

'I hope you will be my frend': Tasmanian Aborigines in the Furneaux Group in the nineteenth century—population and land tenure

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of settlement of the islands of the Furneaux Group in Bass Strait and the effects of government regulation on the long term settlements of Tasmanian Aboriginal people from the 1850s to the early 1900s. Throughout the nineteenth century the Aboriginal population grew slowly, eventually constituting approximately 40 percent of the total population of the Furneaux Group. From the 1860s outsiders used the existing land title system to obtain possession of the islands. Aborigines tried to establish tenure through the same system, but could not compete because they lacked capital, and were disadvantaged by isolation in their communication with government. Further, the islands' use for grazing excluded Aborigines who rarely had large herds of stock and were generally not agriculturalists. The majority of Aborigines were forced to settle on Cape Barren Island, where they built homes on a reserve set aside for them. European expansion of settlement on Flinders Island finally completed the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people by making the Cape Barren Island enclave dependent on the government.

Introduction

In December 1869 Thomas Mansell, an Aboriginal, applied to lease a small island. He petitioned the Surveyor-General, 'I hope you will be my Frend...I am one of old hands Her, and haf Cast and have large family and no hum'.¹ Unfortunately, he could not raise £1 as down payment. Mansell's was one of the many attempts by Aboriginal people in the Furneaux Group to obtain valid leasehold or freehold and recognition of their long term occupation.

The main occupation began with the arrival of sealers in the islands. Soon after the settlement of the colony of New South Wales in 1788, the sealing grounds of Bass Strait were discovered. The sealers, who were of European descent, quickly reduced the seal population to the point that, by 1810, sealing was uneconomic and, by 1827, the animals

¹ Thomas Mansell to Surveyor-General, 8 December 1869, Archives Office Tasmania (AOT) Lands and Survey Department (LSD) 1/39/153.

had been virtually exterminated. Those sealers who stayed on, eked out a living by bartering seal and wallaby skins, muttonbirds, and other produce to passing ships for spirits and other items. Some of these men took Aboriginal women as 'wives' with whom they had the next generation of Aboriginal children.² By the second half of the nineteenth century, the sealers were so in name only. They were now a self-contained Aboriginal community with some European immigrants also copying their lifestyle.

In this paper, I trace the population growth of the Aboriginal people in the Furneaux Group and provide a history of their land holdings, their claims to that land and their relations with the Tasmanian government affecting their tenure.

The beginning of permanent settlement

The first permanent settlement in the Furneaux Group may have been as early as 1820. The journals of George Augustus Robinson, Aboriginal Protector, and official papers record the names of 49 sealers, most of whom operated at some time in Bass Strait.³ Settlements were established on Preservation, Woody, Tin Kettle, and Gun Carriage (Vansittart) Islands in the relatively sheltered waters of Franklin Sound (Figure 1). Gun Carriage Island was the largest, covering an area of 446 ha, and was large enough to accommodate several sealers and their families, while the others covered about 90 ha each. These islands were well wooded, with fresh water available from springs. They provided sheltered anchorages, garden land, small areas of native pastures for grazing animals, proximity to Flinders and Cape Barren Islands for game such as wallaby and waterfowl, proximity to the depleted seal colonies, and above all to muttonbird colonies for muttonbirding.⁴

Demographic change and land tenure to 1860

There are no reliable population figures for the Furneaux Group prior to 1840. In 1832 the two Quaker missionaries James Backhouse and George Walker met several sealers in Hobart, who told them that there were 16 men, 16 women and six children living on Gun Carriage Island. From our knowledge of the sealers described in Robinson's journals, we can assume that this represented most of the population at that time. During the 1840s several visitors saw similar numbers of children and groups of huts scattered around the islands. There were also Aboriginal children on other islands in western Bass Strait, but within a few years these families had left, making the Furneaux Group the only region in Tasmania with an expanding Aboriginal population.⁵

From these accounts and Surveyor-General Robert Power's report of his visit in 1848, it seems that the total population during the 1840s and early 1850s was probably not more than 50 to 60 people, including children. By 1857 the population was said to number about 90, which was probably an over-estimate compared to the reliable, lower figures we have before and after that year.⁶ Some of the people are known to have been

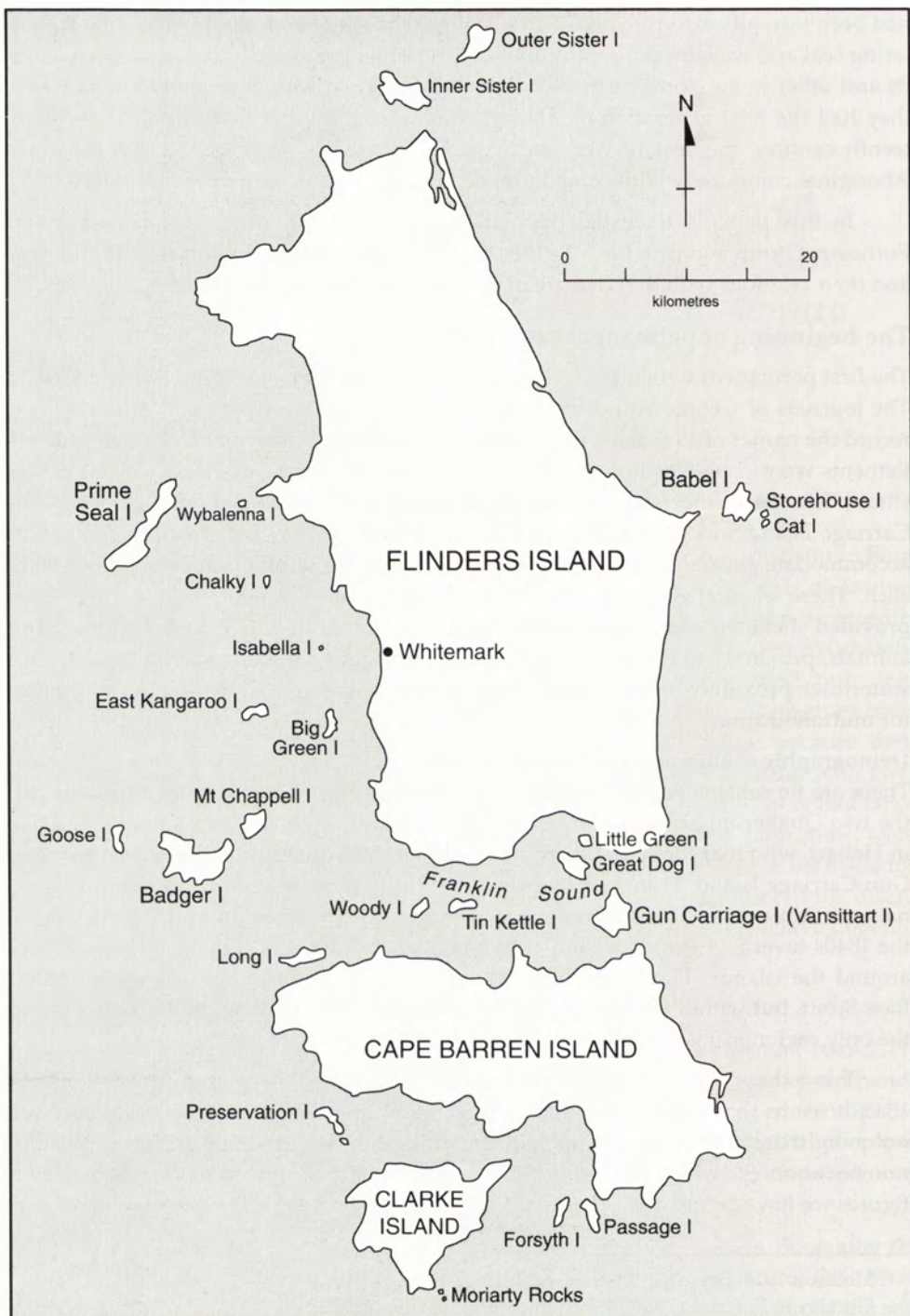
2. Mollison 1974; Drysdale 1991; Friend 1992, p. 127.

3. Plomley in Robinson 1966, 1987; Cumpston 1973; Ryan 1996.

4. Scott 1828; Murray-Smith 1973, p. 173; Edgecombe 1986, p. 97; Skira 1990, p. 77.

5. Backhouse & Tylor 1862, p. 38; Robinson 1966, 1987; Broadfoot 1845, pp. 187-189; Stokes 1846, p. 451; Pasco 1897, p. 142; Tindale 1953, p. 19; Robert Clark to George Washington Walker, 27 May 1846, Walker Papers W7/1, University of Tasmania Archives; Elwes 1854, p. 253.

6. Report of Surveyor-General Power on islands in Bass Strait, 1848, AOT Colonial Secretary Office (CSO) 24/66; Davis 1995, p. 281.



Map of the Furneaux Group, Tasmania

European immigrants, but the majority were sealers and their families who had been in the region for up to 30 years. Many sealers lived to a relatively advanced age, averaging 69 years. This can be compared with the mean life expectancy in Australia of 47 years for males for the period 1881-90, the period for which vital statistics are first available for Australia.⁷

Despite the small population in the Furneaux Group, in 1848 Colonial Secretary James Bicheno sent Power to place some control over the inhabitants by extracting rent to the value of their holdings. This was just one year after the Aboriginal settlement at Wybalenna had been closed and the lease for Flinders Island advertised.⁸ As the officials in Hobart did not know what to expect on the islands, Power's instructions were not specific, but he was enjoined to use his own judgement in each case, for the government knew that most of the occupiers were sealers and 'the like class of people'. However, they appear to have expected only a low income return because rent was to be charged 'so as to secure the Government from loss, and to affect a kind of registration and only demand what is likely to be obtained'.⁹ This was the first administrative inspection of the sealers domain since they invaded Bass Strait in 1798.

Power issued tickets of occupation for one year for a fee of 1/- per year to 16 sealers on Clarke, Woody, Gun Carriage, Cape Barren, and Tin Kettle Islands. Flinders Island was let to Malcolm Laing Smith from 1850 for ten years at £30 per year.¹⁰ Smith had once been a Commandant at Wybalenna and had previously lived on King Island in western Bass Strait for several years, so he was accustomed to rough living. Included in his lease were a bullock dray, water cart, and yokes from the Aboriginal settlement, and other items deemed essential for anyone wishing to rent the islands. Additional chattels were 18 sheep on Isabella Island and about 150 cattle, mostly running wild, on Flinders Island. He was also given the privilege of pasturing stock on Prime Seal and Big Green Islands, and several other smaller islands lying between them and Flinders Island.¹¹ These stock were originally attached to Wybalenna but there was no suggestion of returning them to the Aboriginal community on the islands.

During Power's visit Thomas Beedon, a sealer, applied to lease Badger Island, the first application known to be made by a member of the community. It was refused on the ground that the lighthouse staff on nearby Goose Island required access to firewood which was only available from Badger Island.¹² Beedon's application together with Power's report upon his trip led the government to consider reserving the islands for Aborigines, but a decade passed before action was taken.

7. Plomley & Henley 1990, p. 50; Cumpston 1989, p. 95.

8. Colonial Secretary to Surveyor-General, 19 July 1848, AOT LSD 1/51/355; *Hobart Town Gazette* 7 December 1847, p. 1197, 4 January 1848, pp. 11-12, 17 April 1849, p. 216.

9. Colonial Secretary to Surveyor-General, 19 July 1848, AOT LSD 1/51/359.

10. Surveyor-General to Colonial Secretary, 12 March 1849, AOT LSD 1/51/361; Memorandum of lease of Flinders Island to Malcolm Laing Smith, no date, AOT LSD 1/4/49.

11. Stokes 1846, p. 265; AOT LSD 1/4/111; *Hobart Town Gazette* 4 January 1848.

12. Thomas Beedon to Surveyor-General, 21 July 1848, AOT LSD 1/51/441; Colonial Secretary to Surveyor-General, 26 March 1849, AOT LSD 1/51/442; Thomas Beedon to Colonial Secretary, 22 March 1849, AOT CSO 25/2/3021.

In September and October 1854 Power returned to the Furneaux Group accompanied by the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania, Francis Nixon. The two men took advantage of the government's 90-ton schooner, the *Beacon*, on its resupply voyage to the light-houses of Goose and Deal Islands to visit the islands. It seems that there was no particular official reason for the visit, and there are no records to indicate whether Nixon had a role in shaping government policy towards the inhabitants. It was 11 years since his first visit. The strong physical and spiritual attractions of the islands with their distinctive inhabitants and lifestyles, and a chance for Nixon to do some landscape painting, were sufficient incentives to justify the trip. These attractions and the slower pace of life on the islands compared to the rest of Tasmania, have induced a range of visitors, from clergymen to naturalists, to come there ever since.¹³

The visitors found Wybalenna in ruins. The church was used as a barn and remained so until the 1970s. Nixon and Power then made their way into Franklin Sound arriving at Gun Carriage Island on a weekend. Many of the people were away muttonbirding on nearby Great Dog Island which Power said was the principal muttonbird colony. Next day the Aborigines returned to greet their visitors, and at the Sunday service the congregation numbered 28 people, the majority of whom were Aborigines.¹⁴

From Gun Carriage Island, Power and Nixon sailed to Preservation and Clarke Islands. On Preservation Island they found two brothers, one of whom was James Allen, a former medical officer at Wybalenna who lived on Clarke Island with his wife and their eight children. He had been on the island for eight years 'living a secluded and semi-savage life...becoming as rough and wild as the uncultivated scenes around him'.¹⁵ Power served notices to quit upon both Allen brothers because of default in rent payments. The rent for Clarke Island in 1848 was 5/- per year and probably similar in 1854. Although James Allen drowned in 1856, the family was not evicted until 1860. Ten years later the family was still renting and attempting to purchase Preservation Island.¹⁶ The reluctance to quit occupation upon official notice was a trait of many Aboriginal and European inhabitants of the islands. In most cases they had nowhere else to go, except to another island, and this is what they usually did. The government had no means to enforce its notices. Official visits were infrequent and it was too expensive to station a crown bailiff or police officer with a boat and crew in the region.

The only semblance of bureaucracy came through the special constables appointed amongst the inhabitants at their own request. The appointments seemed to be for the benefit of the appointee, not the government. James Munro who lived on Preservation Island, appears to have been the first person appointed in 1831, although there was apparently some confusion in official circles about this. The reason he gave for his request to be appointed was that he could not control immigrants and fugitive convicts for his own protection unless he had the authority to evict them. Similar rea-

¹³. Nixon 1857, p. 17; Murray-Smith 1986, p. 210.

¹⁴. Surveyor-General to Colonial Secretary, 24 August 1854, AOT LSD 1/51/365, 3471; Nixon 1857, pp. 45, 118; Ratcliffe 1975, p. 50.

¹⁵. Nixon 1857, pp. 50, 52.

¹⁶. AOT Treasury (TRE) 21/1/83; Surveyor-General to Hamilton Allen, 6 January 1860, AOT LSD 2/2/838.

sons were used by the Colonial Secretary in the appointment in 1836 of Malcolm Laing Smith as magistrate at Circular Head in northwest Tasmania, an ambit that took in King Island; of David Howie as special constable to King Island and the other northwest islands in 1846; and of David Kelly, formerly of Gun Carriage Island, and living on Long Island when he was appointed in 1857.¹⁷ Both Munro and Kelly were sealers. It was not until the 1870s that any Aborigines were appointed as constables.

Power and Nixon were suitably impressed by their visit. According to Power:

Every encouragement may be given to these Islanders who are Pilots to people in distress or in case of shipwreck, men to be depended upon and as members of their small community impeachable in manners and conduct.¹⁸

But were Power's dealings with the Islanders sufficient to enable the formation of an informed opinion? He was an outsider who made sporadic visits and there is not any evidence that he made any real effort to pursue the concerns of the Islanders.

Where Bicheno appeared to recognise that the Islanders were a special people because of the links to the Aboriginal women through their relationships with the sealers, he seems to have opposed the granting of special privileges to them. On receiving Power's first report, Colonial Secretary Bicheno summed up the government's attitude as acting '...with a view to preventing the growth of any rights which might interfere with the future resumption of certain islands in Bass's Strait by the crown'.¹⁹ An earlier statement by the British Parliament that native inhabitants were presumed to have a right to their land irrespective of European intrusion conflicted with Bicheno's view. His policy was to give the Islanders no special consideration. The Islanders' expectations based on their previously unchallenged occupation were certainly different, but the government showed little real interest in their social and economic welfare as evinced in its lack of action in reserving islands for the community.

Demographic change and land tenure from 1860 to 1870—a decade of loss

In March 1862 Archdeacon Thomas Reibey paid the first of three visits to the Furneaux Group.²⁰ Reibey's trip is important as it marked the first of regular visitations by Church of England pastors over the next 40 years, as emissaries to the Aborigines to bring them into the fold of the Church. On his first visit, Reibey was accompanied by the vicar at George Town, Reverend John Fereday, who took the first photographs of the Aborigines of the Furneaux Group. These were group portraits taken on Chappell Island during the muttonbird season. Fereday knew the sealers and their families well, as his diocese had included the Furneaux Group since 1846.

17. Superintendent of Police, Launceston, to Colonial Secretary, 3 October 1825, AOT CSO 1/131/3165, James Monro [sic] to Colonial Secretary, 18 January 183, AOT CSO 1/576/185/13061; Colonial Secretary to Malcolm Laing Smith, 4 June 1836, AOT LSD 1/70/67; Surveyor-General to Chief Police Magistrate, 25 August 1857, AOT LSD 1/51/532; Colonial Secretary's Office to Surveyor-General, 21 August 1846, AOT LSD 1/52/252; *Hobart Town Gazette* 8 January 1835, p. 26, 1 September 1846, p. 992.

18. Surveyor-General Power to Colonial Secretary, 13 December 1854, AOT LSD 1/51/378.

19. Colonial Secretary to Surveyor-General, 19 July 1848, AOT LSD 1/51/355; *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1837 [425] Volume 7.

20. TPP 1862. Number 17, p. 3, Letter from Reibey on Islanders in the Straits; TPP 1863. Number 48, pp. 4, 5, Half-caste Islanders in Bass's Straits.

In late March 1866 Reibey paid his third and last visit. It coincided with the commencement of the muttonbird season, and there was no opportunity to make home visits. However he baptised eight to ten children born since his previous trip in 1863. This low number of children indicates a slow growth in the Aboriginal population, which is to be expected, as no new people were absorbed into the Aboriginal community until a decade or so later.

In this decade, a host of guano speculators applied to buy or lease nearly all Tasmania's offshore islands in order to exploit their presumed guano resources.²¹ The government had no policy on the lease or purchase of islands; it seems to have operated on a crisis management basis. Since 1850 Tasmania had lost one third of its male population to the Victorian gold rushes which made the government desperate to find incentives to hold people. On advice from Surveyor-General James Calder, the government suspended from sale as of 24 December 1860 all Tasmanian islands (except Bruny Island in the south) to safeguard a possible lucrative resource from a possible single owner.²² However, it permitted applications for occupation to be received and considered as circumstances arose.

It was during this period that the importance of muttonbirding was documented by John Thomas, a government surveyor. In 1861 Thomas spent several months in the Furneaux Group inspecting and surveying selections recently applied for. His survey maps and reports are the first to describe the islands in terms of their human inhabitants and natural resources. He gave the location of huts, peoples' names and the state of the muttonbird colonies, which reflected government understanding that muttonbirding was the major economy of the community.²³

Thomas had a low opinion of the Aborigines, possibly because they were reluctant to provide him with information, and when they did, it was often contradictory. To him they were '...evidently a much indolent, shiftless race of beings'.²⁴ In contrast, he had nothing to say about the Allens or any other Europeans, whose lifestyles were no different. What the Aborigines thought of Thomas can only be surmised, but he may not have had the patience or tact required to understand their lifestyle and environment. His surveys probably frightened them because, if guano was found on an island they occupied, outsiders could take up leases and the Aborigines could lose their homes. They regarded the islands, for which they paid little or no occupation fees, as their own. Thomas remarked that guano had already been removed from Cat and Chappell Islands by Hobart merchants, an exercise that must have worried the muttonbirders going to Chappell Island.

Generally the islands were occupied by one or more Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal families who kept a few cattle and sheep. There was very little cropping as the prevail-

21. TPP 1861. Number 38, Guano correspondence.

22. Robson 1983, p. 467; *Hobart Town Gazette* 8 January 1861, p. 26; Surveyor-General Calder to Colonial Treasurer, 24 December 1860, AOT LSD 1/50/430; Askunas and Crowther to Surveyor-General, correspondence regarding guano deposits on islands, 1861, AOT LSD 1/69/270-299.

23. Department of Environment and Land Management Tasmania (DELM) Dorset 4 maps and reports; Skira 1997a, p. 121.

24. DELM Dorset 4, Woody Island report.

ing westerly winds were destructive to crops. Nobody lived on Babel, Cat, and Storehouse Islands, located off the central east coast of Flinders Island. Their large muttonbird colonies were not exploited at that time because of their remoteness. Overall, Thomas found the guano resources to be largely non-existent, except on Cat Island where a large colony of gannets nested. As a matter of course, the promotion of guano hindered the Aborigines, because the public scramble for guano leases brought the islands to the attention of European farmers, who were interested in the islands for grazing purposes.

Some new leases had been issued to Europeans at this time for terms of up to 14 years.²⁵ But when missionaries began to take an interest in the Aboriginal community, the names of Aboriginal lessees (albeit very few) appear in the government rent books.²⁶

Flinders Island

The Aborigines viewed Flinders Island as a large hunting ground. The sole place of habitation on the island, Wybalenna, reminded them of the suffering of their kinsmen.²⁷ After Malcolm Laing Smith's lease expired in 1860 the government offered a 14 year rental for Flinders Island. Charles Nantes and James Hutton, prospective lessees from Victoria, accompanied the two clerics, Reibey and Fereday, in March 1862.²⁸ When the clerics decided to cut short their visit, Nantes and Hutton re-hired the *Gift* and stopped off at Waterhouse, Clarke and Cape Barren Islands. They were disappointed with all three as none showed promise of extensive agricultural worth. Cape Barren Island had just been extensively burnt and they found no land fit for grazing:

I have said before that the scenery is beautiful, and it was after the wearisome toil in climbing our last ascent in these islands sitting down and enjoying the grand and magnificent prospect, my smoke and my rest, I felt a regret, almost a personal regret, that such a scene of beauty and extensive area of country should be so comparatively waste and valueless.²⁹

Nantes' opinions were much echoed, as the island was virtually unoccupied and considered 'barren' by early prospective land purchasers.³⁰ It was totally unsuited for farming and therefore an ideal repository for the unwanted Aborigines. Later efforts by the government to turn Aborigines into agriculturalists on land largely unfit for farming failed.

²⁵ John Riddle, lease for Vansittart Island transferred to Elizabeth Bishop from 20 January 1872, AOT LSD 209/2/219; G. A. Robinson Jr., lease for Woody and Tin Kettle Islands from 1 November 1860, AOT LSD 209/2/224.

²⁶ Lucy Beedon applied to occupy Badger Island in December 1857. Together with her brother, James, they placed a deposit and eventually paid off fifty acres each on Badger Island beginning in 1868; George Everett leased Passage and Forsyth Islands in 1860 for £6/8/- and £5 per annum respectively. George Everett, lease for Passage Island from 1 December 1860, AOT LSD 209/2/227; Fereday to Surveyor-General, 9 December 1862, AOT LSD 2/2/924; TRE 21/2, 21/2/49; DELM Dorset 7/70, 71.

²⁷ TPP 1862. Number 17, p. 3.

²⁸ *Hobart Town Gazette* 4 February 1862, p. 185; Howard 1991, p. 78.

²⁹ *Geelong Advertiser* 14 May 1862.

³⁰ Howard 1991, p. 85.

On the basis of Reibey's and Fereday's representations, the government recognised that the Islander community was different from other Tasmanians but adhered to the principle of priority in occupation. For example, James Allen who had been given permission to occupy Clarke Island in 1847 immediately attempted to evict John Thomas, a sealer. Thomas complained and demanded protection.³¹ He was not evicted for he continued to occupy and pay rent on what was a very small portion of the island for several years. The government likewise assisted the sealers by evicting trespassers.

Similarly, arguments of occupation occurred among the sealers themselves.³² On Gun Carriage Island, John Riddle leased the whole island for £15 per year until 1860. Other sealers and their families who lived on the island were told to move and brought their grievances before Fereday. The government promised to protect the sealers and their families against 'the oppression they complain of' and to cancel Riddle's lease if it continued. Within the year, the sealers Thomas Beedon and Edward Mansell moved to Preservation Island. John Riddle had the legal right to evict illegal occupiers (such as the other sealers) which tied the government's hand, despite its promise to cancel the lease.

Reverend Fereday had acted for the inhabitants of the Furneaux Group in their land deals with the government since at least 1854. In December 1862 he applied on behalf of George Everett and James Beedon for Preservation Island and the Inner Sisters respectively. In September 1864 he asked the Surveyor-General to prepare leases for George Everett on Preservation Island, Robert Dunbar on Little Green Island, Elizabeth Davis, the widow of the superintendent of the Goose Island lighthouse, on Big Green Island and John Smith for 500 acres at Hogans Point on Cape Barren Island.³³ The lease for John Smith was next to his lot to purchase and is the first known record of any land deals done by Aborigines on Cape Barren Island. In many of the cases however, the Aborigines found that the leases had already been taken by outsiders and thus were unavailable.³⁴

Fereday's assistance to the Aborigines was not all positive. He frequently held money provided by the inhabitants to pay rent and land purchases because communications between the islands and the authorities in Hobart were very slow and unreliable. In 1866 he used their money on other things, and James Beedon of Badger Island, for example, was required to pay up his balance or forfeit the island. Fortunately no one who put their trust in Fereday was severely disadvantaged by his embezzlement. It did not have criminal repercussions upon Fereday who continued to act on their behalf until his death in April 1871 in a horse and cart accident near George Town.³⁵

31. Surveyor-General to Hamilton Allen, 6 January 1860, AOT LSD 2/2/838.

32. Reibey to Surveyor-General, 4 April 1862, AOT LSD 1/51/652. TPP 1863. Number 48, p. 5; John Riddle lease for Vansittart Island transferred to Elizabeth Bishop from 20 January 1872, AOT LSD 209/2/219.

33. Fereday to Surveyor-General, 9 December 1862, AOT LSD 2/2/924; Fereday to Surveyor-General, 2 September 1862, AOT LSD 1/51/636; Fereday to Surveyor-General, 20 September 1864, AOT LSD 1/51/642; Boothman to Fereday, 23 May 1865, AOT LSD 1/51/644.

34. Thomas Mansell to Surveyor-General, 8 December 1869, AOT LSD 1/39/153; G. Everett to Surveyor-General, 15 July 1870, AOT LSD 1/31/617.

The Aborigines were unsuccessful in the art of political lobbying on their own behalf. The occasional letter of petition from the community brought the subject of land alienation to the attention of the government but no action seems to have resulted. It was only when concerned missionaries and influential European lessees became involved in their welfare that the government took notice, and even then action was belated. One of the lessees, Benvenuto Smith, informed Calder that Chappell Island was the last remaining muttonbird colony for the Aborigines and the best in the Straits.³⁶ The Aborigines, if deprived of their only means of obtaining a livelihood would starve and 'become paupers'. The island, Smith argued, had to be reserved for them. In response to this complaint Jules Virieux, an outsider who had purchased 50 acres on Chappell Island, was ordered to remove his stock from the island. The problem was further aggravated shortly afterwards when the apparent lack of government will to grapple with the issue saw another block of 50 acres sold on Chappell Island.

In order to address the hardships of the Aborigines, in 1868 the government promised to reserve some islands for the Aboriginal people. However, the inspection by a surveyor, Richard Hall, may have hindered the Aboriginal cause. Hall had visited the islands in 1866 to survey those parts selected by both Aborigines and non-Aborigines.³⁷ In his report to Calder, Hall extolled the agricultural virtues of the islands, while mentioning that the Aborigines did not work hard but were occupied in sailing boats and catching muttonbirds. The government was dilatory in most of its dealings with the Aborigines and Hall's report would certainly not have helped. The report was also unfair in its accusations that Aborigines did not work hard. The biggest difference between Aborigines and non-Aborigines was the Aborigines' lack of cash income, which put them at a considerable disadvantage. Their principal income came from muttonbirding, which would have provided them with a sum of money to spend on items they could not otherwise afford, but left little extra for capital accumulation, for land purchase or rent.

Demographic change and land tenure from 1870 to 1890—Cape Barren Island

On 7 February 1870 a census for all of Tasmania included the Furneaux Group as a separate entity for the first time. The population consisted of 242 people comprising 138 males and 104 females. There was no breakdown of ethnic origin, but in 1872 Canon Marcus Brownrigg, on his first visitation to the Furneaux Group, estimated the total population to be 227 of whom only 84 or 35 percent were Aboriginal, or 'half-castes' as they were then called. The term 'half-caste' had been used by Robinson in 1830, and by 1870 had become commonly used in Australia to describe people of mixed race.³⁸ The number of Aborigines represented by this percentage approximates closely to that derived from genealogical data.³⁹ The growth in population since Reibey's visit in 1863

35. Surveyor-General to Colonial Treasurer, 19 February 1868, AOT LSD 1/51/465; Ronald Gunn to Colonial Treasurer, 13 February 1868, AOT LSD 1/51/471; Fereday to Surveyor-General, 27 February 1868, AOT LSD 2/3/1005; *Church News* 1 May 1871, p. 74; *Examiner* 20 April 1871.

36. Benvenuto Smith to Surveyor-General, 26 June 1866, AOT LSD 1/53/619.

37. Surveyor-General Calder to Survey Office, 14 February 1868, AOT LSD 1/53/621-623; *Hobart Town Gazette* 23 July 1867, pp. 1331-1332; DELM Dorset 7/70, 71; 8/21.

38. Brownrigg 1872, p. iv; Robinson 1966, p. 179; *Australian National Dictionary* 1988, p. 303.

39. Tindale 1953, p. 19.

was mainly in the non-Aboriginal population which had increased by some 94 people with only about eight additions to the Aboriginal population.

The Aborigines still resided on some of the smaller islands although some had moved to Cape Barren Island. In February 1871 Fereday found Edward Mansell and Richard Maynard, two of the original sealers, living on Passage and Long Islands respectively, while George Everett occupied Woody Island. On Cape Barren Island were William Brown and a man called Lawton at Munro Bay (several kilometres east of The Corner) and, it seems, also several Aboriginal families at various other locations around the coast.⁴⁰

Many Aborigines found keeping up lease or purchase repayments impossible and very few became landowners. It was only after they had petitioned Governor Du Cane when he met with them on Goose Island in August 1871 that land was subsequently granted to them on Cape Barren Island.⁴¹ Du Cane was a progressive governor with a genuine interest in all Tasmanians and would have made his views known to the Premier. The Aborigines wanted land granted to them which they could call home with security. They expressed two main grievances to him. They deplored the destruction of muttonbird nests, eggs and chicks on Chappell Island by cattle straying from land owned by Virieux.⁴² They also protested against being forced to move from land they occupied by non-Aboriginal lessees, principally Robert Gardner and James Walden Gardner, Launceston merchants who had managers to look after their numerous holdings in the Furneaux Group.

The government was constantly reminded of the plight of the Aborigines. For example, in December 1871 George Everett further complained about Jules Virieux's stock again, using the emotional argument of the '...injury being done to us and our children'.⁴³ He further stated:

The rest of the halfcastes in Common with myself have been led to hope that the Government intend to reserve Chappell Island for our use we therefore cannot help feeling the greatest alarm at seeing the only Rookery available to us being daily destroyed and ourselves and our children left to starve.

To police the removal of stock from Chappell Island, Everett, a crown bailiff, was appointed in April 1872 to be stationed on nearby Badger Island. Hogan Group, Erith Island (all north of Flinders Island), Moriarty Rocks (near Clarke Island), Ninth Island and Tenth Island (off northern Tasmania) were reserved for sealing, and the Chappell Islands and Cat Island for muttonbirding. Except for part of Chappell Island none of the other islands had yet been designated as leasehold or freehold.

The other main muttonbird colony in the Furneaux Group, Great Dog Island, was not reserved because it was held under lease by Robert Gardner at £112/10/6 per annum in 1877. The rent was the same as he was paying for the whole of Flinders

⁴⁰. *Church News* 1 April 1871, pp. 58–60. By the end of the decade the population remained virtually unchanged as the census for 1881 indicates there were 252 people in the Furneaux Group, consisting of 137 males and 115 females, including 11 people on Goose Island.

⁴¹. Lieutenant-Governor Du Cane to Colonial Secretary, 14 August 1871, AOT CSD 7/45/833.

⁴². *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Volume 4, p. 107; George Everett to Surveyor-General, 8 December 1871, AOT LSD 2/4/54/6158[1].

⁴³. George Everett to Surveyor-General, 30 November 1869, AOT LSD 1/51/459.

Island, which he held until 1886. Gardner ran dairy cattle on the island and rented out the extensive muttonbird colony each year.⁴⁴

By 1873 nine islands were leased by non-Aborigines who in most cases made their homes on them. The few Aborigines to hold leases were James Maynard and Henry Beedon who separately held the lease for the Northern Sisters from 1872 to 1878, and James Everett who leased East Kangaroo Island in 1874.⁴⁵ The rapid removal of the Aborigines from other islands to Cape Barren Island continued and was completed by the end of the 1870s, less than 20 years after they first paid rent to occupy those islands. In 1883, 28 islands were leased by non-Aborigines, of whom Walden had nine, paying between £1 and £21 rent per year. The only Aborigines renting or owning any island property other than on Cape Barren Island in 1883 were Lucy Beedon and her brother, James, on Badger Island, where they ran up to 1,400 sheep, some of which belonged to other Islanders. Most of the islands suitable for farming were now occupied, and in the years 1873 to 1882 from 6,000 to 13,000 sheep were grazed annually in the Furneaux Group. Generally the islands were occupied by one family with income from mutton-birding supplementing that from farming.

The move to Cape Barren Island was made during the 1870s. Grant deeds were issued for land on Cape Barren Island in 1873 to George Everett for five acres, John Smith for ten acres, William Brown for eight acres and Thomas Mansell for five acres. One year later John Maynard obtained deeds for five acres on Cape Barren Island.⁴⁶ The land was sold to the Aborigines for £1 per acre, a unit sum comparable with the charge for larger blocks sold elsewhere in the Furneaux Group. Other Aborigines to obtain grant deeds were R. Maynard, 40 acres on Long Island in 1875, James Beedon, 50 acres on Badger Island in 1876 and Lucy Beedon, 51 acres on Badger Island in 1877.⁴⁷ Several Aborigines also attempted to purchase land on other islands, and although they were able to pay deposits and several instalments, eventually had to sell to non-Aborigines. Thus George Everett managed seven instalments on 50 acres on Preservation Island before James Allen purchased the block in 1877. Within two years Allen had transferred his lease of crown land on the island to John MacLaine. In contrast Europeans obtained much more of the freehold on Cape Barren and other islands.⁴⁸ After this, the tide turned. No more disposal of islands in the Furneaux Group occurred after these sales, with the exception of Flinders Island.

For the Aborigines, the move from the smaller islands to Cape Barren Island did not solve their problems. They complained through the missionaries, and in May 1880 Brownrigg enquired of the Surveyor-General whether the Aborigines were allowed the privilege to hunt game on Flinders Island. If that was taken away, then they had no land that they could call their own. It was only two years previously that they had petitioned the Governor to reserve the whole of Flinders Island for them. In response the govern-

44. AOT TRE 21/2/335; AOT TRE 21/2/246; Murray-Smith 1979, p. 65.

45. AOT TRE 21/2/224, 399; AOT TRE 21/2/233.

46. AOT TRE 21/2/294; AOT TRE 21/2/295.

47. AOT TRE 21/2/298; AOT TRE 21/2/300; AOT TRE 21/2/301.

48. AOT TRE 21/2/112, 117, 302; Memorandum from Deputy Commissioner of Crown Land, 25 September 1879, AOT LSD 16/41/724. AOT TRE 21/2/294-303; AOT LSD 209/2/177; Ayde Douglas, lease for Waterhouse Island from 1 June 1859, AOT LSD 209/2/178.

ment withheld from sale the western portion of Cape Barren Island covering 2428 ha (6000 acres) for the Aboriginal community.⁴⁹ The area consisted of scrub and lagoons, unsuitable for agriculture except by dint of much work and money, but many of the people had already made their homes in the area. With Brownrigg in charge the people chose The Corner as the site for their new township and through a lottery drew subdivisional lots. A store was to be opened, probably to compete with the one on Long Island owned by Thomas Barrett. During his visit in 1881 Brownrigg and the Aborigines discussed matters of rules and regulations, and muttombirding on Chappell Island.⁵⁰ A year later little progress had been made because of fear in the lack of security of tenure, and the government not providing direction for the administration of the reserve through leases or sale of blocks.

Demographic change and land tenure from 1890 to 1900—Flinders Island

There are no population statistics for the Furneaux Group in the 1891 census, but according to Bishop Montgomery who visited annually between 1891 and 1901, there were then about 110 people living on Cape Barren Island including about 60 children.⁵¹ Ten years later, in the 1901 census, the Aboriginal population numbered 157 people. Total population figures are absent but would have ranged between 275 and 400 people. This includes about 17 households on Flinders Island in 1899, most of whom were involved in muttombirding.⁵²

The two-fold increase in the population since April 1881 was mainly due to the influx of non-Aboriginal settlers to Flinders Island, which was opened for selection following a favourable report on the island by surveyor John W. Brown in 1887.⁵³ The land was of good quality, but its relative isolation from the Tasmanian mainland required, according to Brown, the 'right class of colonists' to be induced to settle on Flinders Island. By the 'right class', he meant people from the United Kingdom, not local Tasmanians or mainlanders. His advice was not heeded as the majority of initial selections were taken up by Aborigines or non-Aborigines already with holdings in the Furneaux Group.

From 1889 crown land on Flinders Island was sold in blocks ranging from 15 to 320 acres, the latter being the maximum allowed by the *Waste Lands Act, 1870*. The sales caused major changes in the lifestyle of the inhabitants. People who lived on the small offshore islands used Flinders Island to gather firewood, hunting of wallaby for skins and meat, and taking of other wildlife such as waterfowl for food. Under increased immigration employment opportunities were created and gradually Flinders Island

49. Memorandum from Deputy Commissioner of Crown Land to Inspector of Police, 5 May 1880, AOT LSD 16/43/962; Petition from Half-castes to Surveyor-General, 14 December 1878, AOT LSD 2/4/54/6158/[6]; *Hobart Town Gazette* 15 February 1881, p. 246.

50. Brownrigg 1979, p. 184.

51. Montgomery 1892, p. 229; *Church News* 1 March 1892, p. 614. In 1892, 81 adults signed a petition of which 70 were Aborigines. The majority of the signatories lived on Cape Barren Island. In December 1893 members of the Victorian Field Naturalists' Club who visited estimated that there were about 250 people on the islands in the proportion of half Aboriginal to half non-Aboriginal (*Australasian* 30 December 1893).

52. TPP 1901. Number 38, p. 249, Lands and Surveys Report; *Church News* 3 October 1899, p. 1123.

53. TPP 1887. Number 62, pp. 3–5, Report on Flinders Island.

developed, while the offshore islands became deserted as they could only provide limited and short-term opportunities.⁵⁴

The settlers attempted to farm but had little to show for their labour after several years. The quality of the land was generally inferior compared to areas of mainland Tasmania. The island was said to have climatic advantages, particularly for the growing of fruit and vegetables, but suffered from a chronic lack of water during the summer. Many experienced difficulty paying their bills in the mid 1890s due to a depression that gripped much of Australia from 1890. These included Robert Gardner, although in his case it may have been due to oversight as he was frequently behind in payments even on his island leases. Default in payment resulted in fines and overdue charges levied.⁵⁵

In the 1890s the occupation of Flinders Island was slow and confined to the western side. Only a few of the isolated lots were taken up. This was attributed to the lack of roads and safe anchorages for boats, as there were just three jetties, all on the western side.⁵⁶ There were some land speculators but they were hampered by the restriction of good agricultural land to the western coast; the eastern half had problems with drainage, destruction of timber by bush fires and remoteness. The remoteness made it difficult for the authorities to locate road reserves and value land, which was variable in quality prior to selection. These problems remained largely unresolved until the land clearance schemes of the 1950s. However, the establishment of a Road Board in 1906 and its successor, the Flinders Island Council, led to a great increase in selection from 1911 with 109,171 acres sold in that year. The majority of Aborigines missed out on the benefits of the land boom as Cape Barren Island was bypassed as soon as Whitemark on Flinders Island became the administrative centre for the Furneaux Group.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The history of settlement in the Furneaux Group provides an illustrative chronicle of the difficulties encountered by Aboriginal people in obtaining rights to their land. Unfortunately, it was an all too common occurrence in Australian history—the indigenous population becoming victims of erratic and insensitive government regulations imposed on a distant community who had few resources to challenge them. At times, the government administrators did appear to acknowledge that the Aborigines on the

54. In the first two years 37 non-Aborigines selected 5518 acres. One of the first purchasers was T. H. Holyman who placed a deposit of 10/- on a 15 acre block on 26 June 1889 paying it off on 22 August 1889 for £14/10/-. Holyman was a son of William Holyman, a master mariner with extensive interests in Bass Strait shipping (the Holymans later became involved with air transport, the family company becoming Ansett Airlines). The other European families of Collis, Gardner, Holt, MacLaine, Robinson and Virieux had already been in the islands many years, while the others were new immigrants from mainland Tasmania and Victoria. In contrast 14 Aborigines took up a total of 344 acres, ranging in size from 15 to 53 acres. The majority of people in both groups paid off their land in annual instalments over fourteen years, many of the residents getting the money from muttonbirding. The cost of land was £1 per acre regardless of situation or size of block. TPP 1890. Number 65, pp. 3, 6, Survey Department Annual Report; AOT TRE 21/5/14, 134–197.

55. *Examiner* 18 February 1907; AOT TRE 21/7/56, 86; 21/8/107.

56. TPP 1903. Number 31, p. 23 Survey Department Annual Report; TPP 1894–95. Number 39, p. 11, Survey Department Annual Report.

57. Skira 1997b.

eastern Bass Strait islands were entitled to some redress, but this acknowledgement did not result in action that benefited the Aboriginal people. Despite putting pressure on government, using the resources available to them, the Bass Strait Aboriginals ended up confined to a small proportion of what might rightfully be considered their land. The poignant request of the Aboriginal writer, 'I hope you will be my Friend' was ignored by a government which was far removed from the Aboriginal community, both in geographical distance and in spirit. Although this situation may be changing with recent High Court decisions, land rights and their relationship with government continue to present a significant problem for contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals.

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