

SOUTHEAST TASMANIA: THE NUENONNE IN 1788

SANDRA BOWDLER AND LYNDALL RYAN

LATE ONE SPRING AFTERNOON a group of about twenty-five Nuenonne people arrived in the neighbourhood of a cape that forms the northern tip of the large bay on the east side of Bruny Island. They were returning from a foraging expedition on North Bruny Island, hunting wallabies and possums and searching for the eggs of pelicans and penguins that hatched at that season of the year. Moving south, they hoped to find more such eggs and those of swans as well. They had encountered blustery spring weather and several storms.

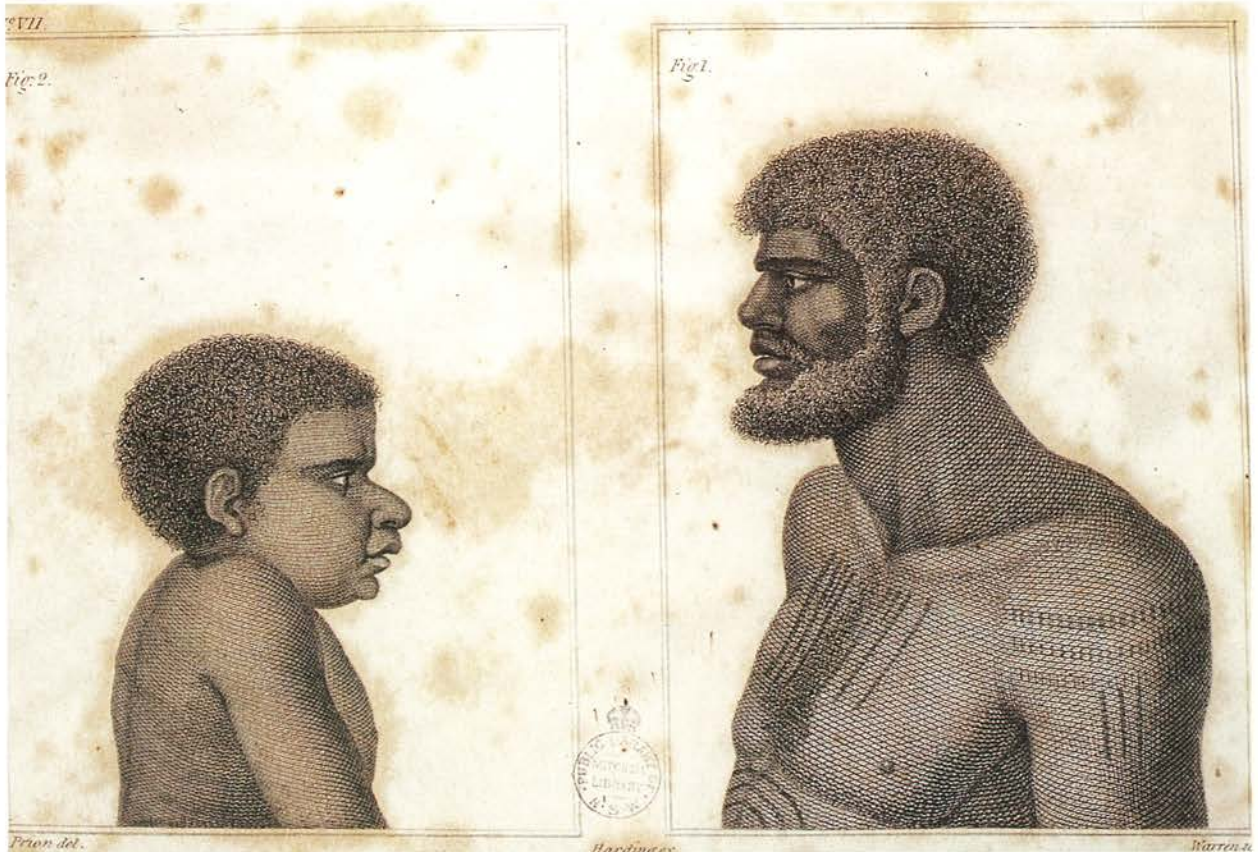
As they moved along they set fire to the bush to clear the undergrowth and make fresh green shoots that would attract wallabies. They nurtured this scrub and bushland very carefully, in preparation for an abundant summer when they expected to share the bird and animal life, the shellfish, abalone, oysters and crayfish, with relatives visiting from the mainland. But at this season of the year, birds' eggs were their main objective.

Towards evening, after quickly constructing temporary bark shelters, the Nuenonne saw what appeared to be a large white bird on the waters of the bay to the south. The bird creaked and there were sounds of shouting voices and strange music. The peace of the bay, even at night, was much disturbed.

Some members of the Nuenonne remembered the visit of a similar bird during a summer many years before. One old man, deformed in body, remembered an even earlier visit, when he and others had watched and listened through the bush as strangers cut down trees, made markings on them and filled large bags with water. He had a host of stories about his encounter. The strangers looked like ghosts, with white faces and white hair. They did not wear charcoal and ochre, they spoke in a flat monotone and gave off a pungent odour. They walked stiffly and wore adornments unsuited for hunting or gathering. They looked old and emaciated, and from what he could remember they were all of one sex, although perhaps they were without sex at all.

Why had these strangers returned? The old man was confident that they would not stay long, for they did not hunt wallabies or possums and they ate mostly scale





A boy and a man from Van Diemen's Land. The artist, Piron, was with the Bruny D'Entrecasteaux expedition of 1791.

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Bara-ourou. A woman of Maria Island, wearing shell and fibre necklaces and displaying intentional scars on her body and shoulders. The artist, Nicolas Petit, was with the Baudin expedition of 1802. Lithographed by B. Roger and J. Milbert after a sketch by Nicolas Petit.

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fish, which the Nuenonne found repugnant but which the visitors had tried to get the Nuenonne to eat. They had hidden some strange seeds in the ground, where they would not keep. Over their shoulders, they carried large heavy sticks that appeared to have the magical property of making a sudden loud noise, but seemed to lack the deftness of stone and spears as weapons of war.

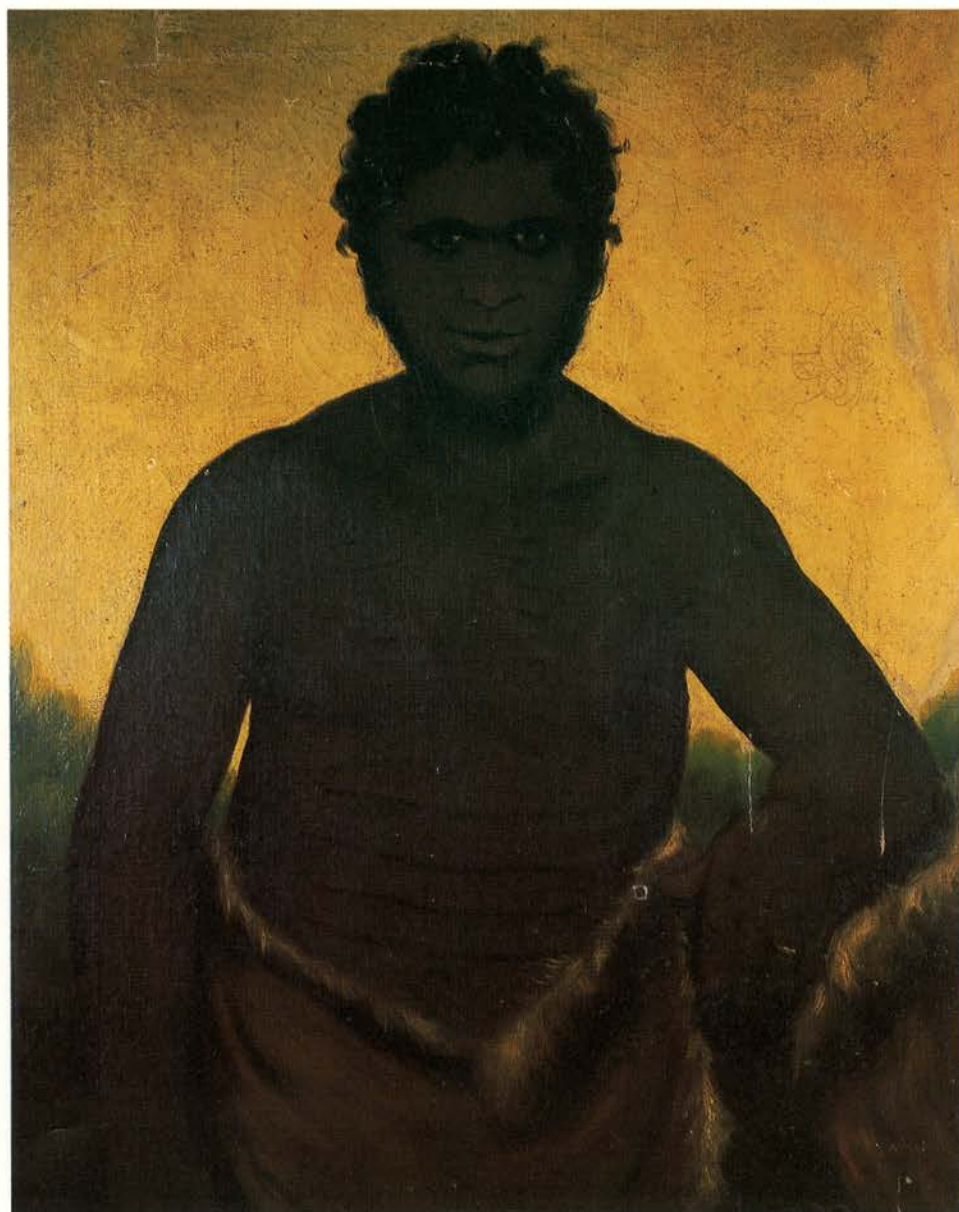
Next morning the noise of sawing a tree carried across the bay. As one family, an old man, his wife and their three young children were foraging in the bush, they came across one of the strangers collecting plants. He showed no fear, held out his hand in friendship and offered the man a knife. The man accepted it, but sent away his wife and children into the bush, in case there were other strangers around. The stranger showed off his plants, but the two men could not understand each other and the stranger, now looking timid, made for the beach where he found his companions in a boat trying to land. The old man quickly found other Nuenonne, and about 20 men went to the rocks on the northern end of the bay to watch the strangers in comparative safety. They carried hunting-sticks, not spears.

The deformed man was in high spirits. He appeared bold during crises, believing that his humour could save him from attack. The strangers looked exactly like those he had seen long before, wearing skins of unfamiliar animals and birds. Having reached the rocks the Nuenonne looked down on the strangers in their boat. Laughing and joking, they encouraged the strangers to land, confident that without truly magical powers they could not do it. The strangers appeared frustrated and gesticulated for the Nuenonne to go to a more convenient place where the strangers could land. But the Nuenonne would not.

The strangers threw gifts onto the shore but the Nuenonne would not look at them until the strangers had turned away, then they carefully unwrapped the gifts and put them on their heads. But when the boat turned around, the Nuenonne quickly took them off again and pretended that they had not seen them. Only when the strangers were out of sight did they unwrap the objects once more. Then, keeping the white bird in sight, the Nuenonne returned to their hunting. This time, they noticed that the strangers ate more shellfish, particularly mussels.

Two days later, the white bird had gone.

The men argued about the strangers. 'Were they spirits?' If so, they were strangely uncertain of their environment. They held clumps of soil in their hands as if it had strange properties and they blundered through the bush. 'If they are spirits of our ancestors,' the deformed man argued, 'how have they forgotten how to live in the bush, why do they not wear ochre, and why do they not sing?'



Tasmanian Aboriginal. Oil
by Benjamin Duterrau,
1837.

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‘They must have been decayed spirits,’ argued another man, ‘for they had the smell of the dead.’

Were they male or female? If male, were they looking for women? The Nuenonne, especially the women, could not believe that these beings were men living in a world without women, yet they ate scale fish, something that surely could happen only if there were no women to forage for them. In any case, the strangers obviously had a different way of sharing the tasks of food gathering and preparation—unless, of course, their unusual activities were preparations for special rituals.

The women noted that there was a change in the moon: perhaps that explained the coming of the strangers.

Continuing their foraging around the bay, the Nuenonne found the strangers had again cut down trees and hidden seeds in the soil. They had also left some wonderful items: a hard thing shaped like a piece of branch but clear like water, and small hard shiny things like the operculi of warrener shells. The Nuenonne resumed their search for eggs, gradually moving south and west. As the weather improved, they began to make journeys in bark canoe rafts, or catamarans, across to the mainland and back.

THE STRANGERS

The strangers were Captain William Bligh and the crew of HMS *Bounty*. The *Bounty* anchored at Bruny Island on 26 August 1788 on a voyage to Tahiti to collect seeds of the breadfruit tree for use in the West Indies. Bligh had previously been to the same bay on the east side of Bruny Island with Captain James Cook in 1777. The British sailors called it Adventure Bay, and considered it a useful place to take on wood and water before the final leg to Tahiti.

While the Nuenonne belonged to the most maritime of the nine Aboriginal groups in Tasmania, the strangers belonged to one of the most maritime of European nations in the eighteenth century. There the similarity ended. The Nuenonne were attuned to their environment, manipulating it in subtle ways while following its rhythms. The *Bounty* on this voyage was an instrument in a major attempt to transform an environment by introducing an exotic species. In order to take the breadfruit plant from Tahiti to the West Indies, it was specially

Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land. Photograph, 1978, taken from near Fluted Cape.

S. BOWDLER





fitted out like a greenhouse. A botanist, David Nelson, and his assistant, William Brown, were among the crew. It was an agricultural enterprise typical of a society in which the monarch, George III, was an active patron of a revolution in farming.

William Bligh was a fine representative of 'Farmer George'. He had come from British farming stock. Wherever in the world he found himself, he scanned the country for its agricultural possibilities. When he considered the wild resources of the land, it was in a desire to make them useful and to harness them to refurbish his ship. Thus while battling around Cape Horn in April 1788, when the crew had caught some seabirds that were flying over the ship and found them unpleasantly fishy to taste, Bligh experimented by cooping some up and cramming them with ground corn. As a result, he found

the pintada birds became as fine as ducks, and the albatross were as fat, and not inferior to taste to fine geese . . . This unexpected supply came very opportunely; for none of our livestock remained except hogs, the sheep and poultry not being hardy enough to stand the severity of the weather.

The Nuenonne would not have thought of such an experiment. They took no food with them on their voyages across the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and did not husband the swans, pelicans or muttonbirds whose seasonal activities provided a staple diet. Nor would they have taken seeds or even food and transferred them from one part of their territory to another. Each hectare of their territory had particular kinds of food resources and the Nuenonne moved from one area to another, foraging as they went, seeking out berries and fruits and the seeds of various trees and bushes. Apart from kelp, they rarely carried food of any kind with

View from the low land to the northward of Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land. *Watercolour by George Tobin, while on HMS Providence, 1792.*

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them. But they always carried fire; indeed, it is possible that they did not know how to make it. They carried food only from the point of capture to the campfire. In this way, numbers of Nuenonne stayed together, living off the land and the sea when the environment could support them, and splitting into smaller groups when it could not.

Bligh was interested both in farming and in indigenous peoples. He planted the seeds of fruit trees wherever he went, in the hope that on some future voyage the fruit would be useful to himself or someone else. At sea he was careful to conserve rations; on shore he was always testing soils and collecting plants. He might have understood why the Nuenonne set fire to the bush to promote new growth, but he could not have appreciated their eating a full catch of eggs and shellfish, not keeping any for the next meal.

The botanist Nelson and the gardener Brown shared Bligh's interest in searching for new seeds and plants. At Adventure Bay, for example, they gathered the tea-tree, which made tasty tea and efficient brooms when dried. When the Englishmen found a part of the bay with few trees and apparently fertile soil, they planted fruit trees from the Cape of Good Hope. But Bligh doubted that they would survive. He wrote,

A circumstance against anything succeeding here is, that in the dry season, the fires made by the natives are apt to communicate to the dried grass and underwood, and to spread in such a manner as to endanger everything that cannot bear a severe scorching.

The visitors nevertheless planted three 'fine young apple trees', nine vines, six plantain trees, a number of orange and lemon seeds, cherry stones, plum, peach, and apricot stones, pumpkins, two sorts of Indian corn and apple and pear kernels. Near the place where they had found fresh water, Bligh also planted some onions, cabbage roots and potatoes.

The *Bounty* moored at Adventure Bay from 26 August until 4 September 1788. Southeast Tasmania had been visited several times since Abel Tasman's first landing in North Bay in 1642. The French explorer Crozet was in North Bay in March 1772 when at least one Aborigine was shot; Furneaux, travelling with Cook, had put Adventure Bay on the map in March 1773 and Cook had called there in January 1777. So in 1788 the southeast part of Tasmania and its inhabitants were as well known to Europeans as was almost any other part of Australia. Bligh's visit was one of several by Europeans between 1772 and 1803, when the British began permanent occupation.

Did the Nuenonne discern a connection between these various sets of intruders? We do not know. Worraddy, a Nuenonne man aged about forty in 1831, told George Augustus Robinson about the arrival of the French expedition led by Baudin in 1802, remembering that the strangers wore white collars. But he was too young to remember Bligh, either in 1788 or on a second visit in 1792. Kickerterpollar, from Oyster Bay, also recalled the French in 1802. He and other men had climbed up trees to watch their activities. By then sealers had begun to visit the Bass Strait coast. The appearance of seaborne strangers was becoming a normal incident in Nuenonne life.

After anchoring off Bruny Island, Bligh had to wait for eleven days before the Aborigines appeared. He knew that they had seen white men before, for he had been with Cook in 1777 when the party's cartographer had sketched a record of the meeting with the Nuenonne. On the night of 1 September the Englishmen saw fires on low land near what they called Cape Frederick Henry (now Cape Queen Elizabeth). Next day they saw the people themselves through telescopes.



Bligh expected the Aborigines to come to him and waited near the watering place, but he was disappointed, so he decided to go after them, and a party set out in a boat. At Cape Frederick Henry a heavy surf hampered efforts to land for several hours. Finally, a mooring was secured with a grapnel, though still some distance from the shore. Another hour passed, then William Brown, the gardener, came suddenly out of the woods in front of them. He had been gathering specimens and met some Aborigines during his walk.

Birds eye view of
Adventure Bay, ...
from near Fluted Cape.
*Watercolour by George
Tobin, while on HMS
Providence, 1792.*

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Soon after we heard their voices like the cackling of geese, and twenty persons came out of the wood, twelve of whom went round to some rocks, where the boat could get nearer to the shore than we were. Those who remained behind were women.

The boat approached as near the shore as possible, but could not land. Bligh threw ashore some presents of beads and nails wrapped in paper. The Aborigines opened the parcels and put the contents on their heads. But when they saw Bligh trying to land again 'they instantly put everything out of their hands and would not appear to take notice of anything we had given them'. He signalled them to go to the ship; they signalled him to land. That was the only communication between the two groups. Bligh, in his journal, recorded his observations carefully.

When they first came in sight, they made a prodigious clattering in their speech, and held their arms over their heads. They spoke so quick that I could not catch one single word they uttered. We recollected one man, whom we had formerly seen among the party of the natives that came to us in 1777, and who is



Wooding place in
Adventure Bay, Van
Diemen's Land. Watercolour
by George Tobin, while on
HMS Providence, 1792.
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particularised in the account of Captain Cook's last voyage, for his humour and deformity. Some of them had a small stick, two or three feet long, in their hands, but no other weapon.

Captain Cook remarked that their colour was dull black:

their skin is scarified around their shoulders and breast. They were of a middle stature, or rather below it. One of them was distinguished by his body being coloured with red oker [sic], but all the others were painted black, with a kind of soot, which was laid on so thick over their faces and shoulders, that it is difficult to say what they were like.

They ran very nimbly over the rocks, had a very quick sight, and caught the small beads and nails, which I threw to them, with great dexterity. They talked to us sitting on their heels, with their knees close to their armpits, and were perfectly naked.

Bligh's journal also preserved the story of William Brown's adventure ashore. Bligh wrote,

The account which I had from Brown, the botanist's assistant was, that in his search for plants, he met an old man, a young woman, and two or three children. The old man at first appeared alarmed, but became familiar on being presented with a knife. He nevertheless sent away the young woman, who went very reluctantly. He saw some miserable wigwams, in which were nothing but a few kangaroo skins spread on the ground, and a basket made of rushes.

Two days later Bligh set sail for Tahiti. His glimpse of the Bruny Island Tasmanians in 1788, when linked with information from other sources, provides the outlines for a more detailed reconstruction. Bligh returned in 1792 on a second breadfruit voyage, accompanied by Lieutenant George Tobin, whose journal and drawings add further information. The accounts of earlier and later European navigators, documents from the period of settlement and information about Aboriginal society elsewhere in Tasmania fill out a picture which helps us understand something of the Bruny Island Tasmanians—the Nuenonne—at the time when the strangers from the white birds sailed into their lives.

TASMANIA: ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

Tasmania is Australia's largest offshore island, almost the size of Sri Lanka. Numerous smaller islands lie to the south and east of the main island, which stretches from 40° to 44° south of the equator and between longitudes 144° and 149°. No part of mainland Australia occupies such high latitudes. The main island has an area of about 67 900 square kilometres, and is much more rugged in topography than most of the continent. The coastal plains are narrow, especially in the west, and much of the interior is occupied by plateaux and mountains rising to heights over 1500 metres.

Tasmania's climate is temperate and marine, with mild winters and cool summers. Because the prevailing winds are westerly, and because western altitudes are higher, rainfall is greater in the west, exceeding 1375 millimetres a year. Cool temperate rainforest of southern beech (*Nothofagus*) is the dominant vegetation in the west, but in the drier east, which has a marked rain shadow, open sclerophyll woodland is more prevalent. Moorland dominates the high altitudes and there are narrow bands of coastal heath, especially in the northwest and northeast.

The flora is a mixture of Australian species, *Eucalyptus* and others, and southern oceanic species such as *Nothofagus*. The fauna of Tasmania is essentially Australian,

but species are fewer than on the mainland. There are many species of bird, and seabirds abound on the coasts. Most abundant of all is the muttonbird—the short tailed shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*)—which in summer breeds in burrows in the sand, within dense rookeries on offshore islands. During the Tasmanian winter it migrates to the northern hemisphere.

Before 1788, most land mammals were marsupials. They included several members of the kangaroo family; two species of bandicoot; brushtail, ringtail and pygmy possums; a wombat and a number of carnivores and predatory forms. This last category included the Tasmanian devil and the Tasmanian tiger (*Thylacinus*), neither of which has been found alive on the Australian mainland since 1788. The dingo, the Australian semidomesticated dog, was unknown in Tasmania before Europeans introduced it. Platypuses and echidnas were found in Tasmania, as well as several species of native rodent. In general, mammals were most abundant in sclerophyll forest and woodland, coastal heaths and moorland environments. Few inhabited the stillness of the rainforest.

Freshwater species were few. Some eels and small fish lived in the many perennial rivers and streams, and crustaceans in the high mountain tarns and streams. The coast, however, was generously supplied with shellfish, crayfish, and several species of scale fish. Before the British came, many species of marine mammals were prolific in Tasmanian waters, including the southern elephant seal and the Australian and the New Zealand fur seals.

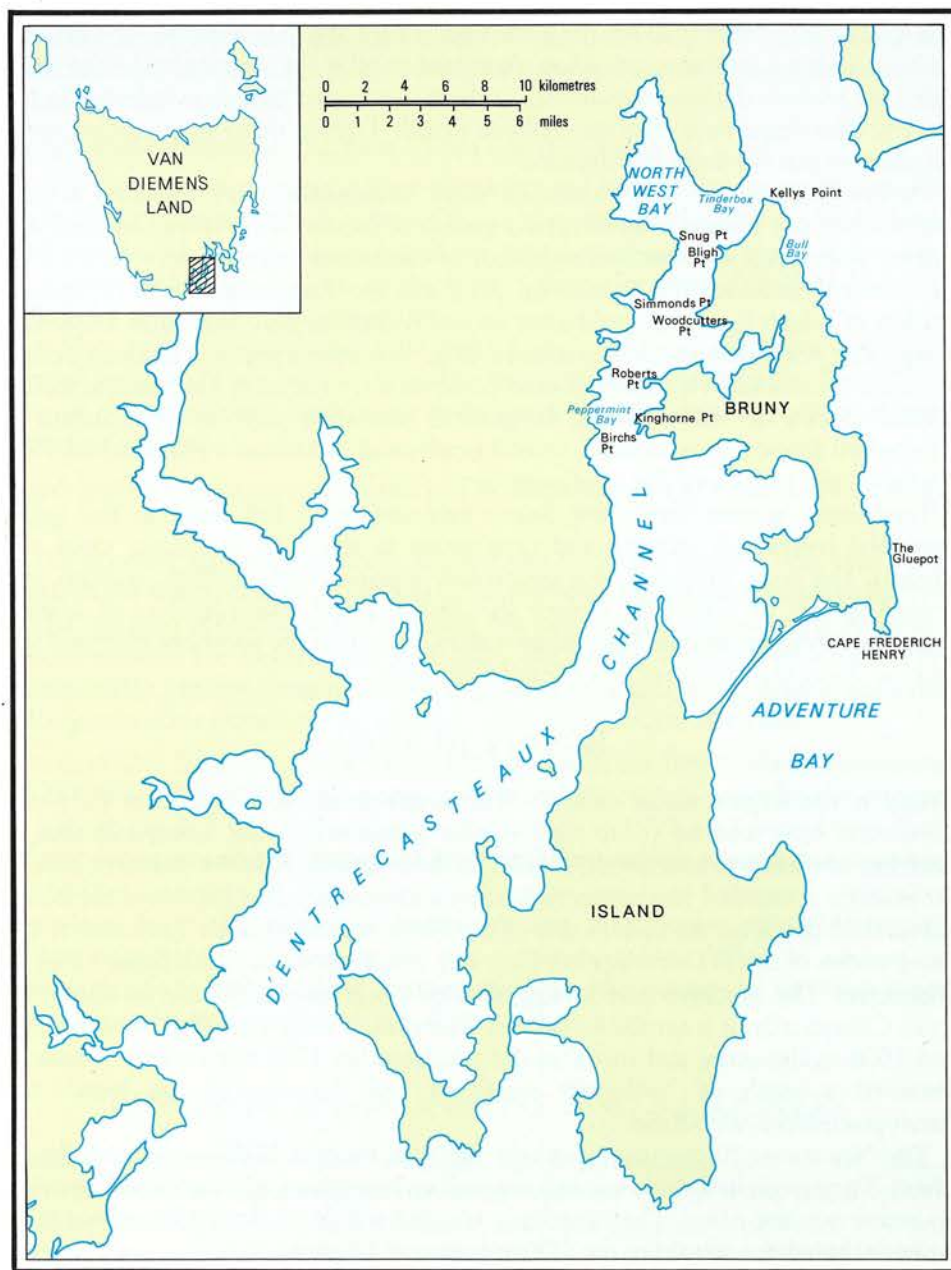
BRUNY ISLAND

Bruny is the largest island close to Tasmania's shore. It is just over fifty-one kilometres long and no more than twelve kilometres wide. Long and thin, it stretches northeast to southwest, parallel to the coastline. A wider southern area of the island is connected to a northern part by a narrow isthmus known as the Neck. Adventure Bay is on the eastern side of the Neck, separated from Tasmania by the quiet waters of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, which varies in width from 1.5 to 10 kilometres. The southern part is rugged, with a high point 571 metres above sea level. Climatically, it is similar to eastern Tasmania. Yearly rainfall is between 500 and 1000 millimetres, and more in the southeast. In 1788 the moister southeast sustained a patch of *Nothofagus* rainforest and the rest of the island was eucalypt-covered woodland.

The Nuenonne Aborigines—perhaps eighty of them in 1788—inhabited Bruny Island. They exploited the coast and immediate hinterland all year round, moving up and down the island. Their territory was the whole of Bruny Island and their range included the whole of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel.

We can trace the year-round movements of the Nuenonne. As the weather improved in spring and early summer, they began to make journeys in their bark catamarans from Kelly's Point to Tinderbox Bay, from Bligh Point to Snug Point, from Woodcutter Point to Simmonds Point, from Roberts Point to Little Peppermint Bay, from Kinghorne Point to Birches Point and from there to join in the search for swans' eggs in North West Bay and the Huon River. In November their relatives from the other side of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, including Truganini's family from Recherche Bay, would cross to Bruny in search of muttonbird eggs, and they returned in March to look for young birds in the rookeries on the northeast side of the island at Bull Bay and the Gluepot.

In summer the Nuenonne traversed the whole length of the island in a few days and then crossed to the mainland to search for shellfish and wallabies in Tinderbox Bay and for seals in Recherche Bay. In return, the Lyluequonny people from



The Nuenonne and their neighbours ranged over a wide area. Places named here are mentioned in the text.

N. DUFFEY, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Recherche Bay visited the Nuenonne in winter, feasting on shellfish along the west coast beside the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. Such visits exploited the seasonal abundance of food resources. November and March provided the feasts of muttonbirds and their young; September was the time for swans' eggs; oysters, abalone and crayfish were more abundant in the summer months, and so were seals and wallabies. Possums were a perennial resource. The Nuenonne also exploited edible plants, but they expected to eat some animal or seafood at least once a day.

THE SOUTH EAST ABORIGINES

The territory of the southeast people, of which the Nuenonne were a band, covered about 3000 square kilometres with 555 kilometres of coastline. It stretched



Southeastern Tasmania, with places referred to in text.

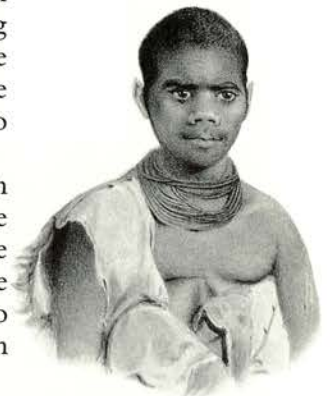
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from the west bank of the Derwent at New Norfolk to South Cape and included all the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and Bruny Island. It reached inland up the Huon valley. In 1788 there were probably seven bands in this territory, each consisting of at least seventy people. The names of some were recorded by Europeans: the Nuenonne from Bruny Island, the Mouheneenner from Hobart, the Mellukerdee from the Huon and the Lyluequonny from Recherche Bay. Bands were also recorded from North West Bay and South East Cape.

The southeast people were the most maritime of the Aboriginal Tasmanians. In their catamarans, they made frequent voyages between Bruny Island and the Tasmanian mainland, and up the Derwent and across the southern straits of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel to Recherche Bay and South East Cape. They also made journeys to Tasman Peninsula, sometimes directly across Storm Bay Passage into the territory of the Oyster Bay people. They even made hazardous voyages in summer to the Maatsuyker and De Witt islands to hunt seals.

THE TASMANIANS IN 1788

The observations of navigators and of settlers—especially the missionary George Augustus Robinson—can provide only a limited picture of Tasmanian society on the eve of European occupation. They are outsiders looking in. Only Robinson recorded some of the insights of Aborigines themselves, speaking to such individuals as Trugernanner (Truganini), from the Lyluequonny at Recherche Bay and Worraddy, a Nuenonne Aborigine. To such sources we can add the oral traditions of surviving Tasmanians and the discoveries of archaeologists, but the picture remains incomplete. We do not know much about the symbolism in the art and



Truggermana (Truganini), a woman from Recherche Bay. Truganini (1812–76) was the best-known Tasmanian Aborigine in the nineteenth century. As a child she made regular seasonal visits to Bruny Island with her family. Lithograph by Thomas Bock in Hobart, 1835.

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ritual of the Tasmanians, or about their kinship systems. When we try to fill in the picture by drawing on our fuller knowledge of life in parts of mainland Australia, we must be careful to allow for the effects of thousands of years of isolation from the continent and adaptation to the Tasmanian environment.

The basic unit of social life was the family. The Tasmanians, unlike mainland Australian Aborigines, seem almost always to have been monogamous. A couple marrying were usually about the same age. Yet William Brown, the gardener on board the *Bounty*, met what he took to be a couple consisting of an older man and a young woman. A single family formed the core of a 'hearth group', who camped together and cooked around a single fire. The hearth group could also include the aged relatives and sometimes other friends and relatives of the husband, wife and children. Such a group occupied a single hut.

A number of hearth groups together called themselves by a particular name, used also by other similar groups to refer to them. This larger grouping is what we call a band, such as the Nuenonne composed. A member of one band was expected to marry someone from another band. Each band consisted of about seventy to eighty people and was the landowning unit. By inference from mainland Aboriginal law, however, it is likely that this ownership was not exclusive. People from one band were allowed to hunt over the territory of another band, particularly if they shared membership of the same group. As we have seen, the Lyluequonny travelled to Bruny Island in winter and the Nuenonne returned the visit in summer.

Groups of bands living in adjacent territories and speaking the same dialect had similar ways of doing and making things, married among themselves, and habitually came together for economic and ritual purposes. The territory of such peoples was the combined territory of their bands. There appear to have been nine major linguistic and cultural groups in Tasmania, each having between five and fifteen bands.

The bands of the southeast people sometimes moved about together. Unlike the Big River and Oyster Bay people to the north, they did not move inland in spring and summer. Instead, they exploited the coast and immediate hinterland all the year round. Bligh and the *Bounty* arrived early in spring, when the winds were variable and weather unsettled. They saw few Aborigines. The Nuenonne would then have been staying mostly on the sheltered shore of D'Entrecasteaux Channel, subsisting on shellfish. At the end of the colder months, the bands in this area tended to disperse as they awaited the return of the muttonbirds.

Brown saw 'miserable wigwams' in the woods. Over on the west coast people occupied huts less flimsy and temporary. This contrast, and others between eastern and western ways of life, corresponded to differences in environment. The west coast, exposed to the prevailing westerly winds, was rich in shellfish, scale fish and seals. However, unlike tropical rainforests, the rainforest of the hinterland was poor in resources. People learned to manipulate it by burning. Firing reduced it to sedge, which supported wallabies and other marsupials and promoted the growth of bracken fern, a valuable food on forest margins. So the Tasmanians of the west coast lived on a strip of sedgeland partly of their own making, between the rich shore and the dense, resource-poor forest. They lived in village-like camps, each having as many as eight solid, beehive-shaped huts, usually perched on exposed hills overlooking the sea. These huts, built to resist the weather and to accommodate people for long periods, were ornamented with feathers and shells.

On the east, the sclerophyll woodland was easier to move around in, coastlines were protected from prevailing winds, and resources were more evenly distributed across the landscape. So people had less need for sheltered settlement.

Opposite page.

Worraddy, man from North Bruny Island. Worraddy (1790–1842) remembered the French coming to Bruny Island in 1802. Oil by Benjamin Duterrau, 1834.

TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY



Native hut (or wigwam)
of Adventure Bay, Van
Diemen's Land. Watercolour
by George Tobin, while on
HMS Providence, 1792.



Cook observed that the Tasmanians were a 'dull black' colour; he saw scars around their breasts and shoulders and thought they were somewhat below the middle stature. One person was covered with red ochre, the others with a 'kind of soot'. In fact the Tasmanians' skins were reddish-brown. They tended to be short, but there were wide variations in height. Some early settlers mention individuals of 6 feet (183 centimetres), 6 feet 6 inches (198 centimetres) and 6 feet 7 inches (201 centimetres). Unlike mainland Aborigines, the Tasmanians had hair tightly curled and 'woolly', like that of Melanesians. The men dressed their hair with a mixture of grease and ochre, twisting the individual ringlets into tubular masses that hung around the head and almost concealed the eyes. Their beards and moustaches grew naturally or were trimmed or cut short. Beards were also greased. A man sometimes wore a feather or flower in his hair. He also sometimes wore loops of twisted sinews loaded with ochre around his neck and suspended the jawbone of a dead friend or relative from his neck, bound with string made from a plant fibre.

The women cropped their hair closely, leaving at most a coronet of short hair. The arrangement of the scalp hair varied from group to group, possibly for purposes of identification. A woman of the southeast people, for example, left a ring of hair lower down her head than a woman to the north. Tasmanian women also often wore necklaces made from tiny shimmering seashells.

Men and women incised their bodies and rubbed powdered charcoal and red ochre mixed with grease into the wounds. This raised high weals on the skin, producing the scars noted by Bligh. These cicatrices—lines, dashes and circles—were principally on the upper arms, chest, shoulders, back and buttocks. Their significance is unknown, but, at least for women, it seems to have varied regionally, like the different hairstyles. As Bligh also noted, both sexes covered their bodies with a mixture of ochre and grease or charcoal and grease. They usually went naked, but occasionally draped a kangaroo skin loosely over their bodies.

Apart from the huts, other items of material culture mentioned by Bligh are a stick two to three feet (60 to 90 centimetres) long and a basket made of rushes. For spears men used plain wooden lances made from the slender stems of tea-trees. They were 2.4 to 5.4 metres long and 1 to 2 centimetres thick, tapering back from a robust point. Thrown so that it spun in flight, such a spear was a lethal weapon at 60 to 70 metres. The stick was a waddy, also a man's weapon. A wooden rod, about 60 centimetres long and 2 to 3 centimetres in diameter, with one end bluntly pointed and the other roughened for holding, a waddy was used as a club or thrown with a rotary motion.

Women carried digging-sticks, sharpened to a chisel-like blade at one end, which they used to prise shellfish off rocks, dig up tubers and roots, break into the burrows of muttonbirds and penguins, and strip sheets of bark off trees. Bark was used for various purposes, including binding catamarans. Women also had smaller sticks: pointed ones for extracting molluscs from their shells after cooking and flat-bladed ones for prising abalone off rocks under water. They dived deep for these shellfish and for crayfish. Women made containers from grass, rushes, or kelp, and gave them handles fashioned from plant fibres. They made long ropes from tough grass for climbing trees after possums. The rest of their tools were made of stone and held in the hand, not mounted in handles. Grinding stones were used to prepare plant foods, and other tools were made by striking sharp flakes from a larger block and trimming them into shape. These tools were used for purposes such as preparing plant and animal foods, for manufacturing spears and waddies, and for cutting hair, beards and cicatrices.

For illness and injury, people were given a variety of practical and spiritual

treatments. Salt water was drunk as an emetic. The end of a lighted firestick was applied to insect stings. Kurrajong leaves were applied to affected parts, or their aroma inhaled. A man shot in the arm by a European gun had it amputated and the stump appears to have healed well. A common remedy for pain was for another person to apply pressure at the right place. Ailments were commonly believed to be caused by a spirit called Raegeowrapper, and could be alleviated either by making deep incisions or by applying charms such as the bone of a dead person or the ashes from a cremated body. After a cremation, invalids were rubbed all over with the ashes. But the healthy also wore charms to keep sickness away. Some people judged to be terminally ill were left by the fire with a little food, but whether or not this practice was common we do not know.

We do know that Tasmanians were punctilious in disposing of their dead. A corpse was usually cremated with ceremony and song. Less commonly, the body was buried. The Tasmanians believed that each person had a non-corporeal aspect, a soul, which survived after death and lived elsewhere. Raegeowrapper, the spirit who caused illness, appears to have been a spirit who governed the night. There was also a sun spirit associated with men and a moon spirit associated with women. These and other spirits had links with the creation of the first Aborigine, who had a tail like a kangaroo—a creation story associated with the star god who tumbled to earth at Togee Low (Port Davey) and was turned into a large stone. Other traditions hint at epic sea voyages.

Songs and dances of the Tasmanians varied from group to group, often having religious significance. The Aborigines made bark paintings and engraved patterns on rock outcrops near the sea. No paintings survive, but rock engravings may be seen, their patterns consisting of lines, dots and arrangements of circles. We do not know their significance. Possibly their motifs formed a language similar to those in the patterns of scars incised on people's bodies.

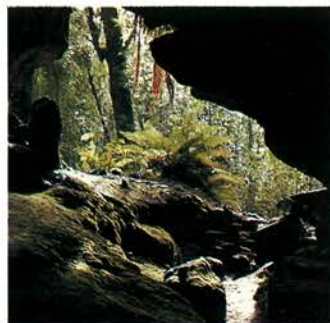
Bligh found their speech fast and unintelligible. The most recent scientific assessment suggests that there were two Tasmanian languages, northern and southern, which had some resemblance to the Australian mainland languages, but not a close one. The thousands of years of the island's isolation provided ample time for the Tasmanian languages to develop separately.

Like other Europeans in the eighteenth century, Bligh was not much interested in the origins of the indigenous people of exotic lands. The Nuenonne in 1788 had their own ideas about their past, embodied in the Dreaming stories about spirits and sea voyages. Few of these narratives survived.

Archaeological evidence shows that the Nuenonne had lived on Bruny Island for at least six thousand years—as long as Bruny had been isolated by the rise of the post-glacial seas. Elsewhere in Tasmania, evidence has been found of much greater antiquity.

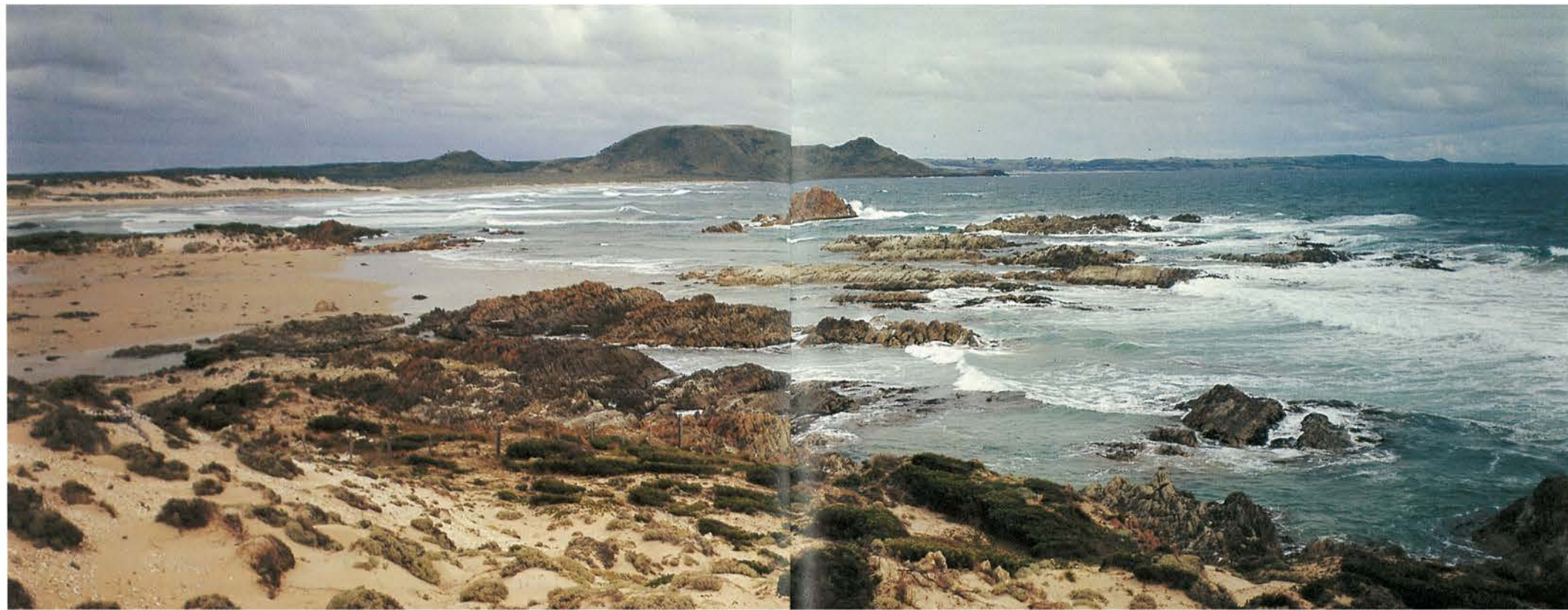
In the southwest and the northwest, archaeological research has confirmed an Aboriginal presence earlier than 20 000 years ago, proving that the Tasmanian Aborigines had a common ancestry with mainland Australian Aborigines. The kinds of stone and bone tools found in these old Tasmanian sites are identical to those found in mainland sites of similar age.

Differences between the Tasmanians and mainland Aborigines evidently developed after the formation of Bass Strait some 12 000 years ago. The Tasmanians went their own way, having no contact with mainland societies. Far from being static their society adapted to the variety of Tasmanian conditions, responding to environmental changes and technological challenges, using their traditional tools and techniques, knowing land and sea and wind and seasons. Then the strangers came.



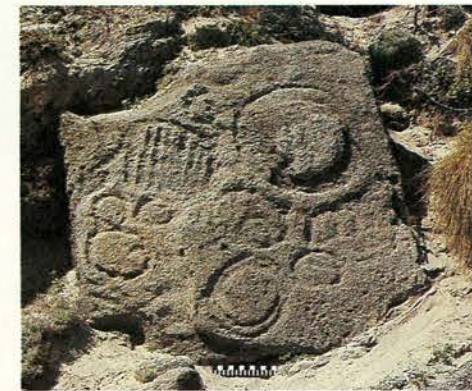
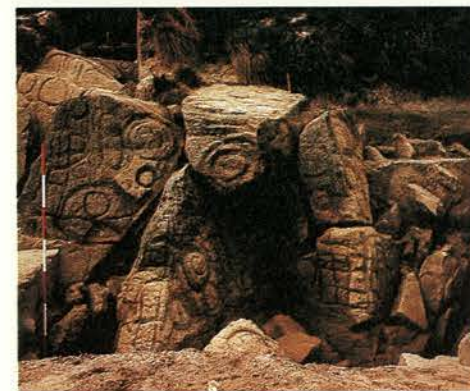
Kutikina cave on the Franklin River was occupied between 20 000 and 15 000 years ago. It was then abandoned, probably because of the encroaching rainforest. In 1981 it was rediscovered.

DJ. MULVANEY



Aborigines in Tasmania rarely painted ancestors or other figures in rock shelters. But at a few sites, of which Mt Cameron West is an outstanding example, they did engrave rocks with signs and emblems. No formal study of these has been published, but they have been recorded and are now preserved. Excavations show that deposits had built up in front of and around the engravings during the last one thousand years. The engravings themselves are probably between 1000 and 2000 years old.

R. EDWARDS





*Paintings created by Najombolmbi, in Arnhem Land.
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IP. HASKOVEC