



Tasmanian Genocide

2004

Once upon a time a people lived happy and free. They practiced no agriculture, made no pottery, wore no clothes and were as gentle and content as the other wild animals they lived with.

Then the civilisers came. And within seventy years all the native people of Tasmania were wiped out. It was called the “The Black War of Van Diemen’s Land”, the official campaign of extermination begun in 1803, which decimated the native people of Tasmania in the usual brutal civilised way.

“The Tasmanians were by missionaries and friends of man civilized under the earth.”

— German anthropologist, Hellwald.

By 1830 the few remaining Tasmanian natives were rounded up and imprisoned on Flinders Island where by 1843 only fifty survived.

“On Flinders Island Robinson was determined to civilize and Christianize the survivors. His settlement — at a windy site with little fresh water — was run like

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a jail. Children were separated from parents to facilitate the work of civilizing them. The regimental daily schedule included Bible reading, hymn singing, and inspection of beds and dishes for cleanness and neatness. However, the jail diet caused malnutrition, which combined with illness to make the natives die. Few infants survived more than a few weeks. The government reduced expenditures in the hope that the native would die out. By 1869 only Truganini, one other woman, and one man remained alive.”

Jared Diamond (www.cwo.com)

The last survivor, Truganini, was defiant to the last.

“An old woman lay dying in a white-walled room, upon a white bed, surrounded by whiteskinned doctors and nurses. In all that whiteness, her dark skin glistened affirmatively; even with the sweat of death on her face, a dominant vitality seemed to flow from her. She cursed at her doctors, and sometimes, in a cracked voice, she sang and chanted. At last she fell back against the pillows and whispered, ‘Bury me behind the mountains’; and so she died.” (pg 137, “Fall of the Sparrow” by Jay Williams, Oxford University Press, 1951)

Her mother had been stabbed to death by a European, her sister was kidnapped by Europeans and her intended husband was drowned by two Europeans in her presence, while his murderers raped her. Even in death she was mocked — displayed in a museum in contradiction with her dying wishes. (She was eventually, in 1976 allowed rest at sea after a lot of fuss.)

What do we know about her people? No record remains, only impressions of missionaries, anthropologists, invader settlers and

government agents who made no effort to try to understand Tasmanian culture. They were hunter gatherers who lived in small bands, (nine widely dispersed tribes at the time of the European invasion), breastfed their kids to a ripe age, practiced no circumcision or cannibalism, sang and danced a lot, were well-fed, strong, happy, and abhorred agriculture.

Archaeologists found certain peculiarities in the Tasmanians' history:

1. They had started to wear clothes at some stage, but then abandoned them again about 4,000 years ago. Although the climate was cold and wet in winter, the Tasmanians wore nothing but a small pieces of wallaby skin as necklaces.
2. They stopped using the bone tools they'd been using to make the clothes and didn't seem to have a need for weaving tools, axes, spearthrowers or boomerangs.
3. They stopped eating scale fish. When the Europeans arrived the Tasmanians preferred to swim further out into the open ocean to gather abalone and other shellfish.
4. They had been using fire to flush out small animals and encourage fresh plant growth, but discontinued this practice too.
5. They had no fire-making tools, but kept a fire stick burning and if one tribe's fire went out they had to go and ask another tribe for some fire. Mainly used for ritual, sacred purposes, not to keep warm by.

All the changes occurred about 4,000 years ago and neatly turn civilised ideas of progress on its head. The usual argument, that 'they didn't know how to' do such and such, was clearly not true as, for example, catching scale fish involved far less skill and knowledge than gathering shellfish from far out in the sea. And in the

other things, like cloth-making, they obviously did know how to do them, just chose not to for some reason.

We don't have any testimonies from the Tasmanians themselves, so I'll just hazard a guess as to why these changes occurred. They felt more free while naked, they were afraid of over-fishing the scale fish and were guided by instinct and observance to see the destructiveness of burning areas of bush land. They weren't afraid of ditching an obviously unusable idea if it hindered them in any way or damaged their home. Being free was far more important than being comfortable.

Of course, we don't know though because all the people were murdered without telling anything of themselves. Anthropologists must surely be wringing their hands over the rock paintings which will never reveal their secrets to them (a large number of hieroglyphic rock carvings were found) and spend many long hours hypothesing about what the natives might and might not have 'believed' in. Perhaps the Tasmanians knew how futile it is to talk to these white fellas who cannot understand anything.

Perhaps their last defiance was to leave this earth without divulging anything of themselves to the stupid, brutalised and brutal people who visited their land and destroyed it. Fuck you! Miserable fellas from the prisons of Europe you wouldn't know what we are about even if we told you. Better to die than live like you, as prisoners. We go to our deep earth graves whole, intact, impeccable, while you must live in the hell you're creating.

The Tasmanians are an enigma, a glimpse of a way of life that could not survive alongside the civilised invasion. They gave nothing to the nasty morons who over-ran them, preferring to hold onto their dignity and integrity, revealing none of their stories or songs, nothing of their history, none of themselves. So we don't even know what they called themselves or the land they lived in. It wouldn't have meant anything to us anyway. And their stories and songs and philosophy of the universe — we would understand them even less.