

The Long Shadow of John West's War
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In a noteworthy recent volume, one of Tasmania's most prolific and award-winning historians characterises John West's two-volume *History of Tasmania* thus:

“The history is extremely thorough, as far as it goes.”

That brief assessment – broadly positive, with a conditional sting in the tail – comes from your last John West Memorial Lecturer, Alison Alexander, and appears in her account of Tasmania's anti-transportation movement. After commenting on West's treatment of transportation and convictism, a subject with which West was morally and politically very engaged, Alexander turns to that portion of West's history which, perhaps more than any other, strikes many a modern reader as prescient. “Unlike most contemporary historians,” she asserts, “West took Aboriginal history seriously, devoting a large section to it.”

West's grappling with the subject of Aboriginal history, and perhaps more importantly the fact of colonial conquest, has attracted considerable praise from historians, especially who looked back from the twentieth century and found in West someone who asked important moral questions of the history he reported. Of these, another of your former John West Memorial Lecturers is especially prominent. In the mid-1990s Henry Reynolds characterised West as one of four “Competent colonial historians” to have addressed the subject of Aboriginal Tasmania. This century, in the context of discussing the colonial war in Tasmania in his own history of Tasmania, Reynolds went so far as to term West “The greatest of Tasmanian historians”.

In addition to West's historical importance and historiographical prominence, however, he has frequently also borne an evidentiary burden. Sometimes this is straightforward. West's quoting from the 29 January 1810 issue of the Derwent Star newspaper is a clearcut case in point, with

West being the main way historians have cited the seemingly long-lost issue. But other instances of West being used as a repository of historical information, and the overall slant he put on the conflict between the colonisers and the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania, is a more slippery prospect for modern historians who approach West uncritically.

By way of simple example of the overarching problem with West we can point to the other three of Reynolds' "Competent colonial historians" – James Bonwick, James Erskine Calder, and Henry Ling Roth – all of whom were influenced by and at times relied upon West's work. Even now, over a century and a half since West's volumes entered the historiographical scene, it is not uncommon for present day writers to quote or cite West for snippets of historical information or ethnographical observation, but also to replicate his overall narrative approach to both the Vandemonian War and the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania.

My focus today is on reassessing West's account of frontier conflict as part of my larger project to unpick the historical and historiographical processes that both form and deform aspects of Tasmanian history-telling. When it comes to the history of Tasmania, as the case of West neatly illustrates, the ostensibly clean lines between primary and secondary sources are easily blurred. And in focusing too much on select detail, we can easily overlook the big picture.

Before continuing with West, however, allow me to tell the history of another historian of Tasmanian frontier encounters: me. This story starts with a young graduate of the Australian National University coming to Tasmania in 2006 to undertake doctoral research on late medieval English social welfare. Purchasing a guidebook to his new home and learning therefrom that Tasmania has a genuine medieval window installed in the little country Church of Buckland, his curiosity was piqued. Eventually, he visited the church, saw the window, and developed a historiographical itch he has not stopped scratching.

Far from being medieval glass from Battle Abbey in Hastings, buried to protect it from despoilers many centuries ago, Buckland's famous window

is in fact decidedly nineteenth century. It looks it, surviving documentation concerning its procurement proves it, and the advent of motor tourism in the early twentieth century seems the most likely explanation for the emergence a good story that encourages visitors to stop at Buckland.

What originally struck me about my Buckland excursion, and still strikes me whenever I drive through, is the way that such a fanciful and demonstrably untrue story had such traction on popular historical memory. Newspapers took it seriously, guidebooks took it seriously, and – if the postcards and other mementos sold in the Church itself are anything to go by –, some parishioners took it seriously well into the twenty first century.

From my visit to Buckland and my first professional drive into Tasmanian history I therefore learned that at least some Tasmanians are willing to repeat stories until they essentially become historical truths.

Fast forward a few years. I have finished, or just about finished my doctorate, and am lecturing in Aboriginal Studies in Burnie. Trove is new, and I'm showing students how to use it to find the historical newspaper sources used by historians of Australia's most infamous colonial conflict. But the students are perplexed. They cannot find a particular edition, supposedly offering evidence that a woman named Dalrymple Briggs had slaughtered some 14 Aboriginal assailants with a duck gun. I too start looking more closely and pulling the evidentiary threads.

That newspaper was not published on the day or even the year for which it was being cited. The event concerned turned out to be unusually well documented and occurred several years later than the historian had asserted. Dalrymple Briggs herself was of Aboriginal descent, and may have wounded somebody, but certainly did not massacre 14 people that day. Something was evidently wrong here.

After further investigation I found that the historian's account shared elements of two versions of the story, one from a nineteenth century history, the other from a twentieth century novel.

My delving into that incident became my first article on the complex historiography of the Vandemonian frontier. While drawn to it because of the problematical threats of evidence, one thing I learned from this exercise was the importance and influence of Tasmania's early histories in the crafting of Tasmanian history even into the twenty-first century.

For about a decade now, I have pottered away in corners of Tasmanian history, picking at weird threads of the Vandemonian historiography, especially those pertaining to the Vandemonian War.

Let me give two quick examples. Firstly, there is the case of Henry James Emmett's "reminiscence" of his experience of the General Movement of 1830 – now often called the "Black Line" – which he authored late in life. While undoubtedly reflecting his own experiences, Emmett's "reminiscence" also demonstrably bends the sequence of history. A close reading of Emmett's account reveals that at one point he was replicating a sequence of events as described in a book published in 1870. Incidentally, part of this included the uniquely mythic account of Dalrymple Briggs I've just discussed, which proved the red flag which alerted me to a problem and therefore also became the key to unlocking the inter-textual dependence that showed this "reminiscence" was more complicated than a straightforward account of things remembered.

Now for our second example, which troubles me much more greatly. According to all available evidence, the Cotton family on Tasmania's east coast did not secretly house a priestly class of Aboriginal informants on their property for decades after the 1830s, from whom they learned lost Aboriginal lore, wrote it all down, lost their precious manuscripts in a fire, and then re-wrote most of it from memory in the form later published in a volume titled *Land of the Sleeping Gods*.

Rather than being lost to fire, the family in fact has one of the most extensive colonial archives of its type, with papers surviving in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the State Library of Tasmania, and the Special and Rare Collections in the University of Tasmania. Rather than being secretive keepers of forgotten lore, they were active in the very public retrieval of ethnographic information during the later nineteenth century, demonstrably and repeatedly corresponding with various ethnographers

and historians in ways which reveal their own knowledge was extremely limited. And rather than being long-term protectors of Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Cotton family were, among other things, later known to have had a fine collection of Aboriginal skulls.

Now, what I hope you take from this digression is this: well before writing *The Vandemonian War* – my own account of the battle for Tasmania between the colonists and the original Tasmanians – I had become the kind of historian who likes to scratch at the sources, not only for information about the past, but also because I am interested in the way that stories emerge, and sometimes last, despite clear evidence that points otherwise. Such “mythic history”, we might call it, tells us much about whatever culture cherishes it, and it is Tasmania’s love affair with “mythic history” that fascinates me.

So, let’s get back to West, whose work I now want to re-examine in this light. And to commence that process I want to delve right into a very specific moment.

April 1828, page 28. This is where we will find our first key to unlocking West’s story.

John West’s second volume of the *History of Tasmania* is in its fourth section devoted to matters Aboriginal. West has just described Lieutenant Governor George Arthur’s partition proclamation of April 1828, which legally divided the island of Tasmania, creating militarised settler zones in which, as West puts it, the Aboriginal inhabitants “were forbidden to intrude”. “In looking at these orders and proclamations,” West says, “it is impossible to regard them in any other light than as plans of military operation.”

But there, on page 28, West then writes of the colonial government’s efforts to communicate with those Aboriginal people so obviously affected by this, stating that “They,” that is, the Aboriginal people, “were invited to seek redress of their grievances; and pictures were suspended in the wood, in which the white man was represented shooting the native, and the Governor hanging the white.”

You will likely recognise in this description one of the most famous artefacts of Vandemonian history. That West had seen one of these picture boards at this time is very unlikely, as the recovery of Tasmania's surviving copy from underneath Government House in Hobart only occurred later that decade. Now housed in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, when that particular copy was recovered so little was known about such boards that when it was displayed in the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne shortly after its recovery it was attributed to one of Lieutenant Governor Arthur's predecessors and dated to the 1810s.

I could say much more about these picture boards, but suffice to note that West's own dating of them is relative. He puts them after the April 1828 proclamation, and then, immediately after writing of these "pictures ... suspended in the wood", West says: "These remedies were, however, ineffectual; and in November, 1828, the settled districts were placed under the protection of martial law."

In short, West puts these picture boards in 1828, between the proclamations of April and November.

To be fair to West, I'm pulling on a very specific thread here, which has a lot of conditional factors to consider. We now know that there were likely other board designs, and therefore potentially other timelines of production and dissemination. But the surviving imagery, which West seems to have been describing, does not belong in 1828. This design was formulated in the year following, in 1829, and the first evidence for the production of actual boards comes from 1830. There are numerous uncertainties here, but we can be rather confident that these boards were not being used in the months between April and November 1828 as a principal means of the colonial government communicating its intentions in the Tasmanian bush as West asserts.

So, the question becomes: Why did West put them there? To my mind, there are two explanations.

The first aspect of this is evidentiary. While it is acknowledged that West made inquiries of those who had first-hand experience, it is perhaps not quite so readily acknowledged just how dependant West was upon earlier

works of history. In this section, where he very quickly passes over the events of 1828, West is clearly following Henry Melville's *History of Van Diemen's Land*, published almost two decades before West's own volumes. Not only does West's treatment of the proclamations of 1828 suggest that Melville is one of his sources, but West paraphrases Melville so closely as to slip into plagiarism at one point. Melville characterised the author of the partition proclamation as someone "whose aberration of mind ultimately caused his removal from office" (p. 78), and West describes the same individual as someone "whose mental aberration led to his removal from office" (p. 27). On the micro-level such correspondences of words and syntax are telling signs of derivation.

But at a more specific level, the second answer to our question about why and how West situates the picture boards concerns narrative, and here a certain macro-derivation is evident too. West puts the boards between the two proclamations because this is where the episode best fits in his understanding of narrative sequence, one drawn from his own rather limited sources of structural information.

Here I want to zoom out again and look at the big picture of West's Aboriginal project. This is the first part of a second volume of Tasmanian history. Organised in ten sections, West's Aboriginal history is not precisely chronologically arranged, but rather a carefully crafted sequence.

The first section deals with the encounters of early explorers with the Aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania. The second focuses on the early period of settlement, highlighting the violence at Risdon and the peaceful efforts of early lieutenant governors. The third aims "to trace the causes which led to that long and disastrous conflict", as West characterised it. This section, it might be noted, gives considerable attention to the role of a few notorious individuals, including the Aboriginal man known as Musquito, and is focused on explaining the emergence of Aboriginal violence against settlers.

The fourth section we have already been discussing. It is about the government's initial response to Aboriginal violence which, as West says

in its opening line, “seemed to require some extraordinary means for its repression”. This theme of Aboriginal violence dominates the fifth section, which details a few episodes at some length, extensively quotes an official list of Aboriginal atrocities, and begins West’s account of what he calls “the year of the Black War”, a term he uses to mean specifically the General Movement of 1830. This campaign is concluded in the sixth section, which also details various conciliatory measures sponsored by the government and undertaken by settlers, and then flows neatly into section seven, which deals with George Augustus Robinson’s endeavours and government policy emerging from the benevolent gaze of the Aborigines Committee.

By now we are on the downhill run, and section 8 deals with the Aboriginal people in exile, section nine touches on the subject of extinction and the relocation of survivors to Oyster Cove, and then section 10 concludes the Aboriginal history with an ethnographical survey.

Now, anyone really familiar with the history of Tasmania will recognise that this is a narrative structure, not a timeline. Robinson’s missions began before the General Movement, for instance, so why place them entirely afterwards? The answer is at least partly that it provides a narrative structure, which West clearly deploys, perhaps unconsciously given his heavy reliance on published accounts and official government sources, which tells the story of a broadly well-meaning government trying to arbitrate a conflict that is mostly between unruly convicts and revengeful Aboriginal people. That is the story promoted during the war by the government and many in the settler class, and it is certainly the story cherished by subsequent generations of settlers down to West’s own day and beyond.

Yet, to again be fair to West, it is too easy to forget that he wrote with a particular intent, which encompassed more than just the history of this war. West’s overall history is an anti-transportation text, and the Aboriginal section should not be treated as some anomalous impartial digression, especially considering the fact that West explicitly turned to transportation for the remainder of that second volume immediately after

his Aboriginal history section. While it is true that West sympathised with the Aboriginal situation, the purpose of that section was to aid his larger argument that transportation itself was wrong. For West, convictism lay behind the conflict.

This notion becomes clearer when you look at the context in which West's book emerged. Take the following account of a lecture he delivered in Hobart in August 1852, the year of his book's publication, on the subject of the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania:

Last Tuesday evening, the Rev. J. West delivered a valuable lecture on the history of the primitive inhabitants of this colony, to a very numerous auditory, assembled at the Mechanics' Institute. The Rev. gentleman eloquently dwelt upon the original physical and social condition of the aborigines when this island was first discovered, and **by numerous examples showed how the progress of their degeneracy and extinction resulted by the contact of convictism.** The whole lecture was singularly instructive and interesting, and we are glad to find that Mr. West has expressed himself willing to resume the subject next Tuesday evening.

This was his argument in a nutshell, summarised by his contemporaries. West **“by numerous examples showed how the progress of their degeneracy and extinction resulted by the contact of convictism”**.

Attention to West's own commentary within his book bears this out. While admitting that “accounts of this affair differ greatly”, West's version of the Risdon incident of 1804 is a telling instance. He says that “the convicts and soldiers were drawn up to oppose them. A discharge of fire-arms threw them into momentary panic, but they soon re-united. A second, of ball cartridge, brought down many; the rest fled in terror, and were pursued”.

When Lyndall Ryan assessed this version of West she stated that “it would appear with the benefit of hindsight that West was trying to make the Tasmanian Aborigines responsible for their dispossession and virtual elimination.” But that is in fact getting West's purpose entirely upside

down. West's point is that convictism itself is to blame. For West, the transportation system is the original sin behind Vandemonian violence.

A similar thing emerges in the West's view of the 1820s. For him, another significant causal factor in the growth of Aboriginal hostility at that time was the corruption of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples by the Aboriginal transportee Musquito. Again, it was not Musquito's Aboriginality that was central to this dynamic, but his transportation to Van Diemen's Land. It was the phenomenon of transportation that brought the scourge of war to this island.

In fact, West's analysis of this comes only a few years after a Launceston petition against the removal of convicts from Norfolk Island to Tasmania was drafted and printed in the *Examiner*, in which special mention was made of the danger posed by a class of convict who "by their peculiar origin and dispositions, are rendered specially formidable: aborigines who have been a terror on the neighbouring continent, are placed in gangs among harden European offenders." West's comments about Musquito are therefore not merely an echo of the past, but an allusion to a contemporary concern, reverberating within his political and social circles.

Furthering West's focus on the evils of convictism lurking behind conflict with Aboriginal peoples are two fascinating footnotes. The first of these, citing an "eye-witness", says: "It was not, however, true, that cruelty was always unpunished. A man was severely flogged for exposing the ears of a boy he had mutilated; and another for cutting off the little finger of a native, and using it as a tobacco stopper." Here, in a footnote ostensibly showing that the government tried to effect justice, were multiple episodes illustrative of degenerate convict violence.

The other footnote to which I want to draw your attention refers to an incident near Launceston related by West, where colonists had fired upon Aboriginal people and mistreated Aboriginal women. West's footnote states that: "The Ruffians who maltreated them were, indeed, punished with 25 lashes!". Again, while ostensibly showing that crimes against Aboriginal people were sometimes punished, this works as proof of convict degeneracy. In their original context, these lonely two footnotes really remind the reader that the crimes being punished were committed

by those within the convict system, and that therefore convictism lays behind the Vandemonian violence.

West does not entirely let all settlers off the hook. But there is a clear thread throughout his work that convicts and servants commit most of the violence which incited Aboriginal rage and counter-violence, which therefore precipitated and necessitated the forceful response of the colonial government and respectable settlers. In many ways this is the official line of the 1830s, straight out of the government playbook. There is no mention in West's book of the government authorising the payment of bounties of Aboriginal people killed during the course of capture, no mention of the execution of Aboriginal prisoners by government agents, no mention of the limits of martial law being quietly ignored while public proclamations focused on conciliatory measures.

While Tasmanians have become all too accustomed to think of this conflict as being between "black" and "white", often reading it through the lens of the scientific racism of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, West saw three main factions: Aboriginal, colonial, and convict. That the colonial and convict factions were intertwined does not negate his argument, but rather bolsters it. West's long-running world view is that the British empire will be stronger and morally superior without transportation. Indeed, in an earlier lecture "On the Friendly Intercourse of Nations", while speaking of the conflict in Tasmania West noted that "we may distinguish between the hands by which the people perished, and the minds which shudder at their destruction". He lived in an age and class that saw the war in Tasmania as the unfortunate by-product of the convict transportation enterprise. If there was guilt for the slaughter to be apportioned, he was pointing finger of history at the those already found guilty of something else, and at the system which put them in place to cause trouble.

This narrative of degenerate convicts and humanely minded settlers is, in hindsight, rather ironic. It was, after all, the class of settler that West acclaims that tended to be very prominent in the waging of the war, and none more so than the now infamous John Batman.

West's treatment of Batman is significant, for it helps set the scene for over a century of denialism. West characterised Batman as someone "distinguished for the knowledge of the bush, compassion for the natives, and skill in pursuing them". While West then goes on to describe multiple instances where Batman reportedly led teams that killed more Aboriginal people than they captured by a very significant margin, he nonetheless concludes that short section with this assessment: "Looked at alone, even in the mildest form these measures are revolting; but to Mr Batman belongs the praise of mingling humanity with severity; of perceiving human affections in the creatures he was commissioned to resist."

West then compares Batman's well-meaning slaughter with that of unauthorised convict violence, saying that "if the authorised system", which Batman typified, "was attended with a sad sacrifice of native life, no one will question the atrocities committed by commandoes, first formed by stock-keepers, and some settlers, under the influence of anger, and then continued from habit." Those stock keepers were, of course, largely convict servants. And ex-convicts were, of course, a component of that larger body of anonymous settlers to which West is likely alluding.

Again, West is drawing a clear line between well-intentioned state sponsored efforts, led by well-known and prominent free settlers like Batman, and a murderous savagery disproportionately inflicted by anonymous convicts. West further illustrates this division here by describing a striking scene:

The smoke of a fire was the signal for a black hunt. The sportsmen having taken up their positions, perhaps on a precipitous hill, would first discharge their guns, then rush towards the fires, and sweep away the whole party. The wounded were brained; the infant cast into the flames; the musket was driven into the quivering flesh; and the social fire, around which the natives gathered to slumber, became, before morning, their funeral pile.

To this account, West then appends a lengthy footnote. In this footnote, he expands on his Tasmanian sources, without naming them, before at even greater length giving an account of the infamous Myall Creek Massacre of 1838 in New South Wales, which actually saw the execution

of men convicted of killing Aboriginal people. “The seven murderers had all been prisoners of the crown”, West noted, and concluded that they were suspected to have been “the miserable agents of persons still more guilty.” Once again, convicts and convictism were to blame for unrestrained violence from the colonial side.

But Batman, who West further characterised as someone who “assiduously cultivated their good will, being one of the few who entertained a strong confidence in the power of kindness”, is a figure we now know to illustrate the perfidiousness of government action during the conflict. Knowing Batman’s team executed prisoners, the government neither stood him down nor called him to account. Publicly proclaiming limits of martial law, the government told Batman to ignore them when in hot pursuit.

West’s characterisation of well-meaning Mr Batman proved appealing to subsequent writers, who amplified it. In his influential account of the conflict in Van Diemen’s Land, James Bonwick quotes those parts of West on Batman. Just as West had developed some of his ideas about the war from Melville’s text from the 1830s, so too West was clearly rather directly influencing the way the war was being assessed into the 1870s and beyond.

Moreover, because of West’s standing as a prominent political and literary figure, his assessments mattered. As early as 1856 Bonwick quoted West in a history of the Port Phillip District, referring to West’s judgement that “The success of humane suggestions depended on the doubtful concurrence of ignorant cotters and wandering shepherds.” This was another of West’s allusions to government intention being good and convict conduct being bad, easily taken out of context to be a broad assessment of British policy towards Aboriginal people, rather than a none-too-oblique critique of the convict transportation system.

Moreover, because Bonwick not only used it in that volume, but in subsequent volumes about Victoria and Tasmania published in the 1880s, West’s assessment about “ignorant cotters and wandering shepherds” easily passed out of its original literary context. It is surprising to see where West gets quoted even today, usually illustrative of a certain sympathy

towards Aboriginal matters, without much recognition that his purpose is not impartial, but highly polemical. West does not so much blame individuals as point the judgement of history towards a system.

That systemic view also comes out in West's assessment of Arthur's General Movement in late 1830. This is the campaign which Melville had called the "Black Line" and West termed the "Black War", terms which I hope will soon be dropped from regular usage in the same way and for the same reasons that historians abroad do not habitually speak of the "Indian Wars", the "Māori Wars", or the "Kaffir Wars".

But to my point: Of this campaign, whatever it be called, West says:

The Governor was delighted, ... by those proofs of the discipline of the prisoners, which were afforded through the campaign: many hundreds were in arms : they performed their duty with exemplary diligence and sobriety, and thus afforded the only spectacle which Colonel Arthur valued. It was certainly unprecedented. Slaves have been armed by their masters – their wives and children were hostages – but convicts, never. Robberies were less frequent than usual, and the journals singularly free from the details of crime. The animating influence of confidence reposes, elevates the least romantic natures : since they were trusted, they were faithful : all returned home to their servitude.

In short, despite having a very limited understanding of the campaign's actual conduct, and following Melville and other critics of Arthur in characterising it as a bit of a farce, West fundamentally saw the largest military campaign ever waged on Australian soil in light of convictism. By his assessment it was a high point in Australia's history because convicts were kept too busy to misbehave. Furthermore, being trusted rather than subjugated, and working with the free in a mutual effort directed towards common safety, West practically represents the convicts as temporarily rising above degeneracy for the duration of this campaign: a war of extirpation. It is an ironic moment for a narrative which places so much emphasis on anonymous convict misconduct.

Now, let me conclude by saying that the war did not end there. “Thus closed the Black War”, said West on page 53 of his second volume after describing this campaign. But there is clear evidence that points to considerable military force being deployed after the General Movement of 1830. The war continued, fought by many, including the soldiery that get relatively little play in West’s volume and successive histories. Robinson’s missions were underway, certainly, but so too were secretive capture missions carrying government guns and promises of rewards for Aboriginal people killed during the process of capture.

I’ll conclude by making this point: The long shadow of John West’s war was cast over many a subsequent telling of this story in ways he did not intend and which we should now start to undo. West’s narrative structure remains influential to the point of being habitual, despite not being entirely chronological. His characterisations of classes of people and individuals were as much polemical as historical, but these endure as frames through which historians often approach the conflict. His set piece events and personalities remain popular historiographical fixations, drawn relatively uncritically from the pronouncements about government policy and history made by earlier government sources. That the government’s directives to its police magistrates could go uncited for a hundred and fifty years, for instance, is, I suspect, largely down to the influence of West’s version of the war in Tasmania.

In short, by so effectively using Aboriginal history to bolster his broader argument about the evils of convictism, John West may unknowingly have set in train a type of historiographical loop whereby re-tellers of Tasmania’s war became too narrowly interested in the events and issues that interested John West, even to the point of occasionally accepting the ridiculous, or ignoring the obvious.