

"DEFENDING OURSELVES"

a record of courageous and violent resistance against colonialism by the First People and true owners of so-called "tasmania" in the 1820s and 1830s



from "fate of a free people" by henry reynolds, 1995

Formatter's note:

Reynolds is a settler historian.

The language used to talk about First Nations people herein reflects the time of publication of his book (1995).

Nevertheless, I thought the information contained in the chapter to be valuable and interesting for those of us who want to pay respects to, learn from, and follow in the footsteps of the first courageous resisters against colonialism here.

Cover artwork: "The Two Walyers," Marie McMahon (1988).

Defending Ourselves

Colonel C. J. Napier was one of Britain's most celebrated military heroes of the first half of the nineteenth century – he was a Byronic figure of heroic achievement. In the 1830s he was asked to become the first governor of the new colony of South Australia. He eventually declined the position, but made use of the occasion to study the history of Australian colonisation and to write a book called *Colonisation: Particularly in Southern Australia*. He was concerned with colonial attitudes to, and treatment of, the Aborigines. Addressing contemporaries who believed that Aborigines were members of 'a race which forms the link between men and monkeys', he argued that all the accounts of explorers and travellers 'proved them to be by nature, equal, to all other men'; evidence showed that these 'poor people are as good as ourselves'. He paid particular attention to 'the story of the colonists' war with them in Van Diemens Land' which, he commented, was one of

aggression, and horrid cruelties on the part of the English; of forbearance, long suffering, and, at last, of unqualified vengeance, on the part of the blacks; who, (considering the odds against them in numbers, in skill, in fire-arms, in discipline), made a most *courageous* resistance against us.¹

Napier's views are refreshing. At one and the same time he rejected the burgeoning tradition of racism and insisted on the principle of racial equality; he linked this to the 'courageous' resistance offered by the Tasmanians to what he considered to be the invasion of their country. Had they known of Napier's views, the petitioners of 1846 would have appreciated the recognition from such a celebrated military man of the fact that the Tasmanians had defended themselves in a legitimate war of resistance.

Not everyone in Tasmania would have been as well pleased. The nineteenth-century historian James Erskine Calder noted in 1875 that in numerous publications the Aborigines were reputed to be 'a cowardly even an inoffensive race'. He was keen to dispel this illusion, explaining it was

a very false description of them for they were not deficient of pluck, and their so-called harmlessness seems to have consisted in their making at least a thousand attacks on the colonists and fighting them as long as one of them was left on the mainland.²

The ethnographer H. Ling Roth arrived at a similar conclusion a generation later. That the Tasmanians 'should have been more successful in their struggles with Europeans than other races better provided for such struggles, was hardly to have been expected'.³

N. J. B. Plomley's detailed 1992 examination of the conflict between settlers and Aborigines during the years 1824 and 1831 largely bears out Calder's assessment. Plomley believed that during that period there were 706 incidents in which Aborigines attacked the colonists or their property. Attacks

averaged 18 a year during 1824–26, but rose rapidly to 72 in 1827, 144 in 1828, 148 in 1829, reaching a peak of 222 in 1830 before falling back again to 68 in 1831. During the seven years under study, about 170 Europeans were killed, 200 were wounded and a further 225 harassed or threatened in one way or another. Three hundred and forty-seven houses and huts were plundered or burnt. Commenting on the statistics he had compiled, Plomley observed that

until 1824 or thereabouts the takeover of lands useful to the settlers in Tasmania proceeded without much hindrance from the Aborigines, but thereafter there developed a state of war, virtual or actual, a Seven Years War, which was waged by both sides with increasing bitterness.⁴

The Black War broke out after twenty years of contact, much of it relatively peaceful. Relations were often uneasy, and there were sporadic, often individual, acts of violence between Aborigines and whites. Recalling the early years of the colony, G. T. Lloyd noted that the settlers and their 'sable neighbours lived upon tolerable though very questionable terms of friendship'.⁵ A surgeon who settled at Jericho in 1822 recalled that the local Aborigines 'at that time came amongst the settlers familiarly and fearlessly'.⁶ Sexual relations between Aboriginal women and white men were commonplace. It was 'well understood' that women would visit the stockmen in return for sugar, tea, tobacco and bread.⁷ George Robinson found in 1829 that tea with sugar was 'accounted a great luxury' among the Aborigines. Their demand for it was 'regular and irresistible'.⁸ By the 1820s, many Tasmanians had learnt to speak 'colonial English' with reasonable fluency and they often wore at least some items of European clothing.

Until about 1824 the common view among colonists was that the Tasmanians were a mild and peaceful people. 'They are perfectly harmless', J. Dixon wrote in 1822, 'a man with a single musket will make them run'.⁹ The editor of the *Hobart Town Gazette* remarked in 1824 that the local blacks had

'always been considered the most harmless race of people in the world';¹⁰ indeed they were 'the most peaceable creatures in the universe'.¹¹ The outbreak of hostilities perplexed many of the old hands. 'I do not know what made them so blood thirsty towards us', an assigned servant from Oatlands observed in the late 1820s.¹²

The common answer to this question was to relate Aboriginal aggression to specific incidents that occurred in particular localities – the hanging of two Tasmanians in Hobart; brutality to a party visiting Launceston; and the kidnapping and raping of women in rural areas. But there were almost certainly more general and universal factors involved. Perhaps the most perceptive white account of the outbreak of conflict was provided in 1830 by Richard Dry, who had been in the colony since 1807. He concluded that the hostility in former years did not extend beyond the 'Tribe or family' in which it originated. It arose and had been 'excited by some Temporary Aggression of the Whites', memory of which gradually gave way to better feelings. But in later years

a determined spirit of hostility [had] been manifested by the whole of the Black population, and acts of outrage committed by them, on the lives and property of the settlers in almost every settled District on the Island.

The motivating factors were no longer desire for individual revenge or reaction to personal injury or affront, but could be attributed to 'causes whereby they are all equally affected and aggrieved' in a situation of

the Rapid increase of Settlers who now occupy the Best portions of the Land, extensive plains and fine tracts, where formerly Emu and Kangaroo fed in such numbers, that procuring subsistence was pastime to a Black Native, and not as it is now, attended with Toil & uncertainty. From this land they are excluded and daily witness our encroachment in the extensive Fences erecting [sic] by the Settlers. The circumstances tho' inseparable from the Nature of

the Settlement must impress the Blacks with unfavourable ideas of our Intentions towards them.

Dry concluded that a dramatic change had taken place in the attitude of the Aborigines towards the Europeans. Until the early 1820s their hostility had been directed at individuals. From that time on they looked 'on the whole of the white population as enemies' and they were 'not sensible of any benefit they might derive from living with [them] on friendly terms'.¹³

There is no doubt that fierce competition over the use of, and access to, land underlaid the escalating conflict. When Aborigines spoke to the settlers they were confronting them with remarks like the ones addressed to a settler in the Clyde Valley in 1830: 'Go away you white buggers what business have you here.'¹⁴ In the island's narrow valleys, settlement was intensive, the farms held under freehold tenure from the very beginning. Abundant convict labour allowed the settlers to rapidly build stone houses and farm buildings, to lay out miles of fencing and plant extensive hedgerows. They put roots down quickly and deeply. The historian John West wrote of this process in 1852:

The rapid colonisation of the island from 1821 to 1824, and the diffusion of settlers and servants through districts hitherto unlocated, added to the irritation of the natives and multiplied the agents of destruction. Land unfenced, and flocks and herds moving on hill and dale, left the motions of the native hunters free; but the hedges and homesteads were signals which even the least rationality could not fail to understand, and on every reappearance the natives found some favourite spot surrounded by new enclosures, and no longer theirs.¹⁵

When they spoke to sympathetic Europeans, the Tasmanians returned again and again to their moral outrage at the way they had been treated by the colonists. George Augustus Robinson recorded such conversations many times during a

decade of close association with Aborigines from all parts of the island. When exiled in Bass Strait, the inmates of the settlement at Wybalenna were 'extremely vehement' while recalling 'the barbarities practiced on their progenitors and themselves'.¹⁶ When the surviving members of the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes met Robinson in January 1832 they complained loudly 'of the injuries done to them', for they had 'experienced a multitude of wrongs from a variety of sources'.¹⁷ The story was the same in other parts of the island, local clanspeople complaining in 'bitter terms of the cruelty' to which they had been subjected which 'prompted them to the commission of their usual outrages'.¹⁸ By the late 1820s the extent of settler violence was so general that there was 'scarcely one among them' who had not had personal experiences of it or who didn't know of atrocities 'that had been committed upon some of their kindred, or nation of people'.¹⁹ 'Can we wonder then at the hatred they bear to the white inhabitants?' Robinson asked. The enmity was 'not the effect of a moment', but was like an underground fire which had been burning for a long time.²⁰ Indeed Robinson realised that

They have a tradition amongst them that white men have usurped their territory, have driven them into the forests, have killed their game and thus robbed them of their chief subsistence, have ravished their wives and daughters, have murdered and butchered their fellow-countrymen; and are wont whilst brooding over these complicated ills in the dense part of the forest, to goad each other on to acts of bloodshed and revenge for the injuries done to their ancestors and the persecutions offered to themselves through their white enemies.²¹

The more sympathetic Europeans believed that the desire for revenge was informed by attitudes which they interpreted as patriotism and love of country. William Darling, who was in charge of the Aboriginal exiles in Bass Strait between 1832 and 1834, concluded from his experience that they considered themselves as having been 'engaged in a justifiable war against the Invaders of their Country'.²² Robinson, the

subsequent commandant of Flinders Island, came to a similar conclusion about Aboriginal motivation. He believed that the Aborigines were 'patriots, staunch lovers of their country'²³ and that

they consider every injury they can inflict upon White Men as an Act of Duty and patriotism and however much they may dread the punishment which our laws inflict on them – they consider the sufferers under those punishment as Martyrs in the cause of their country.²⁴

Both Napier and Calder were impressed by the vigour and courage of the Aboriginal campaign against the settlers, despite their small numbers and simple technology. Many things contributed to their successes: their bushcraft, knowledge of terrain and their great mobility, all products of their traditional way of life. But equally important were the techniques and strategies which were developed in response to the European challenge.

Like all hunting-gathering people, the Aborigines had a profound knowledge of their homelands which had accrued over thousands of years. They understood the flora and fauna, knew exactly where to find water, could navigate across country with complete confidence and knew the intricacies of the rugged and mountainous island terrain.

Europeans who travelled in the bush with Aboriginal guides received first-hand lessons in bushcraft. 'Thus is knowledge gained of their mode of subsistence', George Robinson observed,

which is only acquirable by making them your companion in your travels. Their resources are indeed prolific when hunger craves and there is variety of unknown herbs or roots or plants to which they fly when hunger compels.²⁵

Gilbert Robertson, Chief Constable of the Richmond district and leader of the roving parties, reported that his guide 'Jack' had a knowledge of the country 'equal to any compass' and

he appeared to know 'every spring or stream in the Island'.²⁶ A military officer engaged in the frontier skirmishing noted that the Aborigines possessed

many advantages which men brought up in civilisation do not, they can traverse the Island from one end to the other without difficulty, requiring neither Rations, nor lodging. They can run up the Rocks, fly thro' the Trees and mountains . . . so as to baffle all pursuit.²⁷

The highly honed skills and lifetime training of hunter-gatherers added to their advantages. Their sight, smell and hearing had been sharpened both by the food quest and by the intermittent intertribal warfare during which bush skills were pitted against traditional enemies equally talented in pursuit and attack, evasion and escape. George Robinson was not surprised at the failure of European parties to 'come up' with the blacks. They had been engaged in a futile 'battle with a shadow'. How could success be expected? he asked:

The natives have the advantage in every respect in their sight, hearing, nay, in all their senses; Their sense of smelling also. They can smell smoke at a long distance, especially if the wind sets towards them. I have known instances of their scenting a kangaroo roasting by the hostile natives . . . They can perceive the smallest traces, much less the plain footmarks of white men.²⁸

The Aborigines usually knew exactly where European parties were while remaining hidden themselves. By watching them from concealment, observing the smoke of their fires or scrutinising their tell-tale tracks, the Aborigines closely monitored the progress of white men through their country. The convict Jorgen Jorgenson, who led one of the roving parties given the task of capturing Aborigines, wrote with resignation that fourteen months' experiences had taught him that in most instances 'the vigilance of the Native Tribes has proved an overmatch for all our most strenuous exertions'. He ruefully admitted that his party had been seen and observed from the

minute it left a hut or a settlement.²⁹ The settlers found it almost impossible to follow Aboriginal raiding parties even when they started out soon after their quarry. A military officer stationed at Bothwell explained his frustration to the authorities in Hobart. The Aborigines immediately 'removed to a considerable distance' from the scene of the attack. He had 'never been able to fall in with them in the neighbourhood' and in the rugged country it was quite impossible to determine which direction they had taken.³⁰ Captain Clark, a colleague from the same district, observed that the Aborigines were seldom pursued by the settlers 'from a despair of finding them in the almost inaccessible fastnesses'.³¹ 'To travel after the blacks without scent of them is no use', a settler from the River Clyde explained, 'they are so subtle'.³² On the other side of the colony an east-coast settler referred to the 'utter impracticability of capturing by surprise or pursuit such a sagacious and wily race of people'.³³

The ability of groups of Aborigines to disappear from view even when closely pursued often left Europeans completely perplexed. 'The whole country', Robinson observed, 'affords them concealment'.³⁴ A settler from Great Swan Port observed they were 'really the most surprising creatures in the world'. He recalled the occasion when he was in the act of levelling his gun at an Aborigine when 'he disappeared as if by magic and I could see no more of him'.³⁵ Gilbert Robertson reported a similar incident in November 1828. A large posse of settlers was in hot pursuit of an Aboriginal group near Constitutional Hill but they all escaped 'and no one could tell how though they were in a manner surrounded by upwards of 30 people' and each one was 'more anxious than another to capture or destroy them'. Five parties of settlers and their servants continued all night scouring the hills 'but could see nothing more of the natives'.³⁶ A second roving party led by George James reported a similar incident in May 1830. He came close to a woman and a boy and fired at them, 'but mist [sic]'. They were forced down into a creek, and although the ground was burnt on both sides and they were seen to fall behind logs,

James and his party could 'not find either of them', failed to track them by nightfall³⁷ and 'could not see any thing of their fires during the night'. The *Hobart Town Courier* carried the report of a party which had pursued a group of Aborigines who had speared a man on the main road between Hobart and Launceston. As was so often the case, the pursuers lost the track of their adversaries. In fact

they disappeared so quick that they could not any where be seen. They have some extraordinary method of concealing themselves, for nothing is so difficult as to overtake them. They run over the wildest passes on all fours, almost as fleet as dogs, and conceal themselves in holes and trunks of trees, or behind stones, and though you may see them at a short distance and run up to the place where they are, not a vestige of them will be found.³⁸

In evidence before the Aborigines Committee, an advisory body composed of prominent officials which was set up in 1830, Gilbert Robertson admitted that he did not know of 'any effectual mode' of pursuing the Aborigines by which they could be captured. They could not be surrounded 'by several parties coming upon them'. They always kept regular sentries and passed over the most rugged and difficult terrain.³⁹

Governor Arthur showed an old soldier's respect for his Aboriginal adversaries, writing to an officer out in the field:

you are of course aware that . . . you will have to deal with a people who always in the most adroit manner, reconnoitre the ground on which they purpose passing.⁴⁰

Aboriginal bushcraft gave them strong confidence in their own ability and a contempt for the Europeans who were deficient in all the skills which they themselves valued. This was the conclusion drawn by those Europeans who spent time in the bush with Aboriginal associates and guides, men like Robinson, Robertson and Jorgenson. Jorgenson explained that the blacks 'consider themselves our superiors in the art of

warfare, save their fear of our firearms'. Their morale and self-confidence was so high that the real problem was to find ways of 'humbling their savage pride'.⁴¹ Robinson said something similar. It was, he wrote, necessary to find means to convince them 'they are not invincible'.⁴² 'They have great confidence in their own strength', he observed on another occasion, 'more particularly as they conceive their concealment in the fastnesses of the Mountains affords them great protection and security'.⁴³ On one occasion he warned the members of his party while he was out in the bush with them that if they were not extremely careful the settlers would shoot them. They retorted that they 'could see the white man first' and that the Europeans 'could not always shoot straight'.⁴⁴ On Flinders Island, 'the Natives ridiculed the idea of white men following them in the woods and many amusing stories have since been told connected therewith'.⁴⁵

The links between the skills of the tribal hunter and the guerrilla warrior were recognised at the time, the editor of the *Hobart Town Courier* remarking in 1830 that the Aborigine had adopted the 'natural weapons of his condition', and while the settlers might deplore the results, they were the 'natural tactics of war with which providence has provided him'.⁴⁶ Other colonists were less complimentary about their adversaries' tactics. 'Their whole art of war', wrote one, consists of 'a concealed, silent and treacherous attack'.⁴⁷ George Robinson thought their warfare was of a 'predatory nature'. Their mode of attack was 'by surreptition'; they lay in wait before they made their attack which was 'a sudden and unperceived invasion'.⁴⁸ Calder observed that the Aboriginal raiding parties 'never attacked at a disadvantage' and invariably 'retired directly when over mastered'.⁴⁹ It was extremely difficult to 'put down such an enemy' who was 'neither to be easily met with in fight, nor overtaken in pursuit'.⁵⁰ Calder concluded that

If it had been possible to bring the savage into fair and open fight, with something like equal numbers, all this would have been

reversed . . . But the black assailant was far too acute and crafty an enemy to be betrayed into this style of contest, and never fought his opponent at a disadvantage to himself.⁵¹

But Aboriginal warfare in the 1820s involved much more than 'that which nature provided'. It reflected a generation of cultural borrowing and adaptation during which the Tasmanians learnt far more about the Europeans than white people learnt about them – they were far more curious about the immigrant culture than the settlers were about the Indigenous one. By the 1820s many Aborigines had a rudimentary grasp of English and some were quite fluent, whereas George Robinson was the only person in the colony who could converse in the Tasmanian dialects. When attacking huts and houses, members of the raiding parties frequently communicated in English, if only to abuse and denounce the Europeans with convict cusses. As well as picking up the language, the Aborigines had learnt how to use and counter the effectiveness of firearms, how to train and deploy domestic dogs and how best to lay siege to European farms and stock huts. These adaptations need to be considered in turn.

Many Aborigines had at various times camped close to European farms, had worked there as children or cohabited for longer or shorter periods with convict servants or with the sealers in Bass Strait. By the 1820s they had a fair understanding of how the settlers' establishments worked – who, if anyone, would be home at particular times of the day, where the men would be, where the stores were located and, even more importantly, where the guns would be and if they were likely to be loaded. What was not known as a result of general knowledge about the Europeans could be gained from a close surveillance of a house targeted for attack. Forested hills stood sentinel over pioneer farms in many Tasmanian districts, providing perfect vantage points for Aborigines and bushrangers alike. Jorgenson concluded that 'from great patience in watching' the raiders were 'perfectly aware when they may

attack a hut safely and when not'.⁵² After investigating numerous forays by bands of Big River Aborigines, Captain Vicary remarked that the knowledge they had 'of the defenceless state of a house is really astonishing'.⁵³ His colleague Captain Clark noted that 'houses became an easy prey to these insidious depredators' who will

for days and weeks, watch a house that they have marked out for plunder, till they find the whole of the males absent, they then pounce upon the dwellings, and with a celerity incredible plunder it of every article they consider valuable.⁵⁴

After the failure of the Black Line, the government experimented with the establishment of fortified huts which were built to look exactly like any other while containing armed men waiting in ambush. And wait they did. The men never left the huts in daylight and exercised the most 'especial care, caution and patience'. But the Aborigines knew exactly what was going on. They robbed neighbouring huts with impunity but never once approached those hiding the armed avengers.⁵⁵

The Tasmanians quickly adopted European dogs into their economic and social life. Archaeologist Rhys Jones observed that they sought dogs enthusiastically,

incorporating them into their culture with extraordinary rapidity. In so doing they adapted their hunting methods, and managed to make the profound social and psychological adjustments necessary in setting up an affectionate relationship with the new animal, a relationship radically different from anything they had had with other animals.⁵⁶

George Robinson was highly impressed by the ability of the Aborigines to train their dogs and prevent them from barking at inconvenient times. Their 'tact . . . in quietening their dogs' was, he thought, 'truly surprising'.⁵⁷ He was out in the bush one day when his party found two feral pups. They were 'exceedingly wild and flew at the natives', but in the course

of a few hours 'they had tamed them'.⁵⁸ Well-trained dogs were useful in warfare, for running down fleeing Europeans, for surrounding besieged huts and for providing early warning of approaching enemies.

Guns greatly intimidated Aborigines during the first generation of settlement, less for their actual impact than for the mystery which surrounded their operation. The greatest problem to explain was how they struck people down. There was noise, a flash of light, smoke, but no visible missile. The person killed or wounded might have a relatively small wound with no immediate sign of what had made it. The initial assumption in Tasmania, as elsewhere in Australia, was that magic was involved. James Bonwick observed that

When the Tasmanians were at war with the colonists, they had a great dread of soldiers. These formidable beings were seen to put their hand behind . . . bring thence some fire, put it in their guns, and afterwards eject it at the unfortunate Aborigines. To make the process thoroughly complete . . . a round, heavy stone-like thing was often found in the body of the poor creature whose life had thus been charmed away.⁵⁹

The actual power of guns could only be learnt by experience. Much detail had to be comprehended – whether each shot or each gun could injure one person only, at what distance the magic ceased to be effective, why it failed to have any effect at all on some occasions. Fear of guns and uncertainty about their operation allowed the Europeans to overawe the Aborigines in the early years of settlement, hence the confident belief of the settlers that anyone carrying a gun could travel safely anywhere in the island. It was confidence founded on reports like the one in the *Hobart Town Gazette* in October 1816 which related how a party of four Europeans in a cart had been confronted by fifty Aborigines who were 'repulsed by a single pistol shot'.⁶⁰ When George Robinson visited the Tasmanians of the west coast, who had limited experience of Europeans, they were extremely anxious about

guns and were terrified when he raised his telescope to his eye, assuming it was a firearm. Robinson discovered that they had heard from adjacent tribes that 'white men had weapons that vomitted forth thunder and lightning and annihilated their unfortunate race'.⁶¹

But by the 1820s most Aboriginal groups had learnt how guns worked and were keenly aware of both their power and their limitations. Guns were frequently stolen in raids on frontier huts; many groups had them hidden away in the bush and used them when they could get powder and shot, which were also stolen from the Europeans. Robinson found that the blacks who had learnt the use of firearms were excellent shots, partly due to their keen, trained eyesight. Guns retrieved by the Europeans when they raided camps, or which were voluntarily handed over, were usually well looked after. The Big River tribe handed their guns over to Robinson. They were stored in a hollow tree, were primed, loaded and in good condition, with pieces of blanket thrust into the muzzles.⁶² Another camp raided in the same area produced four stand of arms, loaded and in perfect order. Two had 'native' flints in them.⁶³ In August 1830 an Aboriginal party was pursued after a raid near Launceston and driven away from their camp where the pursuing settlers found that the recently stolen guns had been reloaded and the muzzles had been stopped with corks.⁶⁴ On the west coast in 1835 Robinson met a man who carried an excellent carbine 'for the preservation of which he had made a case from the skin of a kangaroo'.⁶⁵

Robinson believed that guns were taken from the Europeans not with the idea 'to deprive the whites of those instruments in order to prevent them being used against them' but because the Aborigines thought that the settlers had them 'in abundance'.⁶⁶

The Aboriginal bands were possibly preparing to use their recently acquired guns against the Europeans. Robinson was told they 'intended using them against the whites as soon as they could get ammunition'.⁶⁷ But having learnt how to use

them, the Tasmanians may have been disappointed with their potential. The muskets of the period were extremely unreliable and were certainly no more accurate than a spear thrown by an experienced hunter. Numerous spears could be dispatched while white men were reloading. They were easy to make, light to carry and could be stored in large numbers for future use. The Aborigines appear to have found that the optimum use for firearms was for hunting birds – shotguns, or ‘fowling pieces’ as they were called, undoubtedly proved far more effective than spears.

The Europeans came to realise by the early 1820s that the Aborigines had lost their fear of guns. ‘We find by everyday experience’, the editor of the *Colonial Times* wrote in 1826, ‘that the natives are no longer afraid of a white man’.⁶⁸ In a petition to the governor in 1828 the settlers from the Campbell Town district observed that they were ‘no longer to be alarmed by the discharge of a musket’.⁶⁹ ‘Time was’, a writer in the *Hobart Town Courier* observed in 1829, ‘when the aborigines would fly from the presence of armed men’. But now, he noted, they ‘will face even the soldiers sent in pursuit of them’.⁷⁰

Knowledge of the mechanism of guns allowed the Tasmanians to develop tactics for dealing with them. They learnt the range of the weapons and how they could remain just beyond shooting distance. By carefully watching European movements, they could throw themselves on the ground or spring behind nearby trees in the second or two between the flash in the pan as the powder ignited and the delivery of the charge. But of even greater use was knowledge of the limitations of guns – that once they were fired it took as much as a minute to reload. The editor of the *Colonial Times* warned his readers in 1826 that the Tasmanians ‘know when a gun is fired off, it is useless’.⁷¹ Once a gun was fired the European was totally vulnerable. All the Aborigines needed to do was to wait until the shot was dispatched and then rush in and attack before reloading could be effected. Without a loaded gun Europeans were at a distinct disadvantage. Armed with spears and waddies the Aborigines were far more effective in hand to

hand combat than white men, and intertribal conflict, or the threat of it, meant that members of raiding parties were well practised in the art. The balance of forces often ended in prolonged stalemate. When confronted by an Aboriginal party, the Europeans knew that their only safety lay in not shooting their guns. The Aborigines were unwilling to attack until a gun was fired and tried every possible stratagem to provoke the whites into shooting. Such stand-offs sometimes lasted for many hours, with the blacks shouting abuse in English and calling out 'shoot you buggers shoot'. While Europeans were holed up in their huts the attackers endeavoured to drive them out by throwing flaming spears into the bark roofs and setting them alight.

When attacking a hut or farmhouse Aboriginal assailants waited until they knew exactly how many guns there were and where they were kept. If the guns were left behind in the hut they would creep forward and remove them before confronting the Europeans. If the guns were carried off to work, the problem was to see where they were placed – against a tree or fencepost – and then to rush in quickly and quietly to cut the white man off from his gun. The *Launceston Advertiser* related the story of a farmer who, having been once raided, never left his house without his gun and his servants followed suit. On the first day the guns were left behind in the huts, the local Aborigines swooped in and made off with the guns there – as well as the stock of flour and sugar – before the settlers could respond.⁷²

Aborigines and frontier settlers waged a long-running battle of wits – one party seeking ever new ways to plunder the huts, the other trying novel strategies to keep them secure. Aboriginal scouts lit decoy fires to entice shepherds and stockmen outside and, while they were away investigating the blaze, raiding parties waiting nearby would move swiftly in and strip the hut of anything useful and portable. The Van Diemen's Land Company, in the far north-west of the island, fought its own long, sporadic war against the local Aborigines. In 1841, with only one small family group remaining

in the bush, the manager, Edward Curr, wrote to the governor complaining that the 'natives [have] commenced a remarkably persevering and daring system of attacks on an outlying shepherd's hut'. It was cleared out on 6 July and restocked and then robbed again on the 13th, 14th, 19th and 20th. After the last burglary the company's employees set up a spring gun which was activated when the door was opened. The gun went off as planned on 23 July. It missed its mark but the raiders dropped their booty and fled empty-handed. The gun was set again the next day, Curr confidently expecting that the hut would henceforth be immune from attack. It was an overconfident expectation. The very next day the hut was robbed and the raiders 'carried off amongst other things the spring gun'.⁷³

The quantity and range of European commodities taken by the raiding parties was apparent when pursuing settlers stumbled upon recently deserted camps. In 1831 an inquest was informed that the camp of the suspect band produced two muskets, a fowling-piece, 3 lbs powder, 8-900 cwt of flour, a 70 lb keg of butter, 150 lbs of sugar and ½ a basket of tobacco.⁷⁴ A camp in the Eastern Tiers, overturned in 1828, produced fourteen blankets, twenty-eight knives, six sheep shears, two razor blades, one fowling-piece, ball, shot and 21 lbs gun powder.⁷⁵ In the far north-west, Van Diemen's Land Company employees found in a camp at Surrey Hills in 1831 one good musket, a pistol, ball, shot, gun powder, flints, pocket knives, table knives, sail needles, cotton wick, a mahogany dressing case, several pieces of measuring tape, a broad axe, 'manufactured steel to make fires', handkerchiefs, blankets and a 'kangaroo rug of European origin'.⁷⁶ The police magistrate at Sorell compiled a list of 'Articles plundered from the several Houses in the Neighbourhood' of the town between 16 and 19 October 1830:

On the 16th

- About half a Bushel of Flour from the House of John Stacy - Thos. Pratt his servant killed.

- From the House of Thomas Coffin three Blankets, about a Bushel of Flour and two loaves of Bread – Coffin dangerously wounded.
- From the House of Joseph Haydon Five Blankets, two Sheets and six large Loaves of Bread also about 1½ Bushels of Flour.
- From the House of John Finis two Blankets and four knives.

October 18th

John Brown's House was plundered of three Blankets, a large looking Glass, six Table Forks, thirteen knives with Buck-Horn handles, 18 Plates, 9 Empty Bottles, 30 lbs of Sugar in a Bag and a tin Dish with about ten Pounds of Sugar, three Gowns and a Gown Shirt, a Table Cloth, two Strip'd Shirts and a Loaf of Bread – the Ab. broke open three Boxes in Brown's House . . . in the same manner as the Bushrangers used to break them.

Oct. 18 William Gangell's House was attacked (and he and his Son a Boy about 12 Years old were dangerously wounded) where they stole 5 Blankets, eight Bushels of Flour in 4 Sacks, a Bag of Sugar, seven Pounds of Tobacco, two White Calico Shirts – four knives, eight empty Bottles & a Fowling Piece.

David Lanes House was rob'd of Seven Pairs of new Blankets, a whole Bag of Sugar, six knives with buckhorn handles, three or four Strip'd Cotton Shirts belonging to Wm Martin . . . a whole Loaf and part of another, there was no Person in the House except Lane's wife, who had time to escape into the Loft over the Bedroom having perceived them coming up along the Garden fence – when in the Loft she defended herself with the Blade of a Scythe which she found there, to prevent the Natives following her, she pulled the ladder up after her.⁷⁷

The settlers found abundant evidence of Aboriginal adaptation of European material culture – large amounts of flour made into damper, teapots and tea, clothes and blankets neatly sewn with European needles, clay pipes and tobacco. By the time of the Black War even the more remote tribes were addicted to tobacco and tea. George Robinson found when he visited the Port Davey people that their desire for tea was 'one of the chief sources of attraction in directing their migrations to those places or abodes where they think they can procure

it'.⁷⁸ When he met the Big River tribe he discovered that 'flour is their object, also tea, sugar and blankets . . . they cannot do without these'. They were incessantly asking for bread and sugar which they were 'passionately fond of'.⁷⁹

The new desires created the necessity of finding innovative means to carry and to store the European commodities. Blankets and empty wool bails were used to carry potatoes, and empty bottles were used to hold water. Robinson came upon a well-prepared storage pit for flour out in the bush. Bark and grass were placed on the bottom while the sides were lined with bark. Stones and old pieces of wood had been placed around the hole 'to mark the spot'.⁸⁰

The demands of war forced changes on Aboriginal society – both the initiatives needed for attack and the responses demanded by defence. Europeans were often aware of important changes taking place in Aboriginal society. In a petition to the government in April 1828, the leading settlers of the Campbell Town district noted that 'of late the Aborigines have assumed a character altogether different from that they once bore'.⁸¹ The police magistrate at Norfolk Plains wrote to Hobart with concern about 'the daring and new character which the Aborigines have lately assumed'.⁸² His colleague at Richmond believed that the 'Systematic Stratagems by which their operations' were conducted rendered them 'every day more and more dangerous'.⁸³ The editor of the *Tasmanian* agreed. There was in the Aboriginal campaign 'an extent and design of management'.⁸⁴ As far as Jorgenson could see, the Tasmanians had developed 'a regular systematic plan of offensive aggressions against the White Colonists'.⁸⁵ The members of the colony's Executive Council were similarly impressed with the rapid development of Aboriginal tactics. 'The Council cannot but remember', they observed in August 1830

the repeated proofs it has had before it of the skill with which the Natives have availed themselves of the facilities presented to them by the nature of the country to make their hostile approaches

unperceived – of their patience in watching for days the habitations of those whom they design to attack, and to the frightful celerity with which they avail themselves of any unguarded moment to fall upon the inmates and put them to a cruel death. The Council conceive that these facts are sufficient to show how dangerous an enemy it is whom we have to contend with.⁸⁶

All movements about tribal territories, all seasonal migration, had to be planned to avoid the Europeans. New paths were opened up to keep to high and forested ground. Gilbert Robertson was conducted on just such a 'blackman's track' across the Eastern Tiers by his guide Jack, who told him that as they travelled they 'would not see a white man's hut for many nights'. He showed Robertson a cache of spears in a hollow log 'to be kept in reserve in case of their losing their arms in the plundering expeditions on which they were engaged at the time'.⁸⁷ The Big River and Oyster Bay tribes appear to have planned their attacks on the settlers by dividing into small war parties which conducted forays into the settled districts and then withdrew quickly into the mountains. The local commanding officer, Captain Vicary, believed they divided themselves 'into small parties' in order to 'attack different places at once, widely apart, and then meet again at some given point'.⁸⁸ Jack, 'the black native', confirmed this assessment in conversation with the Europeans. The Big River people, he said, split up into ten to twelve small mobs 'the better to effect their purposes'.⁸⁹

European food was of critical importance to the war effort – it was ready to use, could be carried and stored, and would not spoil. Jorgenson noted in February 1830 that the clans in the east and centre of the island had 'changed their mode of life', they had 'closed in upon the settlements' and were living on flour, tea and sugar.⁹⁰ But the most important reason for switching to European food was to relieve the Aborigines of the arduous food quest which, given the ever-present pressure of the European roving parties, was intensely dangerous – both gathering by the women and, more especially, hunting

by the men. Jorgenson realised that Europeans had made hunting extremely hazardous to the Aborigines by 'compelling them to run over large tracts of ground' which exposed them to 'capture and very great danger'.⁹¹

George Robinson believed that the Big River tribe had decided to engage in the extensive use of fire to destroy crops and dwellings. There were several spectacular attacks on the River Clyde settlers early in 1830. Howells's barn and house were destroyed in a sudden raid. A lone Aborigine carrying a firebrand ran on to the property in broad daylight. While Howells was in the corn field and his wife in the hut, the lone marauder set both buildings alight and 'ran off again with incredible speed'.⁹² A week later there was an even more successful attack on Sherwin's property. A small party set fire to the back of the men's huts and escaped without being seen. The fire could not be controlled and spread to the house, which was destroyed. Soon after, two Aborigines walked along the fences and set fire to them at every twenty or thirty yards and then burnt the crops, 'bringing the fire even to the River side'. They then joined a larger party standing on some overhanging rocks where they began to leap and 'use much of the language'. 'Parrawa Parrawa', they shouted, 'Go away you white buggers. What business have you here'.⁹³

Warfare brought about a change in the role of Tasmanian women. It appears that in traditional society they did not play an active part in combat. Robinson found that when he first made contact with the Port Davey people the war bands were 'generally picked men' and they invariably left their wives and children behind.⁹⁴ The Aboriginal leader Eumarrah told Gilbert Robertson that the Big River tribe had established a 'standing depot for the women and children' while the men went off to raid the European farms.⁹⁵ But women who had lived with the Europeans were unwilling to remain out of the conflict. Calder believed that such women

became the most hostile of the enemies of all who belonged to the race of their persecutors, and notwithstanding the ancient custom of

the blacks, not to permit the women to take any part in active war, these individuals could not be restrained from joining them, and sometimes leading the attack.⁹⁶

The most notable female warrior was Walyer, who had lived with the sealers in Bass Strait. She 'rose like a Joan of Arc', Bonwick wrote, 'amidst a nation of warriors, to deliver her people. She gathered a party by her eloquence, and urged a band to violence and war by her appeals, and by her courageous conduct in the field'.⁹⁷ We know about her mainly from the evidence of George Robinson. He told the government's official Aborigines Committee that she was 'a very sanguinary and dreadful character'.⁹⁸ She had been the cause of 'all the mischief' committed on the north-west coast. She led a band of seven men, a boy and another woman and carried a 'little fowling piece' which she used in combat.⁹⁹ Robinson wrote to the governor about Walyer in 1830 reporting that

From Several Aborigines, I have received information respecting an amazon named . . . Walyer, who has at the head of an Abor. Banditti, this woman speaks English, and Issues her orders in the most determined manner. Several Cattle belonging to the [Van Diemens Land] Company, have been speared – and several petty thefts have been committed, which I have traced to this 'woman' – the Amazon is at war with several nations of Aborigines and many Aborigines have been slain by her party – the Amazon is an athletic woman middle aged – and is a native of the East Coast. She has collected together the disaffected of several nations and roams over a vast extent of country committing dire outrage.¹⁰⁰

There is some evidence to suggest that under the pressure of war with the settlers, the Aborigines endeavoured to suspend their traditional enmities which had continued right through the 1820s. The colonists with the greatest knowledge of the Aborigines – Robinson, Robertson and Jorgenson – all believed that diplomacy was being carried on between the

various tribal groups. In 1830, Jorgenson concluded that the Aborigines had 'most probably suspended their own internal broils'.¹⁰¹ Robertson was told by Aboriginal informants that the Oyster Bay, Swan Port and Stony Creek tribes had met with the Port Dalrymple tribe to resolve their differences. He reported that the four groups had made 'some sort of a treaty', by which the Swan Port tribe gave all the others permission to hunt on their grounds 'from whence each tribe sends small parties to rob and murder the inhabitants of the remote huts'. They were currently on a mission to the Big River tribe for the purpose 'of compelling them to give up their hunting grounds for the common good and make common cause with them in carrying on warfare against the whites'.¹⁰² Robertson heard later from Aborigines captured by John Batman that 'a general meeting of the tribes' was about to be held near the Great Lake.¹⁰³ George Robinson was told of similar diplomatic moves on the western side of the island. When on Flinders Island he was informed by 'Albert of Port Sorell' that some years before he had travelled to meet the west coast tribes 'to induce them to visit their country and to aid them in robbing and committing aggressions on the whites' but the mission failed to achieve its purpose.¹⁰⁴ It's possible the reconciliation was achieved later. Robinson believed that the Big River tribe intended 'to coalesce with the tribes of the western coast with whom a treaty of alliance had been entered into'.¹⁰⁵ But even if such diplomacy had succeeded it was all too late to affect the outcome of the war.

As Colonel Napier had observed, the surprising thing was that, despite the enormous disparities in population, technology and power, the Tasmanians fought so effectively and for so long. But the cost was enormous. Even the survivors carried scars of the conflict. Robinson reflected on the physical infirmities borne by members of the Flinders Island community in 1837. 'There is not an aborigine on the settlement', he noted

nor an aborigine that has been at the settlement but what bears marks of violence . . . Some have musket balls now lodged in

them . . . some . . . have slugs in their bodies and other contusions, all inflicted by the whites.¹⁰⁶

The constant pursuit and harassment by the military, the official roving parties and numerous posses of settlers must have chronically disrupted Aboriginal society, making normal life almost impossible. Most European parties were outwitted and eluded, but the psychological cost of the contest would have been immense. The police magistrate from the troubled River Clyde, Captain Clark, observed perceptively in 1830 that the local blacks had

suffered but little from our exertions, yet the constant state of alarm they must be left in, and the frequent change of position rendered necessary to avoid the parties, must be very harassing to themselves and to their families.¹⁰⁷

The Black Line must have alarmed the Aborigines, given its size and the number of whites involved, despite the ease with which they slipped through the cordon. A woman told Robinson of her experience inside the Line, explaining how the soldiers were 'extending for a long way' and they kept firing off muskets. She said 'plenty of horsemen, plenty of soldiers, plenty of big fires on the hills'.¹⁰⁸ It would not have been apparent to the Aborigines that the Line was a unique, one-off event that had strained the total resources of the colony and would never be repeated.

It almost certainly persuaded the survivors of the war to consider a negotiated settlement. The population had dwindled away to a few hundred, although the numbers actually killed by the Europeans may have been less than is generally supposed. But there was a constant attrition throughout the 1820s, at the very time when the European population spiralled rapidly upwards from 5000 in 1820 to 24 000 ten years later. Demographically, a few hundred whites killed in conflict was nothing. They were replaced every week or so as the ships came in from Britain. A single convict transport brought

enough men and women to replace those killed by the Aborigines in seven years of conflict. In 1830 alone over 2000 whites arrived, a figure representing perhaps half the total Indigenous population at the time of settlement. But for the Aborigines the losses sustained in the Black War were a demographic disaster that could not be turned around when the killing times came to an end and the Tasmanians negotiated peace terms with the colonial government, senior members of which were only too happy to see the end of the 'lamented and protracted warfare'.

“Knowledge of the mechanism of guns allowed the [First Nations resistance fighters] to develop tactics for dealing with them. They learnt the range of the weapons and how they could remain just beyond shooting distance. By carefully watching European movements, they could throw themselves on the ground or spring behind nearby trees in the second or two between the flash in the pan as the powder ignited and the delivery of the charge. But of even greater use was the knowledge of the limitations of guns – that once they were fired it took as much as a minute to reload. [...]

Once a gun was fired the European was totally vulnerable.

All the [First Nations resistance fighters] needed to do was to wait until the shot was despatched and then rush in and attack before reloading could be effected. Without a loaded gun Europeans were at a distinct disadvantage. Armed with spears and waddies, the [First Nations resistance fighters] were far more effective in hand-to-hand combat than white men.”