

The Tasmanians

Part 5: The Traditional Tasmanians

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In this chapter we try to show how the Tasmanians lived before the British invasion of 1803. The material that was subsequently collected at first by interested British individuals and a little later also by scientist of various hues and reliability is (apart from archaeology) all we have on the Tasmanians. Archaeology under these conditions it split into two: (1) an

archaeology whose finds might throw light on the relatively recent Tasmanians of the last few centuries before the year 1800 and another archaeology that collects information on the ancient Tasmanian society. The latter is "normal" prehistoric archaeology while the former is something special to Tasmania. In this chapter we deal with the Tasmanians between an arbitrarily chosen year 1500 (more or less) and 1800.

5.1. Traditional Tribes and Groups around 1800

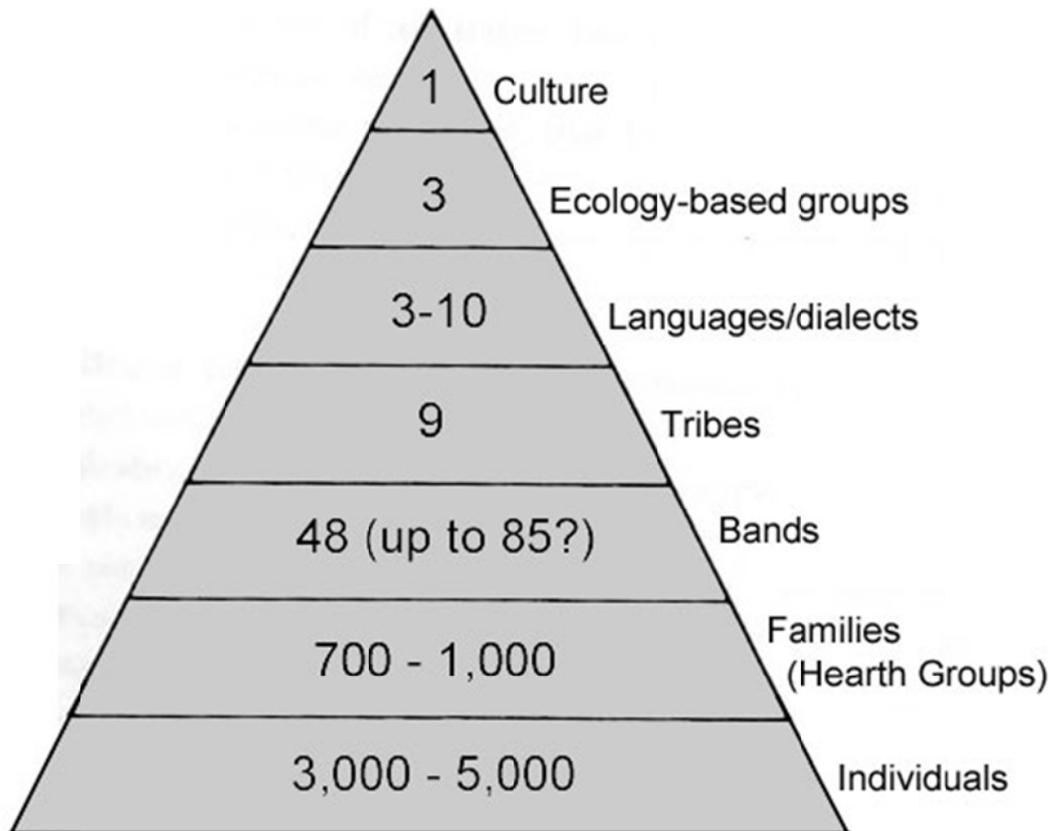
The first known outside visitor to Tasmania was the expedition of the Dutch sailor Abel Janszoon Tasman (ca. 1603-1659) who first sighted the land now named after him in 1642. The island was initially left unnamed but was later named Van Diemen's Land after a later explorer but was re-named Tasmania in 1856.

Direct contact with the outside world was an unhappy experience for the Tasmanians from the start. Disease brought to the islands by early sailors soon began to work its way through the population. The sad story of the demise of the Tasmanians ended, essentially, with the death of the last full-blooded Tasmanian woman, Truganini.

The map shows the distribution of the Tasmanian tribes at the time of the first intensive contact with the outside world and just before the first wave of settlers (rather than temporary visitors) arrived from the outside world, around the year 1800 (map adapted from L. Ryan, 1996, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Allen and Unwin/University of Queensland Press).

The area marked as "uninhabited" is very thinly inhabited even today. It has been covered for millennia (and still is) by dense, often impenetrable rain forest consisting of mostly beech and myrtle. This forest is unique to Tasmania and is virtually devoid of animal life. The area, however, is anything but archaeologically sterile and must have been, of major interest to the earliest Tasmanian hunter-gatherers.

The aboriginal Tasmanian hunter-gathering population in 1800 has been estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000 persons. Some other (less likely) estimates propose 7,000 and still others a rather unlikely 20,000. These are all guesstimates, based on what is known about how many hunter-gatherers a certain type of environment can carry. Tasmanian society before the British invasion is likely to have had a population structure like the following:



It has also been estimated that the smallest tribe had around 250 and the largest around 700 members. In the 1800s the largest tribe was the Oyster Bay tribe (D on the map below). Coastal tribes could support larger populations at higher densities than the less richly-endowed inland tribes. It should be noted, however, that even complete inland groups such as that of Ben Lomond made regular seasonal food-gathering excursions outside their own territory.

The tribal borders shown below are as they were when found by early white observers at the time of the Black War (1804-1830). Before that time, each tribe was made up of a number of local bands that each owned a territory, had a seasonal migration pattern and spoke a common language. About the internal organisation of the traditional tribes before 1800 virtually nothing is known. Several "chiefs" are known but it was never clear to the (white) recorders what these were chiefs of: a local group or a tribe. It is even possible that the "tribes" were not organized units with a chief but were held together solely by traditional family links between the groups and a common language. Any of the wars that we know occurred between Tasmanians would then have been fights between groups or temporary alliances of groups rather than by tribes moving as units. In any case, things changed dramatically in eastern Tasmanian society after 1804 when the Black War began. It should always be remembered that what is reported on Tasmanians after 1800 referred to a society that had already suffered enormous losses and that was changing quickly into something unrecognizably different from what it had been before 1800.

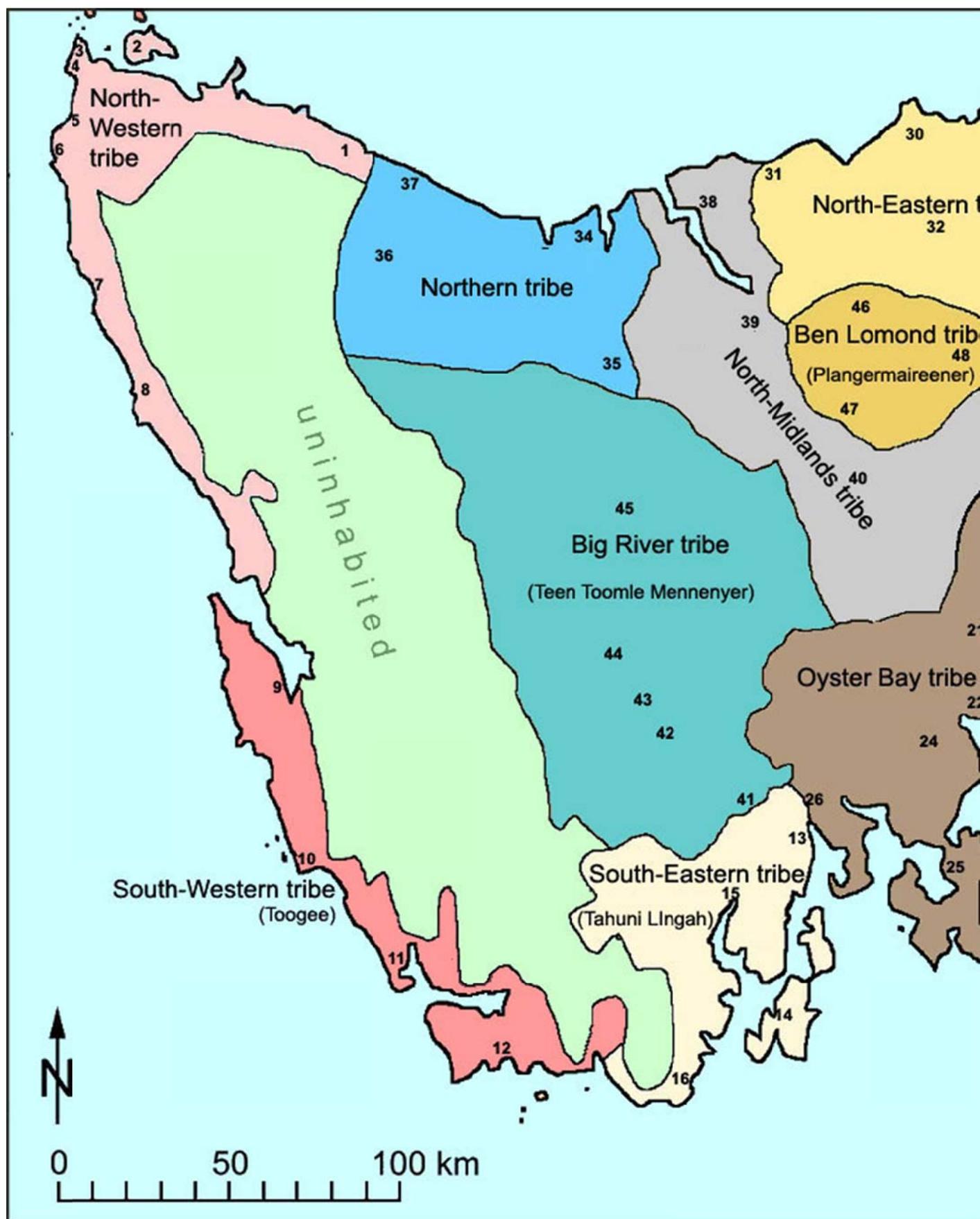
All tribes made seasonal wanderings to hunt and gather specific seasonal items, and these often led through enemy territory. Safe passage was sanctioned by a tradition at specific times of the year for specific purposes. A traditional truce was particularly important in the search for ochre: the red mineral was of major importance to the spiritual welfare of all

prehistoric Tasmanians (as it was to most prehistoric people around the world from the earliest times). Ochre was used for body painting and cave art as well as for many other ritual and ceremonial uses. Surprisingly, no trade in this important resource developed between the have tribe and the have-not tribes. Each group had to go and collect its ochre themselves and this even if they lived at the other end of Tasmania. Ochre is found in Tasmania above all in an area belonging to the Northern tribe. There is another source of ochre in the southwest that seems to have been used only by the local Southwestern tribe on whose land it was located but not (for unknown reasons) by any other tribe. The regular tribal visits to the northern ochre mines may date back to the earliest Tasmanian settlement, 30,000 or more years ago and must have been a strong influence over the millennia on Tasmanian identity.

Captions for map below: **blue** - groups, **red**: tribes, **black** - bands, **red dots**: ochre mines.

<i>1. Maritime</i>	<i>2. Eastern and Northern</i>	<i>3. Midland</i>
<p><i>A. Northwestern tribe</i></p> <p>01 Tommeginer - Table Cape 02 Parperloihener - Robbins Island 03 Pennemukeer - Cape Grim 04 Pendowte - Studland Bay 05 Peerapper - West Point 06 Manegin - Arthur Rivermouth 07 Tarkinener - Sandy Cape 08 Peternidic - Pieman Rivermouth</p> <p><i>B. Southwestern tribe (Toogee)</i></p> <p>09 Mimegin - Maquarie Harbour 10 Lowrenne - Low Rocky Point 11 Ninene -Port Davey 12 Needwonnee - Cox Bight</p>	<p><i>D. Oyster Bay tribe</i></p> <p>17 Leetermairremener - St. Patricks Head 18 Linetemairrener - North Moulting Lagoon 19 Loontitetermairrelehoinner - North Oyster Bay 20 Toorernomairremener - Schouten Passage 21 Poredareme - Little Swanport 22 Laremairremener - Grindstone Bay 23 Tyreddeme - Maria Island 24 Portmairremener - Pieman Rivermouth 25 Pydairrerm - Tasman Pensinsula 26 Moomairremener - Pittwater, Risdon</p> <p><i>E. Northeastern tribe</i></p> <p>exact location of groups unknown</p> <p>27 Peeberrangner 28 Leenerreter 29 Pinterrairer 30 Trawlwoolway 31 Pyemmairrenerpairrener - 32 Leenethmairrener 33 Panpekanner</p>	<p><i>G. North Midland</i></p> <p>38 Leterrenairrener 39 Panninher - 40 Tyerrernoteer</p> <p><i>H. Big River tribe (Mennenyer)</i></p> <p>41 Leenowwen 42 Pangerningher 43 Braywunyer 44 Larmairremener 45 Luggermairremener</p> <p><i>J. Ben Lomon tribe (Plangermairrener)</i></p> <p>exact location of groups unknown</p> <p>46 Plangermairrener 47 Plindermairrener 48 Tonenerwee</p>
<p><i>C. South Eastern tribe (Tahuni Lingah)</i></p> <p>13 Mouheneenner - Hobart 14 Nuenonne - Bruny Island 15 Melukerdee - Huon River 16 Lyluequonny - Recherche Bay</p>	<p><i>F. Northern tribe</i></p> <p>34 Punnilerpanner - Port Sorrell 35 Pallitorre - Quamby Bluff</p>	

	36 Noeteeler - Hampshire Hills 37 Plairhekehillerplue - Emu Bay	
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The following discusses evidence that comes, of course, from the same early observers who initially took so lamentably little notice of the Tasmanian languages: sailors, soldiers, administrators, as well as an occasional interested layman. They were all busy with their own tasks and only now and then able to observe and write down what they saw and heard. Moreover, they did so when traditional Tasmanian society was already well on the way to extinction. Much was likely to be misunderstood and still more more missed baltogether. But what they noted down is all that we have. Under these conditions, it is remarkable how much material, despite everything, there is.

Short of the unlikely discovery of a dusty old manuscript forgotten in a museum cellar, only archaeology is now able to throw new light on what we think we know or unearth completely new evidence.

5.2. *Religious Beliefs*

Brian Plomely in his small but excellent book "The Tasmanian Aborigines" 1993, The Plomley Foundation, p. 62) had this to say:

The whole question of the religious beliefs of the Tasmanians is hardly known. There are two main reasons for this: one, that the enquirer must have a good understanding of the native language before religion can be talked about ; and the other that the enquirer must be sufficiently interested in the subject to ask questions about it. It goes without saying that the inquirer must not believe that his own religion is the only worthwhile religion, as did [G.A. Robinson](#).

To the extent that Tasmanian beliefs can be made out at all, they believed in non-human powers that could be benign or malign. They did not worship or tried to propitiate such powers but merely did their best to avoid provoking them, or to get out of the way of the perceived result of an unwitting provocation. They sometimes also "provoked deliberately" to get a wished-for result: for example they believed that a burning torch suddenly thrust in one direction would alter the direction in which the wind was blowing.

The two most powerful evil spirits were Raegeowropper and Rowra. There was also a creation myth

There was also a belief in "devils" (though "spirit" might be a better word for it since these beings were not invariably evil). When [Truganini](#) died her last words were "Rowra [devil or spirit] catch me." The Tasmanians also seem to have regarded the nature surrounding them as animated throughout. A particular tree, rock or other natural object could be declared to be part of a particular Tasmanian person or of a group, and if that object was then in any way damaged, this was regarded what a modern police report would call "grievous bodily harm". There is no evidence for a Tasmanian belief in beneficial spirits and their entire religion (as far as it is known) seems remarkably dark and cheerless. But then, we know only a tiny part of the entire belief system and even much of what is thought to be known may be completely misunderstood.

The very existence of [Tasmanian petroglyphs](#) and [cave art](#) is evidence that there was a great deal more to Tasmanian religion than the garbled stories of spirit devils told by traumatized 19th century Tasmanian survivors to British collectors.

Ochre (sometimes spelt ocher) is an earthy, red to yellow iron ore that is foremost among humanity's earliest means of decorative painting. It was used from the earliest days of *Homo sapiens* for rock and cave paintings but probably also for body painting and to decorate tools, weapons, hutss, etc.Ochre was widely used by Tasmanians. Although we do not know what ochre meant to the ancient Tasmanianswe know that it ewas very important to their spiritual life. See also under [conflict management](#) and in the chapter on archaeology under under [ochre](#).



[Mannalargenna](#), a chief of the Loch Lomond tribe (1770-1835) is usually portrayed with his hair coated with ochre. Portraits of other Tasmanian men show that this hairstyle was fairly widespread, but the precise meaning of it is not clear. We can be sure that anything involving ochre was was not mere fashion.

5.3. Hunting, Gathering, Food and Cooking

The Tasmanians before 1800 had a wide variety of edible plants and animals available to them on land and in the seas all around the island. They made the most of it for the more than

30,000 years that they were at the top of the island's food chain. In fact, they seem to have eaten anything edible - with some exceptions of which scaled fish is the most notable (see box below). The Tasmanians also did not eat fatty parts which instead they smeared on their heads and bodies, very likely as added protection against the cold. Two further exceptions are the Tasmanian Tiger and the Tasmanian Devil who do not seem to have been hunted or eaten, most likely because they were nocturnal, fast and dangerous when cornered.

The Dingo - the wild dog of Australia - never reached Tasmania. Based on DNA evidence and C14 dating, it is now thought that this Asian dog was not introduced into Australia until 5,000 years ago. The Dingo's absence from Tasmania is an indication that there have been no contacts between Australian and Tasmanian aborigines for at least that time.

The No-Fish and The Vanishing-Bone-Tool Mysteries

Tasmanian prehistory has many unexplained oddities. One of the most startling of these was first discovered when Tasmanians watched early Europeans around 1800 catch and eat scaled fish. The aborigines were clearly shocked and displayed unmistakable signs of horror and disgust, rather as most of us would react if we saw someone eating

Sea creatures other than scaled fish such as shellfish, crustacea and stringray were happily eaten by the Tasmanians before 1800 - but absolutely not scaled fish. Archaeological analysis of prehistoric Tasmanian fireplaces show that until about 3,500 years ago, the aborigines *did* in fact eat scaled fish. It has even been worked out that such fish made up about 10% of the aborigines' total caloric intake then. The new fish-less diet arrived suddenly and was still in place at the arrival of the Europeans. All Tasmanians all over the island apparently had stopped eating scaled fish and never picked it up again. Most of the species of spurned fish remain common in Tasmanian waters until the present day. No trace whatever of a possible environmental or other disaster at the critical time has been found. In Australia, south of the Bass Strait, the aborigines never stopped eating scaled fish and they still do so today.

Another, less dramatic and slower but still drastic vanishing act of a traditional technology in Tasmania began about 7,000 years ago and was completed when the fish-avoidance began. Tasmanians had long used bone tools such as needles and awls. These tools, for no apparent reason, started to vanish, gradually, from the archaeological record. They had disappeared around 3,500 years ago (only one single bone tool has been dated later). Nothing comparable happened in Australia across the Bass Strait either 3,500 years ago or at any other time - bone tools were used from the distant past to the present day. Did the Tasmanians adapt physically so well to their climate that they could abandon sewn clothes? When the first European could observe them they customarily went naked (see Tradition and Custom in Tasmania/Clothes. As J. Mulvaney and J. Kamminga (*Prehistory of Australia*, 1999, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, p. 355) noted that the bone tools' "disappearance from the tool-kit is extraordinary because they are such a low-level innovation, are easy to make, and have such a wide range of uses."

It has been speculated that a reduction of technological skills might be a side-effect of being completely isolated from other people. If the Tasmanians, for whatever unfathomable reasons, dropped the use of a technology, they would be unlikely to be able to re-invent it after a few generations - the skill would be lost forever. Whereas if they had other populations to observe, they might in time take up the habit of making bone tools, for example, again. Maybe that doesn't explain why the Tasmanians should drop useful skills in the first place, nor does it explain the disappearance of scaled fish from the menu of a people surrounded by seas teeming with fish. Moreover, the disappearance of bone tools took a long 3,500 years whereas the fish disappeared very rapidly from the Tasmanian menu at roughly the same time that the bone tools were on their last legs, so to speak.

Whichever way one looks at it, both disappearances remain utterly baffling.

As regards the food that the Tasmanians did eat, this was almost anything not mentioned above. Coastal tribes (especially those on the west coast) were living primarily on shellfish (mostly mussels) and on other sea food such as crabs and unscaled fish, as well as birds. Inland tribes were more specialized on hunting various animals and the east coast people both hunted for animals and dived for sea food. All tribes also collected mushrooms, edible plants and fruit wherever possible and in season. Much of the hunting and gathering also was seasonal - animals moved and plants were ready for harvesting at different times in different areas. Tradition determined which group had access by what route to what hunting or gathering grounds at what time of the year outside its own territory.



Part of a drawing made of a group of Tasmanians taking a peaceful break (apart from the active spear-thrower in the background demonstrating the use of his weapon) near the d'Entrecasteaux Channel on 10 February 1793.

The sketch was made by an artist with the [d'Entrecasteaux expedition](#). Although inevitably coloured by the tastes of its time, the section of the sketch shown here is drawn surprisingly realistically with little of the artistic posturing fashionable at the time.

Hunting was men's work, while collecting plants and diving for sea food was the task of women. While hunting without dogs was a great deal more difficult than it was for the Australian aborigines after they acquired the Dingo, it is quite obvious that it was the women who did the really heavy work. To put it bluntly, they did all the work that the men did not want to do. Diving for sea food in the icy waters was also women's work and in this they are reported to have acquired scarcely credible levels of diving skill. Some women are said to have been able to dive and stay under water for up to 15 minutes at a time! Even if there is some exaggeration in such accounts, there cannot be any doubt that the Tasmanian

women's diving skill must have been close to the limit of human capacity - but then, they had perhaps 30,000 years of exercise behind them.

The Tasmanians did not have the bow-and-arrow technology. But they had the the spear and the *waddy*, a sort of club. Both were not only used in hunting but also in [war](#). Whether they never had bow-and-arrows or lost he technology at some stage during their long isolation in Tasmania is an open question. In the naturally tangled and bushy Tasmanian environment, arrows might not have been as useful as they were on open plains and grasslands. Traditional Tasmanian hunting methods included deliberately laid bush fires that drove game from cover towards the waiting hunters *and* reduced the tangle of underbrush over the long run. The Tasmanians seem to have developed the firing to a fine art and it is said that some of Tasmania's various types of forest even today owe their origins and composition to controlled burning by Tasmanians over countless millennia.

Kangaroo was the favourite and the most substantial source of game meat. After 1803 both Tasmanians and newly-arrived British hunted kangaroo. With their guns the British could do so much more efficiently than the Tasmanians and they pushed the animals rapidly towards extinction. Soon the Tasmanians were starving and the British kept shooting, including for "sport". This situation was the main cause that started violent Tasmanian resistance which rapidly escalated into the [Black War](#) in 1804.

Another favourite food animal was the opossum which was hunted by women. They climbed into the trees and killed the animals there there with a club or stone axe. To ease climbing such large trees, step-like notches were often cut into the stem, and it was precisely such steps that were the very first indication of a human presence noted in Tasmania in 1642, by [Abel Tasman](#). This was 130 years before the first Tasmanian person was actually seen, by [Nicholas du Fresne](#), in 1772.

Meat was roasted over an open fire while other foods taken were eggs which were roasted.



Two Tasmanians repairing and making spears (B. Duterrau, 1855)

A fairly good hint that Tasmanian spears were not used in war but

only in hunting is the fact that the Tasmanians (unlike the Australian aborigines) had nothing even remotely resembling shields.

Vegetables, mushrooms (even a kind of truffle) and fruit were gathered when in season and consumed, as were roots (including a kind of local potato), red gum or manna (a sap exuding from eucalyptus trees) as well as some edible ferns. Acacia seeds were roasted and eaten while *solanum* (also known as colonial or sand apple) were buried in piles of sand and left to ripen when the sun heated the sand. More unusual to us is that the use of kelp (a kind of sea weed) which was macerated in fresh water and then roasted.

The invention (or introduction) of pottery into any culture invariably signals a major civilisatory advance. Pottery allows liquids to be boiled and many other refinements to be introduced. It also allows initially poisonous foods (e.g. many fruits, berries, etc) to be cooked and so made edible and digestible. This in turn increased the amount of food available and made larger numbers and longer lifespans possible for human groups. The introduction of pottery in early people always signals a major technological advance and a massive increase in the security of food storage and food availability. The Tasmanians (unlike the Australians) never made that cultural quantum jump. Among Tasmanians, roasting was the only known use of fire for food. There are reports, however, that occasionally meats or seafood would be laid on a hot stone before being consumed, but that seems to have been fairly rare treats.



The waddy was a no-nonsense club that could give the coup-de-grace to a wounded kangaroo

just as it could finish an enemy in a fight. (Photo Kevin Bell)

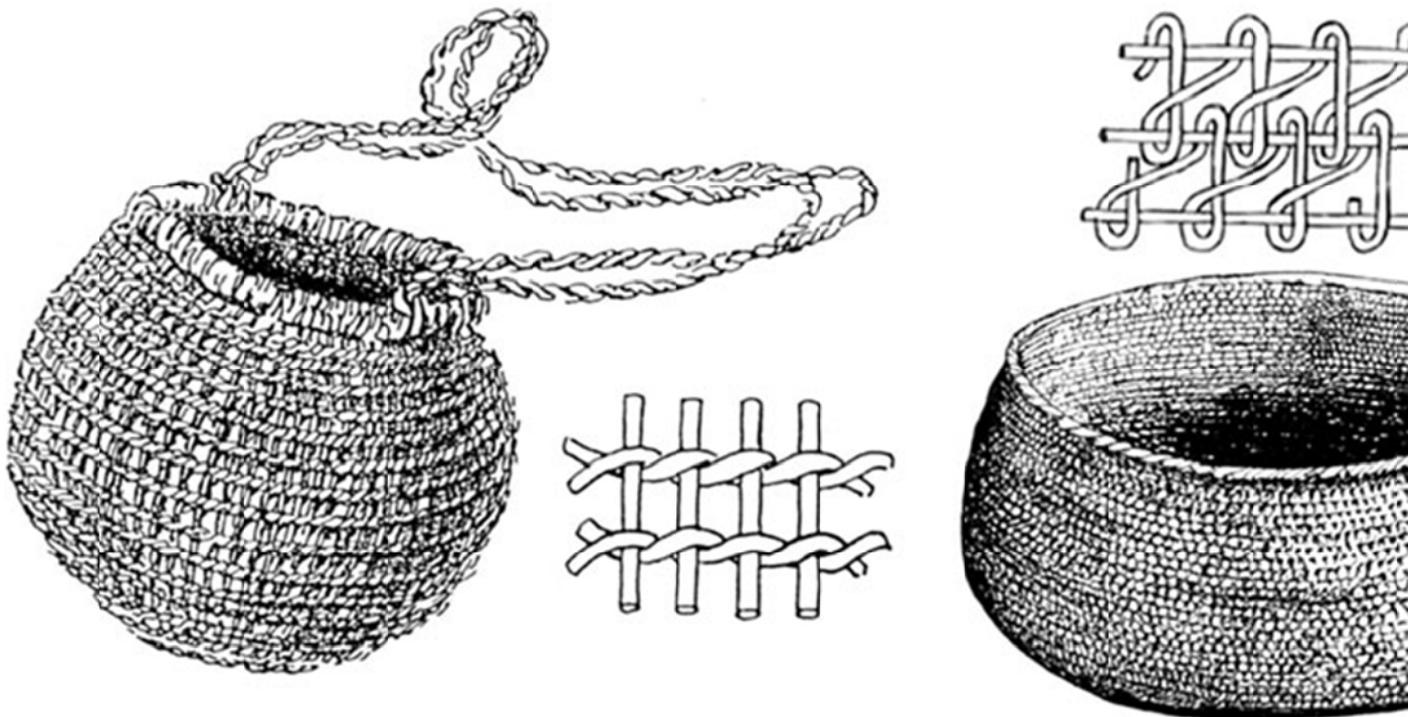
5.4. Baskets and tools

The subject of stone tools will be looked at with in the Chapter [Ancient Tasmanians](#), rather than here. Apart from the unexplained disappearance of fish from Tasmanian diety and the fading out of most bone tool, the stone tools of the ancient Tasmanians until around 3,500 years ago was substantially the same as the tools used by their descendants in the early 19th century. Stone tools are, therefore, not dealt with in this chapter (but see below under [strange changes in Tasmanian eating habits and bone tools](#))

Baskets made by Tasmanian women: well made but for practical use and hardly "art".

Left: a basket made in the traditional Tasmanian way *before* the arrival of Europeans could influence the way baskets were tmade.

Right: a basket made by a Tasmanian woman but influenced by the way British baskets were made.



Another tool used by women only was the simple digging stick with which tubers and similar foods were dug out.

5.5. Making and Using Fire

The ability to make, control and use fire goes back to a pre-human African species (probably *Homo erectus*) at least 1.4 million years ago. It was the most momentous invention ever - to the point perhaps where the possession of fire made the pre-human inventors develop eventually into *Homo sapiens*.

As with all pre-industrial cultures, fire provided not only physical warmth or an opportunity to roast meat but a focal point for group of people to gather around a fire and feel comfortable among their own. Anyone who has ever been at a youth camp will know that a camp fire still works its ancient magic with even the most highly industrialized people.

Whether the Tasmanians knew how to make fire (and did not have to wait for the occasional unpredictable strike of lightning) is not entirely clear. If they could make fire, however, we do not know how they did it. It is possible that they used one or both of the two oldest methods known to mankind: they rubbed together sticks of dry wood until they caught fire, or they struck two fire stones against each other to produce a spark. What is clear is that the Tasmanians took extremely good care of their fire so that a loss of fire would have been a very rare event. Loss of fire would have been highly embarrassing for the unlucky group which had the choice of asking their neighbours for fire, wait for lightning to strike or try to get a fire going by striking stones.

Making fire can be a difficult business even for people with a lot of practice, especially if it has to be done at night or in the rain. The Tasmanians avoided such problems when moving camp by carrying "firesticks": these were pieces of soft wood or twisted strands of fibres and bark with dry moss which were carried around smouldering. Such firesticks could be used to ignite a fire quickly anywhere.

Apart from starting fires for the conventional culinary and heating purposes, the Tasmanians are also said to have used smoke from fires for signalling over long distances. As James Bonwick (in his *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870) reported that "according to the intelligence to be conveyed, the smoke was great or little, black or white."

Fires also needed to be carried not only when a group decided to set up camp somewhere but it was also used when hunting. The hunters customarily set fire to dry bush and grassland in order to flush out game animals (especially the fast kangaroo) but also to keep down undergrowth and reduce cover for the animals. Such regular firing over many millennia has been a major influence on the development of the Tasmanian landscape and ecosystem as it is still today.



Remains of a Tasmanian fireplace uncovered by wind, showing remains of sea shell and animal bones (photograph L.E. Luckman)

5.6. *Song and Dance*

Dancing and singing among the oldest social amusements of mankind and it also was a major factor in strengthening social bonds within a group. Some dances, moreover, are restricted to certain persons (initiation rites and priests) or to special occasions. In ancient societies dancing is not just amusement but carries many religious functions.

Of course, Tasmanians knew dancing and singing but, as usual, we know almost nothing about it and still less about the meanings these songs and dances had to the Tasmanians themselves. The "horse dance" shown below certainly was not just social entertainment (as Robison seems to imply)



A sketch by [G.A. Robinson](#) of some of "his" Tasmanian captives performing what he called the "horse dance."

This dance is described immediately below by James Bonwick. It may have been an adaptation of an old dance to the spectacle (new to the Tasmanians) of coach-and-horses. Alternatively it could have been an entirely new invention growing out of the Tasmanian tradition of replicating in dance the things that interested or were new to them.

James Bonwick describes Tasmanian dances (in his *Daily Life and the Origin of the Tasmanians*", 1870, Sampson.Low,Son & Marston). Since he was in Tasmania only 1841-

1850 he may merely repeat what he had heard from other observers and that he did not see any of these dances himself.

Dancing was the favourite amusement of the men; for only upon very extraordinary occasions were the ladies permitted to waltz with the gentlemen, though indulging at times in a merry dance among themselves at home. During this pleasing exercise, the performers were unencumbered with heavy drapery, pre-ferring the Eden robe of simplicity, if not of innocence ... Tasmanian women were, however, permitted now and then to exhibit their charms and agility before their lords; and such movements were not more remarkable for their chastity of expression than those of more civilized races in ancient and modern times.

[Tasmanian] dances were often imitations of animal movements. The kangaroo dance was one of leaping. [In the] emu dance ... a number of men would pass slowly round the fire throwing their arms about to imitate the motions of the head of the animal while feeding. One hand behind would alternate with the other in front, coming to the ground, and then rising above the head. Messrs. Backhouse and Walker witnessed on Flinders Island a coach-and-horses dance [the dance illustrated above] a lot of men laid hold of each other's loins, moving round in a circle at a gallop, one holding back as if reining-in the others, while a young woman applied a whip lustily upon the backs of the horses, to hurry the creatures on. The thunder-and-lightning dance was performed with a peculiar rolling of the body and a pattering of feet and hands upon the ground. Another dance was simply a springing up a considerable height, on all fours. One celebration was not unlike that related of the Andaman Islanders by Mr. Colebrook, who said they "danced in-a-ring, each alternately kicking and slapping the lower part of his person ad libitum.

A settler makes mention of a singular dance in the forests [of Tasmania]: an old woman rose up, and began most volubly to abuse the men on the other side, chanting their misdeeds in high key. One of the lordly sex advanced, chanting likewise, and appearing to reply to the insinuations of the crone. Then he rattled off an energetic foot movement, while a number of the other women joined in his song, as if defending his cause.

The female dances were usually supposed to be exercised in private, and were conjectured to relate to events of woman's life in the woods, her clamber for opossums, her dive for shell-fish, her dig for roots, her nursing of children, and her quarrels with her spouse. But stock-keepers and sealers have spoken of dances not so correct in tone. Peron saw such in 1802, when the women danced before him and his mate, in the absence of their husbands and fathers; but he kindly and charitably adds an apology: "Some of them," he remarks, "might be reckoned exceedingly indecent, if in this rude state of society man was not utterly a stranger to delicacy of thought." It is to be feared, on the contrary, that the motive was no chaste one. An old Tasmanian bush-rover described a dance not unlike that, sometimes practised before one of the Murray tribes, with the avowed intention of exciting the passions of the men, in whose presence one young woman has the dance to herself. In that case, the hands are placed behind the head, with the feet and knees close, when the legs

are thrown outwardly from the knee, the feet and hands preserving their first attitude; then, when the legs are drawn in again, a sharp report is heard, to the delighted "Ugh !" of the masculine spectators. The women wore a covering of leaves or feathers in the dance. ...

The corrobory in the Tasmanian woods was very similar to that of the Australians, being held chiefly by moonlight, though by no means confined to that season. A great corrobory took place at the full moon of the month of November each year, when the various tribes made peace, and assembled beyond the Ouse river. No one gives an account of the proceedings at this annual meeting, and no one records the sight of a corrobory on a large scale, as the tribes rapidly retreated before the Whites, and at no time were fond of displaying themselves, as their neighbours across the Straits have been.



Among the old notations of a Tasmanian song, the one shown here was made by a member of the expedition of the French explorer Louis de Freycourt (1779–1842) on his way to Australia and Tasmania during the early 19th century.

The same James Bonwick has the following to say about Tasmanian singing (the Tasmanians had no musical instruments):

In their wild state they were a merry people. Occasional skirmishes with neighbouring tribes gave new zest to the festive evenings. It was not until they found themselves engaged in the bloody and hopeless contest with the White, that they became morose, sulky, sullenly wretched. Rarely do we hear of corrobory shouts of joy and fun during the latter, the dying years of this race. Their songs had a melody to please themselves, if not quite agreeable to our ears. Eye-witnesses record instances of intense emotion produced by these native lyrics; tears would be shed, and tumultuous passions excited. We have one song brought down to our times by Mr. Davis, some time resident among them.

SONG OF THE BEN LOMOND TRIBE:

Ne popila raina pogana,
Ne popila raina pogana,
Ne popila raina pogana.
Thu me gunnea,
Thu me gunnea,

Naina thaipa raina pogana,
Naina thaipa raina pogana,
Naina thaipa raina pogana.
Naara paara powella paara,
Naara paara powella paara,

Thu me gunnea.	Naara paara powella paara.
Thoga me gunnea,	Balla ugh,
Thoga me gunnea,	Balla ugh,
Thoga me gunnea.	ugh, ugh.

This guttural termination of all their songs was also a war-cry among them. All their chants abounded in repetitions of words or lines in a monotonous but not inharmonious strain.

Another song has been preserved, sung with the dance in honour of a chief:

Pāppēlā Rāynā 'ngōnŷnā, Pāppēlā Rāynā 'ngōnŷnā
Pāppēlā Rāynā 'ngōnŷnā !
Tōkā mēnghā lēāh, Tōkā mēnghā lēāh,
Tōkā mēnghā lēāh !
Lūghā mēnghā lēāh, Lūghā mēnghā lēāh,
Lūghā mēnghā lēāh !
Nēuā tāypā Rāynā poōnynā, Nēnā tāypā Rāynā poōnynā,
Nēnā tāypā Rāynā poōnynā !
Nēnā nāwrā pēwŷllāh, Pāllāh nāwrā pēwŷllāh,
Pēllāwāh, Pēllāwāh !
Nēnā nāwrā pēwŷllāh, Pāllāh nāwrā pēwŷllāh,
Pēllāwāh. Pēllāwāh !"

Many songs, like their dances, were copied from other tribes. Some Dibdin, Moore, or Burns of the forest would originate some humorous or pathetic ballad, which might be transmitted with its appropriate tune over the island, without its meaning being understood by any but the original tribe. Both sexes joined in the tune. They were fond of making *a b-r-r-r-r-oo* by blubbing lips over closed teeth. The subjects of their poetry were incidents in their history of the day. Most frequently it was a sort of improvisation; in which, doubtless, some gained a celebrity

One ignorant of their language could distinguish the sentiment to be warlike or pathetic, by the modulation of voice, the tenderness or vehemence of expression. In some songs they would pause at the end of a stanza, in perfect silence for some moments, and then recommence.

So much for Mr. Bonwick's report.

5.7. Conflict

In a small-scale hunting-gathering society such as that of the ancient Tasmanians, war must have been a small-scale affair of inter-family or at most inter-group conflicts. We know little about traditional Tasmanian "conflict management" but we can nevertheless make some

informed guesses based on knowledge of other small, ancient groups such as the [Andamanese](#). The combatants in Tasmanian fights were men (women seem to have quarrelled among themselves with words or at worst with sticks) - and women were spectators at the more "formal" quarrels or wars between men. The men's main weapon seems to have been the [waddy](#), a club that could indeed cause death if swung hard enough) and

As P.P. Price (in her *The First Tasmanians*, 1979, Rigby) notes:

There are a number of records of intertribal fighting in G. A. Robinson's journals. Sometimes the cause of a conflict is mentioned, being raiding to capture women, the failure of one tribe to allow members of another to pass through its territory according to custom (e.g. to procure ochre), and so on. Combative weapons were spears, waddles and showers of stones. All these cases of group warfare, however, appear to have been unnatural events resulting from the interference of the European settlers in Aboriginal life. Possibly quarrels between individuals were the usual natural events in Aboriginal society. There is some indication that in their clashes the conflicts were ritualised, one or a few from each side being positively involved, and that the combat was considered to be at an end when one or two of the participants had been killed or knocked out of the fight.

Conflicts occur in any society and have to be resolved if that society wants to survive. The Tasmanians must have had traditional ways of doing so - they would not have survived more than 30,000 years otherwise. Given the no-nonsense hunting weapons and the Tasmanians' skill with them, any armed conflict using these weapons would have been very bloody. In hunting-gathering groups there are few individuals and the consequences of losing even one (especially if he is the chief hunter) could be devastating for all. Thus ways for settling quarrels that do not leave important providers dead or seriously injured tend to evolve naturally in small, isolated societies.

The complex system of "traditionally permitted access" to limited resources across tribal territories that existed in Tasmanians until shortly after 1800 is notable. Groups from all over Tasmania had the right to wander unhindered along paths sanctioned by tradition through the territories of even their worst enemies. Such a system does not develop overnight: it must have taken a long time and perhaps many conflicts to achieve. We do not know how old these access rules were in Tasmania but anything involving ochre could be very ancient indeed.

[Robinson](#)'s journal records a few intertribal conflicts and these were due above all to raids for women and to the refusal of one tribe to honour the commitment of "traditionally permitted access" through their territory (see also [ochre](#)).

5.8. *Health and Disability*

The pre-contact Tasmanians enjoyed remarkably rude health - which argues for little-or-no contact with the outside world and its evolving germs. It might also have been a consequence

of the exceedingly rough life they led: anyone falling sick was as good as dead. Tasmanians all went naked in a climate that could threaten fully-clothed modern people with a wide range of diseases, from colds to pneumonia. Especially the Tasmanian women (who had to work much harder than the men) are described as hardy beyond what one might think possible. For example, they are reported to have dived up to 15 m deep in icy waters and to have stayed submerged for up to 15 minutes without coming up for air. This might be an exaggeration by outside observers who had to guess at time and depth, but the dives they witnessed were certainly cold, long and deep enough to impress them enormously.

In such a tough society, disability is rarely tolerated. Clearly handicapped or even just "unusual" children were quickly removed in one way or another. Such societies do not have the resources to let handicapped babies grow up and be a burden to society. In Tasmania there is a (probably very rare) case known to this general rule of small and primitive societies. During the Cook expedition in 1777 and then again during the Bligh visit in 1788 a red-haired Tasmanian man was seen that was described as:

... much deformed, being humpbacked, but he was no less distinguishable by his wit and humour, which he showed on all occasions.

Brian Plomley who reports this case (*The Tasmanian Aborigines*, 1993, The Plomley Foundation) notes:

There are two points of interest here, one, the syndrome of bodily affliction with high mental ability, recalling the jesters of the medieval courts of Europe; and the other, that the physical disability, which probably was a defect of the vertebral column that would have been evident at birth, had not led to his rejection by the community, but he was allowed to grow to manhood. Although the Tasmanians had a great affection for their children, this may not have been the reason for his acceptance. There is another possibility: he was red-haired. Red hair is a rare mutation among the Tasmanians, but another instance has been recorded.

5.9. *Death and Burial*

Hard as this may be to believe, the burial customs of the ancient Tasmanians have acquired a certain political relevance in the Tasmania of the late 20th and early 21st century. For details see [Chapter 4](#). The archaeological evidence and that of early witnesses indicate a variety of burial customs that varied over time and between tribes.

A Dr. Milligan (in James Bonwick, *Daily Life and the Origin of the Tasmanians*", 1870, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston) has left this report on funeral customs among Tasmanians. Note the "some" in his first sentence:

With respect to the burial of the dead, some of the tribes were in the habit of burning the remains, in which cases the remains were sometimes taken up very carefully, and carried about as an amulet, to ward off sickness, and to ensure success in hunting and in war. Other tribes placed their dead in hollow

trees, surrounded with implements of the chase and war, building them in with pieces of wood gathered in the neighbourhood; while others would look out for natural graves, made by the upturn of large trees, and there deposit the bodies of their dead. ...

The body of the deceased Tasmanian was usually placed in a sitting posture, the knees bent upward, as with the Indians, the Kaffirs, the Andamaners, ... A fence of brushwood was often fixed round the Tasmanian grave, or a rude hut, as at Guichen Bay, built over the remains. Occasionally a mound was raised. Without adequate means for digging a large hole, though with their sticks the Natives pursued the wombat in its burrowings, there would be only a little earth and leaves, or grass, spread over the corpse. The scratchings of beasts and the washings of watercourses often revealed the skeletons to the passers-by. In some graves the head was missing, that having been retained as a relic by some loving friend.

The only Tasmanian burials that have been closely observed are those that took place in the area where the British settled first: in the southern and the eastern coastal areas. In that general area, cremation was the rule.

Below: Burial arrangement on Maria island off the southeast coast of Tasmania in a drawing made in 1802 by a member of the Baudin Expedition. The drawing was made very early when Tasmanian society was still fully functional.



Burial arrangement on Maria island off the southeast coast of Tasmania in a drawing made in 1802 by a member of the Baudin Expedition. The drawing was made when traditional Tasmanian society was still fully functional.

Visible in the drawing is a tent-like structure

made of
strips of bark
erected over
the ashes of
the dead.
Not visible
on the
drawing are
lines and
circles
drawn on the
inner surface
of the tent.
The ashes
themselves
were placed
inside the
hut in a bag
and tied
down in an
elaborate
arrangement
of strings
and stones.
The meaning
of this
astonishingly
elaborate
arrangement
is far from
clear.

On the right
there is what
seems to be
an older
burial with
bones visible
and without
its tent
(which has
probably
decayed).



Symbols were occasionally found in the early 19th century carved into tree-trunks in the Tasmanian forests. The samples on the left were discovered by a Mr. Commissary Browne in the 1830s (ref. James Bonwick, p. 47). While it is fairly clear what most of the signs represent (have you spotted the boat with some people in it?), the overall meaning of the message (if it is one) is not.

Could the signs be the practical joke of a bored British passer-by? Perhaps, If it was not for the symbols on the funerary tent shown above, for the [Tasmanian petroglyphs](#), and the symbols that occur in cave paintings. The Tasmanians did have a tradition of graphic symbols but what is surprising is to find this tradition apparently still alive (even in only a small way) as late as the 1830s.

Pouch Burial

A pouch containing human remains named the Cornwall Ash Pouch) was found in northeastern Tasmania . At least two other such objects are said to have been found earlier at unspecified locations. Details of the Cornwall pouch are described in the chapter on Tasmanian [archaeology](#).

5.10. Family Life

In the section on *Hunting, Gathering, Food and Cooking* we have seen that the role of the sexes were clearly separated in a way that would not have been totally alien to 19th century British middle class society: the women worked and the men did as they pleased. However, the way the Tasmanian males treated their women was too much for even that very middle-class James Bonwick who reported from his sources in 1870:

In addition to the necessary duty of looking after the children, they had to provide all food for the household, excepting that derived from the chase of the kangaroo. They climbed up trees for the opossum, delved in the ground with their sticks for yams, native bread, and nutritive roots, groped about the

rocks for shell-fish, dived beneath the sea-surface for oysters, and fished for the finny tribe. In addition to this, they carried, on their frequent tramps, the household stuff in native baskets of their own manufacture. Their affectionate partners would often pile upon their burdens sundry spears and waddies not required for present service, and would command their help to rear the breakwind, and to raise the fire. They acted, moreover, as the cooks to the establishment, and were occasionally regaled, at the termination of a feast, with the leavings of their gorged masters.

As an illustration of the treatment they received, the following story from a writer in 1823 is here appended: One of the hunting party, who was pointed out to me as the husband of a woman who had a sucking child, returned without any prey. I supposed he had been unsuccessful, but Muskitoo (afterwards the Mosquito of Black War notoriety) told me that he had eaten his opossum in the bush. "Then," said I, what has his wife to eat?" "Nothing." "Has she had any food to-day?" "No." "When will she get any?" "Not until she procures some for herself." Indeed, the unfeeling wretch, her husband, was quite regardless of her and the children; and, although it was then past noon, and they had been without food since the preceding day, he would not trouble himself to obtain any for them. I endeavoured to make him understand that he was a very bad man, and ought to take care of his wife and children, but he paid no attention to me. However, I persuaded one of the party to share his opossum with the woman, and was much gratified to observe that, before she ate any herself, she fed her eldest child, a little boy, about two or three years old." ...Our fair friends [i.e. the Tasmanian women], with all their trials, including an occasional waddying from their enraged or jealous partners, were a merry, garrulous company. Like all savages, they quickly changed from smiles to tears. T

Some of these excesses may well have been the result of a disintegrating society rather than inherent in that society but it is clear from many sources, that the women in traditional Tasmanian culture did most of the work apart from hunting.

The British observers, gentlemen or not, were not unexpectedly agitated about the nakedness of the Tasmanians which, to most of them, signalled moral degeneracy, immodesty and worse. This is the one subject where the observers most clearly showed their own prejudices. As the inevitable James Bonwick exclaimed (for his own times rather daringly):

... as to their nakedness, there is evidence enough that such could exist without the want of modesty, and consistently with the preservation of delicacy.

Marriage was exogamous among Tasmanians, i.e. the girls had to marry outside their own groups. The patriarchal family structure ensured that the fathers of prospective bride and prospective groom made the decision on who was to marry whom, thereby cementing alliances between groups. The girls' wishes were not a consideration. It was not a system limited to Tasmanian aborigines but one that was as widely practiced in pre-1914 Europe, for example.

When the white sealing captains (see [Sealing Community](#)) of the late 18th and 19th century are reported to have "bought slave girls" from Tasmanian fathers, it was often thought that

this showed the "utter depravity of Tasmanian society". The moralists are mistaken. The Tasmanian fathers did not, in their own view, "sell their daughters as slaves" but they married them, in return for the traditional marriage gift, to people they thought it wise to have on their side. In fact, the Tasmanians merely involved newcomers in what had been traditional practice for many thousands of years. The earlier sealers at first did not always understand the system, but they soon picked up the idea and many later genuinely came to think of their former "purchases" as their lawful wedded wives. The switch from slave to wife was made easier since sealing was hard and dangerous work, and the sealers were delighted by their incredibly tough and hardworking wives. The resulting Sealing Community has survived roughly two centuries and today forms a separate community in Tasmania (see [The Tasmanians have Survived](#)).

Tasmanian marriage seems to have been mostly monogamous with a few instances of polygamy in special cases, possibly when a wife was suddenly widowed.

Divorce was possible and seems to have come about all from the male side of the matrimonial equation. Reasons that could be given for a divorce sound oddly modern: incompatibility and unfaithfulness. The divorced woman, however, was not left free to remarry or do as she wished. She remained subject to tribal laws (in which her former husband carried some weight) that could reduce her choice.

After the social and other disruptions caused by the Black War there were many women (widowed or never married) who were forced by circumstances to make their own marital arrangements where possible. The most famous of all Tasmanian women, [Truganini](#), was one such. She had several husbands which she seems to have chosen freely herself. But such was not the normal way of traditional Tasmanian society before 1800.

In a tightly-knit society with limited resources in a limited island, children were precious but the population had to be kept stable. A population explosion would have been nearly as destructive to a self-contained and isolated society as would have been the opposite. We do not know how traditional Tasmanian society kept its population stable for so many thousands of years, but it clearly did. The Tasmanian birth rate even before the arrival of the British was remarkably low - apparently just right to keep the population stable. Whether this was accomplished through a natural adaptation or through some form of birth control we do not know. Infanticide, especially in times of great stress and disruption, was a measure of last resort in ancient societies, it may have been used when mothers in a collapsing traditional Tasmanian society saw no other way. Most deaths of babies, however, are likely to have been caused not by infanticide but by the many new diseases which did not differentiate between babies and adults.

James Bonwick nevertheless notes (1870):

The charge of infanticide has been brought against the island Aborigines. Though this dreadful custom may not have been so prevalent as among [a number of irrelevant and unrelated other ancient people are listed here] yet we know that the crime did exist in the forests of Tasmania. The want of food for infants, the inconveniences of nomadic life, the interference with the personal charms of the wife, jealousies of other women, the arrest of their own pleasure, the disagreeables of baby life, and sometimes the desire of sparing a daughter the wretched lot of the future, were causes of infanticide. New-born

infants were often buried alive with the deceased mother. Fathers, when enraged with their *lubras* [wives], would occasionally snatch up and murder their child. It is sad to know that at the time of the Black War almost all the children disappeared, being killed by their friends to avoid the fate of the hunted tribes.

5.11. *Decorating, Scarification, Body Painting*

Tasmanians have not produced a comparable wealth of decorative ideas and items as have comparable populations in Australia and elsewhere, or indeed have the very ancient Tasmanians with their cave paintings. The undoubtedly harsh life of the more recent Tasmanians may not have allowed them the necessary leisure time. Whatever the reasons for their reluctance to decorate and paint, the traditional Tasmanians before 1800 did nevertheless produce some attractive basketry and strings of shells, proving that they were capable of producing beautiful objects if they wanted to. It is possible that traditional Tasmanian artwork may have been deliberately kept from the eyes of outside observers as it may well have had religious significance.

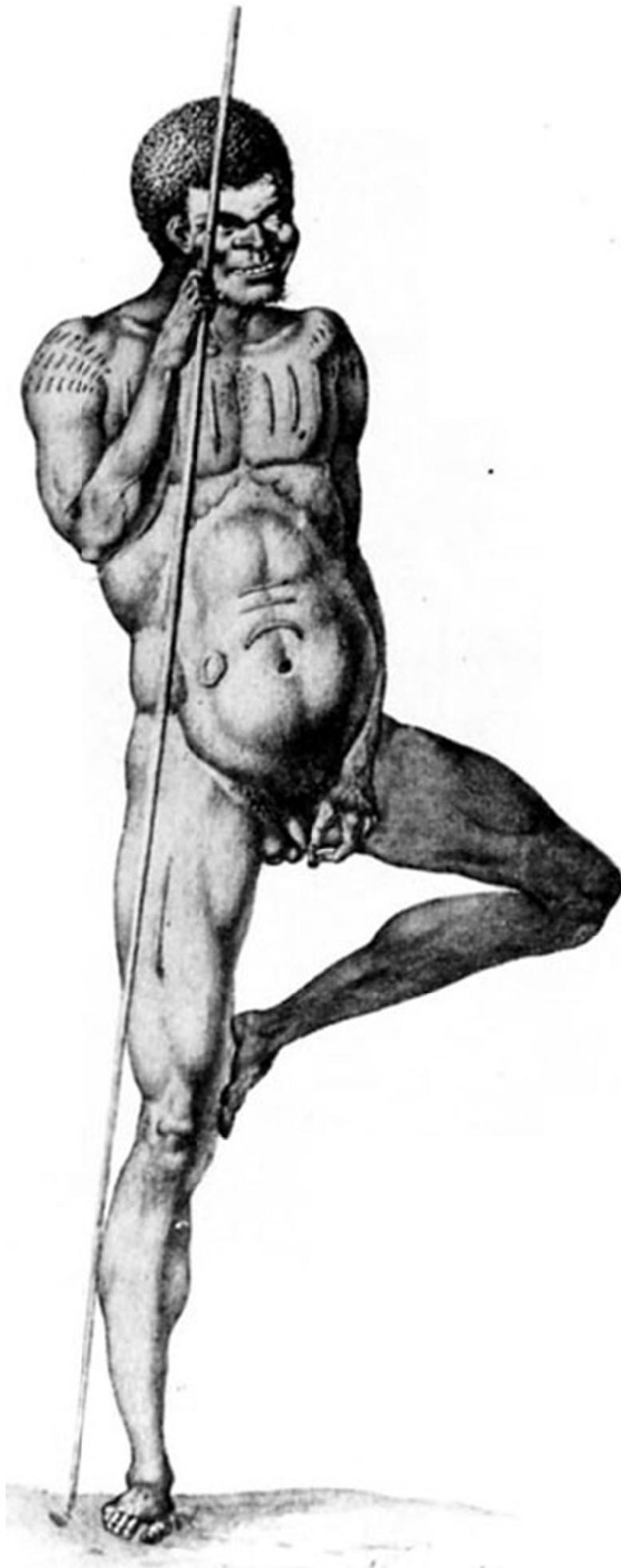


A decorative bead of sea shells.
(drawn by a member of the Baudin expedition in 1802)

Body painting has not been observed among Tasmanians which is rather strange, considering the Tasmanian interest in ochre and the wide use of bodypainting in aboriginal Australia and Papua-Newguinea. It is, however, possible that bodypainting did exist among Tasmanians but was limited to religious dances and other ceremonies that were not shown to white observers.

Instead of bodypainting, the Tasmanians used scarification, i.e. they cut flesh wounds and rubbed charcoal into it. After healing, the wound became a raised scar. In this the Tasmanians

were remarkably [similar to the Andamanese](#). Among people who practice scarification and/or bodypainting, such "decorations" were not meant to be merely "pretty" or impressive but had social and religious significance.



Left:
Tasmanian hunter from the area of the d'Entrecasteaux. He has numerous scarification marks on shoulders, chest, abdomen, and legs, characteristic for Tasmanian males at rest.
(drawn by a member of the Baudin expedition)

Below: _

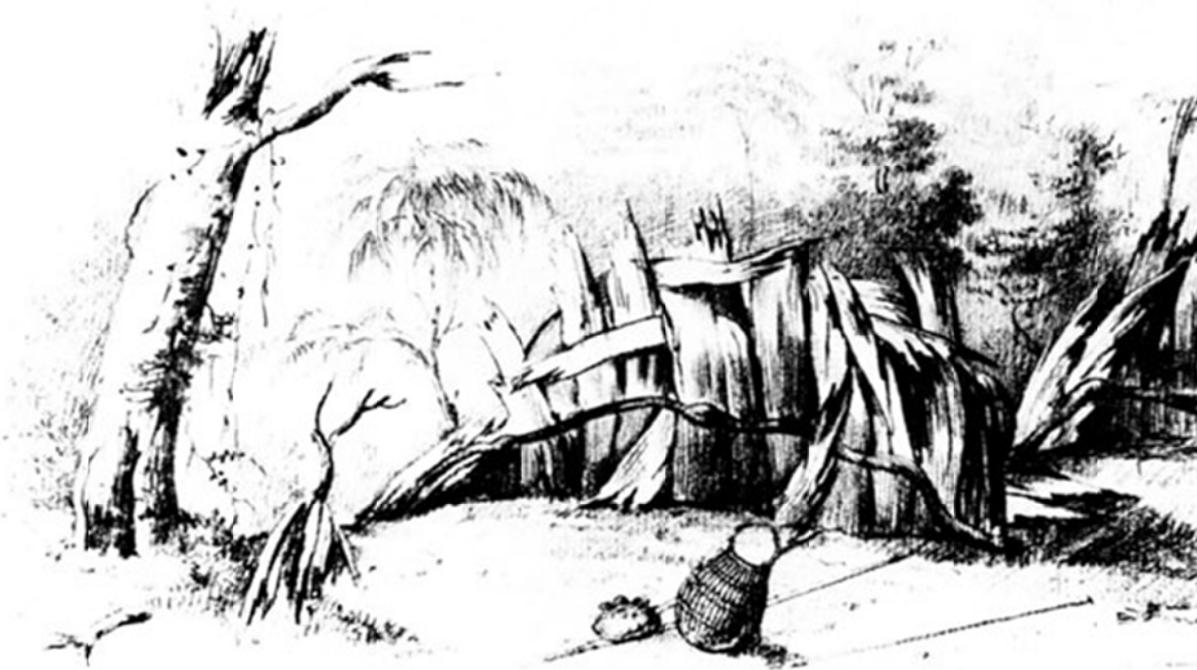
Young
Tasmanian
male with
scarification
marks.
(drawn by a
member of
the Baudin
expedition
1802)



5.12. Huts and Shelter

Hunter-gatherers are often on the move and so Tasmanian shelters, by necessity, had to be simple and easily erected. Movements over many centuries led along familiar tracks to familiar camp-sites where at least some "basic infrastructure" awaited the travellers at the other end of their move. It may be assumed that hearths and heavy stone equipment (such as cochre grinders) were left at the sites and not moved.

The simplest Tasmanian structures were mere windbreaks, open to the sky and rain and needing to hold together for just one or two nights. A little more substantial was the protection given by shelters constructed with the opening away from the direction of the wind by tying together overhanging branches of trees and if necessary supporting the branches with sticks. The fire was then lighted at the foot of the large tree-trunk, the most sheltered location. Still more substantial were huts made of were noted by early outside observers and these were erected when a group intended stayed longer than one night in a place. The simplicity of such shelters was not an inability to construct more elaborate structures (as the fairly elaborate funeral monuments decribed above prove).



A simple lean-to shelter made of loosely interwoven stripped bark held in place by branches.

(drawing made in 1802 by a member of the Baudin Expedition)

The unglamorous work of moving the groups' possessions including babies from one camp site to the next rested with the women. The men carried their hunting gear and concentrated on the search for prey. Or so they said.

Many native tracks were discovered by the British. Among others, [Robinson](#) on his expeditions to capture aborigines made extensive use of them. Both these tracks and the sites of huts could have been of considerable antiquity as they were used (resp. re-built) by generation after generation of Tasmanians. There could be a great deal archaeological

evidence if some such sites could be found and excavated but this has not been the case until now.



A much more sophisticated and presumably rain-proof "cupola hut" was also covered with stripped bark.

The entrance of Tasmanian huts opened to the east since the prevailing winds on the island are from the west.

(painting made 1792 on Bruny island by Lt. Tobin of the Bligh expedition)

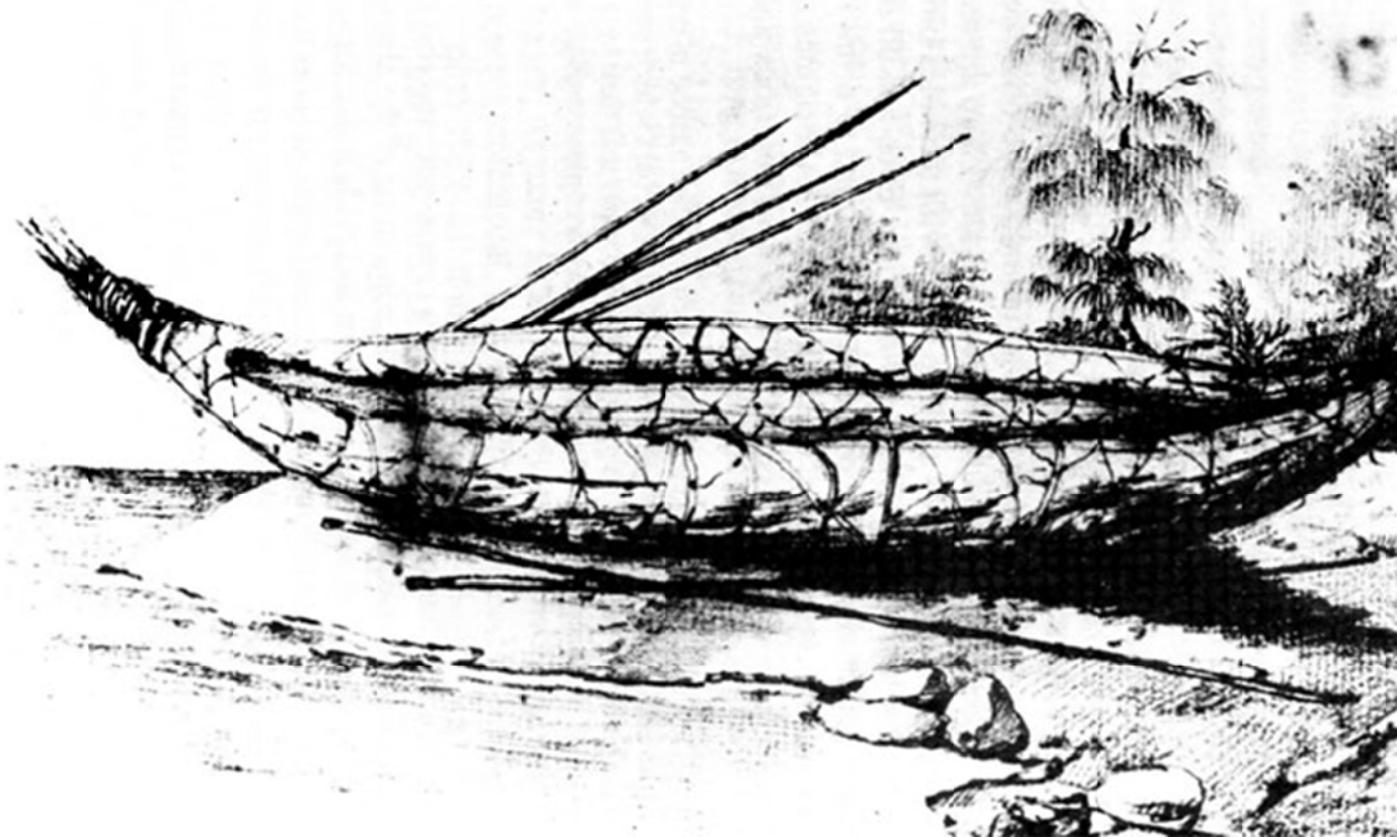
There are reports of a different, more solid type of hut among the little-known west-coast tribes. No such hut has been described, let alone excavated, but since the west coast is much more exposed to rain and wind than the protected eastern parts of Tasmania, more stable huts in the west make sense.

Whether the traditional Tasmanians used rockshelters or caves for camping sites is not known. Since many such sites were sacred and covered with ancient wall paintings, it is not very likely.

5.13. Boats

The Tasmanian raft-canoes are exactly what they are called: rafts in the shape of canoes. They could not stay very long in the water before getting water-logged but this does not seem to have disturbed the Tasmanians. They even made the 15-km voyage on the open ocean to the Matsuyker islands (15 km from the southern Tasmanian coast) in such raft-canoes. This is a awe-inspiring feat even if it was undertaken only during the quiet season. The Tasmanian sailors must also have had a good eye for the weather.

The raft-canoes may not have been a nautical engineer's dream, but for all its shortcomings, its extreme flexibility in choppy waters and narrow passages as well as its ability to get thrown against rocks without breaking apart, outweighed all other considerations.



The ultra-light construction made the boats steerable only with the long, thin poles (ranging in length from 2.5 to 5 m). It would have required a lot of experience to do so in choppy waters. In some areas the material used for the boats was strips of bark from *eucalyptus* trees that was rolled up and tied together in the shape shown above. In other areas (such as the Bruny islands) rushes provided the favourite material. There were no rudders, paddles, masts, sails or other sophistications.

The Baudin expedition of 1802 measured up one of the canoes and found the following:
Length of keel: 4.55 m; width of keel: 1 m; length of side pieces: 3.9 m; thickness of side-pieces: 0.32 m; length of central hollow: 2.95 m; depth of central hollow: 0.25 m; max. outside breadth: 0.89 m; max. height in the middle of the boat: : 0.65
(data from Brian Plomley, 1993, *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, Published The Plomley Foundation)



Not all Tasmanian tribes had canoes. At least when first observed in the late 18th century their use was limited to the pink areas of the south.

Archaeological evidence indicate that Tasmanians visited Hunter island in pre-European times - but we do not know how they did so or with what type of boat.

There is no archaeological evidence so far for the use of boats on rivers or along the coasts left uncoloured in the map.

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Last change 1 March 2008