

Land Invasion

© The Tasmanian Invasion - Land War

The Land War

During the 1820s white settlers poured into what was then known as Van Diemen's Land, bringing vast numbers of sheep and rapidly taking up the land. Aboriginal resistance hardened. The colony fell into a state of panic as attacks and murders became more and more frequent.

In 1828 Governor Arthur proclaimed martial law - in effect, a declaration of war. Soldiers had the right to arrest or shoot on site any Aboriginal found in the settled district (the central and south eastern areas of the island). The Tasmanians adopted guerrilla tactics, striking with fire and spear when least expected and vanishing into the forests, terrorising the small scattered and vulnerable European populations.

Vigilante gangs of soldiers and settlers avenged Aboriginal attacks by killing men, women and children. In 1830 a military operation known as the 'Black Line' was launched against the Aboriginal people remaining in the settled districts. Every able-bodied male colonist convict or free, was to form a human chain across the settled districts, moving for three weeks south and east in a pincer movement, until the people were cornered on the Tasman Peninsula.

The Black line captured only an old man and a boy, but succeeded in clearing the remaining Aboriginal people out of the area.

Between 1829 and 1834 George Augustus Robinson, the 'Conciliator', travelled Tasmania gathering the Aboriginal people who were still alive. He did this with the approval of the colonial government. Robinson thought he was saving the people - he wanted them to become Christians and to abandon their culture. 135 survivors from the mainland were sent to Wybalenna, a bleak settlement on Flinders Island in Bass Strait.

On Flinders Island the people were to be 'civilised' and 'Christianised'. However, they were unused to living in overcrowded European houses; they were forbidden to practise their old ways; and were homesick for their lost country. Many died of respiratory disease, poor food and despair. Robinson left for Victoria before he could see the terrible consequences of his policy.

In 1847, the 47 survivors of Wybalenna were transferred to Oyster Cove near Hobart. They were the only known group of 'tribal' people remaining. The deaths continued, however. A few managed to survive by leaving the reserve. Fanny Cochrane Smith was one of the lucky ones. Born on Flinders Island in 1834, Fanny married and left Oyster Cove in 1855. Truganini, the last of this group and for many years regarded as the 'last Tasmanian' died in 1876.

By this time however, a vigorous Aboriginal community had established itself in the Bass Strait islands. They were descended from people who had slipped through the government net.

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