

Forged by War

LYNDALL RYAN

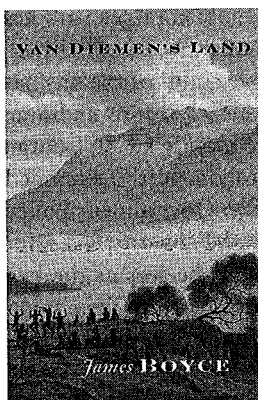
James Boyce: *Van Diemen's Land*
(Black Inc., ISBN 9781863954136, \$49.95)

James Boyce first came to national attention in 2003. His extended chapter, 'Fantasy Island', in Robert Manne's edited collection, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, mounted a sustained attack on Windschuttle's scholarship to undermine his argument that the Tasmanian Aborigines were a dysfunctional people whose criminal behaviour led to their own demise. The chapter turned the tide against Windschuttle and was hailed by Inga Clendinnen as "the jewel of the collection ... If the discipline in Tasmania can produce historians of this calibre, it is in the very best of hands".

James Boyce's new book *Van Diemen's Land* was conceived and written in the heat of the Aboriginal 'history wars' and contests the two 'stains' that have marked Tasmanian colonial history since 1856.

The first is the 'hated stain' of convictism. After the colony's change of name to Tasmania in 1856, its early history went underground, denying the positive experiences of the convicts who were the majority of the population and became the founding mothers and fathers of Victoria. Most came from a life of poverty in what was in many respects a pre-industrial society in Britain and Ireland, and the Australian colonies became their hope: a place of redemption from servitude rather than of darkness and despair. Their success is not to be gauged by the accumulation of capital, but rather by self-sufficiency and the preservation of life and freedom: "The story of the convict settlers of Van Diemen's Land, then, differs dramatically from the accounts which still fill Australian history books and set the terms for debates about national identity."

The second is the 'indelible stain' of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Rather than considering their fate as accidental or inevitable, Boyce contends that their killing and removal constitute genocide. He analyses the policies of Governor Arthur from 1828 to 1832, and the motives and actions of Arthur's agent of conciliation G.A. Robinson in removing the Aborigines first from the war zone in eastern Tasmania and then from the peace zone in the west, and argues that they amounted to ethnic cleansing. "This fact



alone", he concludes, "arguably makes the removal unique among tragedies experienced by Indigenous peoples during the nineteenth century."

The two 'stains', however, rarely intersect, largely because Boyce uses different methods and sources to address them, which makes the

book uneven in structure and approach. Nevertheless he achieves his overall purpose, opening up new directions in Tasmanian colonial history.

To address the 'convict stain', Boyce uses E.P. Thompson's model of class relations within a framework of environmental change to argue that Van Diemen's Land offered opportunities for the convicts to successfully adapt to its distinctive environment. He engagingly sets out the main planks of his argument in the introduction, but has difficulty in sustaining them in the following eighteen chapters. The absence of a sustained narrative – the result, no doubt, of sparse evidence – often leaves the reader floundering. The argument would have been clearer had it been possible to follow the lives of individual convicts or particular convict families over time to show how they adapted, and how the environment changed over time in particular regions. When we do meet individual convicts, many, like the bushranger Martin Cash, appear lifeless, although others, like the woman convict a settler meets in Hobart Town, reveal their pragmatic attitude to life. One gets the impression that the emancipated convict men preferred the bush while the women preferred the towns. This dichotomy is never resolved.

Nevertheless, in championing the convicts, Boyce makes telling points about their experiences beyond the penal system, including their pre-industrial economic and cultural backgrounds, their aspirations after their sentences expired and their usage of the Tasmanian environment. And he certainly makes a convincing case for their significance as the backbone of colonial society before the gold rushes. This should re-invigorate the largely forgotten debate about their role as founding mothers and fathers of Victoria. It could also generate argument about their significance in South Australia, where their alleged

absence remains one of the most notable examples of Australian historical amnesia.

In addressing the 'indelible stain' of the Tasmanian Aborigines, Boyce is clearly more at home – once again assuming the mantle of St George to slay the Windschuttle dragon. In the extended appendix, 'Towards Genocide: Government Policy on the Aborigines 1827–38', he constructs a gripping narrative addressing what he sees as the key questions about the near demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines. How far was Governor Arthur responsible for the policies that led to the removal and exile of the Aborigines? How did Robinson persuade the Aborigines in the war zone in eastern Tasmania to voluntarily surrender and relocate to an island in Bass Strait? And how did he remove the Aborigines from the peace zone on the west coast?

Boyce critically examines the transformation of Arthur's policy in what he calls the well-documented period of the Black War, from April 1828 when Arthur considered that the Aborigines did have rights to their land, to the end of martial law in February 1832 when he decided their rights had been lost and they were now exiles in their own land.

First, he argues that, in April 1828, Arthur understood the link between land alienation and the conflict with the Aborigines. He formally established the parameters of the Settled Districts as the area of settler occupation and set aside the North East as an Aboriginal reserve. This partition was based on Arthur's belief that a negotiated settlement could be reached with the Aborigines, and that he needed to provide a sanctuary without settler occupation.

The declaration of martial law six months later changed Arthur's policies, not to the exclusion of the concept of partition, but in escalating the war against the Aborigines in the Settled Districts. As evidence, Boyce cites the establishment of the Aborigines Committee to inquire into the causes of the Black War. Its report, which Boyce calls a whitewash, provided justification for extending the reign of terror against the Aborigines in the Settled Districts rather than addressing the causes of the war. Arthur used the report to increase the armed parties against the Aborigines, including "every soldier that could be spared" with "as many as possible mounted", and to offer a five-pound reward for every adult Aborigine captured and two pounds for every child. Boyce makes the point that "not one Aborigine was reported killed during the

most intense period of the fighting in the first seven months of 1830", indicating that the official records did not account for enemy deaths.

Boyce then mounts a sustained attack on Robinson. He claims that in November 1830 Robinson abandoned "honest negotiations" with a newly contacted group of Aborigines, tricking them into mutton-birding on Swan Island. They believed they were making a temporary visit; according to Boyce, Robinson used the trip to effect their capture.

Two months later he was summoned to Hobart to advise the government. But he prevented the two leading Aboriginal chiefs from putting their case to remain on the Tasmanian mainland. According to Boyce, at a critical moment the Aborigines were denied a voice because Robinson had already decided that they should be exiled on Flinders Island. Had they been able to argue their case, the outcome could well have been different.

Finally, Boyce contends that Arthur made a policy choice to ethnically cleanse Aborigines from the western half of Tasmania after the Black War was over, and paid Robinson a vast sum to do it. Robinson again used trickery, force and deception. He used trickery to remove one group to a detention centre on Hunter Island where many died within a few weeks. He forcibly removed another group to Macquarie Harbour where they died like flies. And he deceived the survivors in exile on Flinders Island, abandoning them to their fate.

Boyce reaches the grim conclusion: "The black hole of Tasmanian history is not the violence between the white settlers and the Aborigines – a well-recorded and much discussed aspect of the British conquest – but the government sponsored ethnic clearances which followed it."

Boyce is the first Tasmanian historian since Clive Turnbull in 1948 and Bronwyn Deśailly in 1977 to argue that the dispossession and near extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines were neither accidental nor inevitable: this was genocide. He has slain the Windschuttle dragon. His book might make other historians feel they have been too cautious, that they have not quite faced what Dirk Moses has called the genocide gorgon. In any event, James Boyce has pushed Tasmanian colonial history in new directions.

Lyndall Ryan is conjoint professor in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle, and author of *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*.