

Chapter 2

Reclaiming History for Aboriginal Governance: Tasmanian Stories

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Van Diemen's Land, renamed Tasmania in 1856, was first colonised by the British in 1803. By the late 1820s a campaign was well underway to remove all Aboriginal clanspeople from the mainland of Tasmania, and to do so by whatever means available. By the mid-1830s the operation was all but over. It had taken the British less than one lifetime to clear the island of a people who had survived in the Tasmanian landscape for tens of thousands of years. As far as the colonists were concerned, the Aboriginal problem had been resolved. In 1875, reporting on the then recent Aboriginal demise, colonial historian JE Calder opens one of his many volumes with the following observation: 'The most interesting event in the history of Tasmania, after its discovery, seems to me to be the extinction of its ancient inhabitants' (1875: 5). More than a century later, historian James Boyce concluded his extraordinary tome *Van Diemen's Land* with the following lament: 'With the death of Truganini in 1876, "full-blood" Aborigines were widely thought to be "extinct" and their story deemed over ... Colonists could both publicly ponder the tragic consequences of British conquest and allow its final chapter to proceed almost without comment. Questions about the invasion of Van Diemen's Land were now deemed to be of purely historical interest' (Boyce 2008: 317).

In the space between these two literary bookends, the story of contact relations on the Tasmanian colonial frontier has inspired significant historical and general interest. Yet, despite this attention, the meaning and significance of the impact of colonisation on Tasmanian Aboriginal people remains far from clear or well resolved. What is unambiguous, however, is that telling the story of colonial incursion and its outcomes for local Aboriginal peoples remains of vital and immediate concern to Tasmanian Aboriginal people

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