James Boyce: *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne: Black Inc Press, 2008, 388 pp., AUD 49.95 (hc). Isbn 978 1863954136.
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Van Diemen's Land continues to be an enigma for both Australian and European observers. Having lived in the state for six months, I can understand both the fascination with this isle as well as the resentment that the locals bear against mainlanders. All too often Tasmania does not even figure on commercial maps of Australia, and it is still the butt of jokes by stand-up comedians for its alleged endemic in-breeding. Manning Clark did a relatively poor job writing up its history; he presents the development of Van Diemen's Land as largely parallel to the development of NSW. And here I already come to the core of Boyce's engrossing study: Clark's view, prevailing as it was for half a century, is wrong. Van Diemen's Land has a history as separate from that of NSW as, say, the history of the USA is separate from Canada's.

Boyce presents the differences convincingly. While NSW was created by administrative planning and proceeded to develop under strict control of the authorities, the 'founding fathers' of Van Diemen's Land was an unruly mob of whalers and sealers. While NSW had an uninterrupted inflow of convicts, the colony-to-be Van Diemen's Land was started in 1803 with a few shiploads – which then stopped coming. During the Napoleonic wars, in which Britain was heavily involved, it forgot about its new colony south of Bass Strait, to the near-despair of Governor David Collins. Provisions ran out and he was forced to release many convicts, sending them out into the wilderness for the purpose of hunting wallabies so that the colony would not starve. A handsome price was paid for the kangaroo meat collected by the independent foragers, although most of the profit went to the officer class. Thus, the convicts of the first 20 years had an existence much preferable to that on the mainland. Their freedom was far greater than that of the first convicts to NSW and it was not until the 1820s that secure gaols were built. While the dependence on kangaroo meat remained, imperial control over the

island almost broke down. Their income was no less than that of the first colonists – and since everyone wore kangaroo skins they even looked like them. Tempting fate, many became bushrangers and teamed up with Aborigines in robbing isolated farms. Colonial control over the island almost broke down.

Even so, the farms of the early emancipists are described as amazingly productive by Boyce. The colony fast became an exporter of agricultural products to the mainland even though the farming practices by untrained colonists were ridiculed by the administration. Incidentally, Boyce also tells us that for the first decades of the antipodean settlements the most important export commodity were sealskins harvested on the islands to the north, northeast and south of Van Diemen's Land. In 1803, 57.000 skins were taken, and in 1804 a record number of 107.000. Most were exported to China (16). Over-hunting led to a rapid decline of the seal population thereafter. It was only in the 1820s that wool became the main export commodity.

A sea-change occurred on Van Diemen's land with the start of governor Arthur's rule in 1824. The end of the Napoleonic Wars saw a substantial increase in the flow of convicts as well as free settlers seeking free land grants over the grasslands of the island on which they profitably placed sheep. Arthur was able to introduce effective controls over the convicts, and had considerable success in moulding them into a subservient labour force for the gentry estates. He achieved this by two means: first, he eliminated bushranging. This he did either by military force or by coaxing the bushrangers back into the fold. Second he introduced a range of economic reforms backed up by a fierce punishment regime for secondary offenders, including the mighty fortress of Port Arthur (which was, incidentally, the largest gaol in the British Empire for many decades to come.)

Arthur also escalated the war with the Aborgines. A particularly obnoxious method was to put a bounty of five shillings on the head of any Aboriginal man brought in by settler or bushranger (less for women and children but still a bounty). This effectively broke all the bonds between whites and blacks. Secondly, he forced the small farms out of existence and replaced them with the farms of the well-

heeled, for which land grants of 10.000 acres were provided. In other words, Arthur created serious class conflicts where none had existed before, and since the small farms were more likely to leave the indigenous population alone while wealthy farmers were inclined to drive them off their land, this measure was also aimed at 'eradicating' the Aboriginal 'problem'.

In Boyce's narrative Governor Arthur emerges as an administratively capable, but truly evil presence: he continued the genocidal fight against the Aborigines with the infamous Black Line (the biggest government military operation against Aborigines in Australian history!) even after receiving written orders from Whitehall to seek alternative ways of dealing with the indigenous population. And when the last remnants of mainland Aboriginality – some 300 people – laid down their arms in exchange for a treaty that should have allowed them access to their traditional food sources, he reneged on it and had them all transported to a concentration camp (my term, not Boyce's; but I choose the word not without caution) to Flinders island, where 80% of them perished in just one decade. The 'philanthropist' George Augustus Robinson, self-appointed 'protector' of Aborigines, was complicit in this vile treachery.

Not being a historian, I am a poor judge of how Boyce used existing resources or how new his findings are. As a cultural studies person however, I am highly impressed by the observations on the actual life of the colony which he makes. For instance, he explores the significance of imported dogs. (There were no dingoes in Van Diemen's Land as the island separated from the mainland before dingoes penetrated the mainland from the north). Wallabies were hunted almost exclusively with the use of English hunting dogs; the rifles of the time were ineffective against the elusive, nocturnal marsurpials, and in any case it would have been dangerous to provide convicts or emancipists with fire-arms. As pointed out before, this put emancipists and free settlers on a comparatively equal footing; what was new to me is that Aborigines adopted the method as well. So 'efficient' was this method that within only 30 years, the Tasmanian emu became extinct, while wallabies, barely avoiding the same fate, became scarce almost everywhere. Since dogs were an important ingredient in the emancipation of convicts

Governor Arthur banned their possession to serving prisoners and instituted a dog tax to reduce ownership among the emancipist class. His intention was to degrade them to the status of wage-dependent agricultural labourers; in this he largely succeeded. Another intriguing observation concerns a report of the late 1830s that a large number of trees were dying in the heartland of Van Diemen's Land. Boyce explains this by the extinction of Aboriginal hunters with the consequence that the possum population exploded.

For reasons that are not quite clear to me, Boyce chose to create a separate, 57-page appendix titled "Toward Genocide: Government Policy on the Aborigines 1827 – 1838." The history of the genocidal war against the indigenous population of Tasmania has of course been treated elsewhere, but Keith Windschuttle's revisionist book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal history* (2002) re-opened the debate adding a tone of urgency. Boyce contributed an important chapter to Robert Manne's collection of rebuttal essays *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003) and in his appendix elaborates his argument. He makes quite extensive forays into the central question of how many undocumented killings occurred: Windschuttle's argument, if you remember, was that since colonial administrations reported only a handful of lethal encounters with the indigenous population, the charge of a genocidal war against Tasmania's Aborigines must be dropped. Well, Boyce presents substantial and convincing evidence (letters, diaries and other forms of personal testimony) about who the killers were: settlers and their private police forces of bushrangers and other hired desperadoes. Obviously their murders (and the settlers were well aware of the nature of their bloody business) would not be recorded, would not be reported to the authorities. They were clearly against the laws of the colony.

This study is an important contribution to Tasmania's *Trauerarbeit*. As late as in 1980 a feature film (*Manganinni*) put the blame for the massacres firmly on the colonial police, while the Van Demonian settlers emerged as innocent bystanders or, at worst, unwilling extras.

In 2003, the state of Tasmania could have celebrated the creation of a penal colony (as part of NSW) two hundred years ago. It did not. In 2004, the city of Hobart could have celebrated its bicentennial. Again, it did not. The unacknowledged reason is that Tasmania's history is still considered raw and shameful. James Boyce's study confronts the shame head-on and so delivers a valuable contribution to the discourse of Reconciliation. Perhaps it is useful to quote a few lines from Graeme Hetherington's poem "Hobart Town" to illustrate what the poets already knew before the historians:

> Our history here is nasty, brutish and short-lived:
> Convicts and one exterminated race.
> The hulking mountain's twilight markings tell
> Of aboriginals cold as gun-metal blue
> Of convicts in the shadows cast,
> A past that's better buried with the dead.
> Perhaps that's why the people's nerves are bad.
> There's a kind of lean-to of the mind
> In folk who have no once-upon-a-time.

In short, this is an excellent and eminently readable study. Boyce has drawn together a number of aspects of early Tasmanian history (the impact of sealers, the economics of farming, the deliberate creation of class conflict in an effort to re-create a pre-industrial England, the relations between early farmers and Aborigines, and so forth) and has thus created a new, multifaceted narrative. Read it – and no good library should be without the new 'Boyce'.