

THE HIGHLY ACCLAIMED 1978 DOCUMENTARY BY TOM HAYDON AND ARCHAEOLOGIST RHYS JONES



# THE LAST TASMANIAN

THE STORY OF THE SWIFTEST AND MOST DESTRUCTIVE GENOCIDE ON RECORD

The Tasmanians were a distinct people, isolated from Australia and the rest of the world for 12,000 years. In 1803, British colonisation began and in 1876, Truganini died. She was the last full-blood and tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal. Within her one lifetime, a whole society and culture were removed from the face of the earth.

STUDY GUIDE



**THE LAST TASMANIAN** had an extraordinary impact upon a very wide public in the years following its first release in 1978. The film has been credited by historians with substantially altering Australian perceptions of their past and critically affecting contemporary attitudes of both black and white Australians. It is a very important documentary. But it is also a deeply moving, clearly communicating and finely crafted work: most notable for its deliberate eschewing of sensationalism in approaching so potent a subject.

The story this film tells requires to be told again and again, to each generation. Its method remains ever fresh: a pioneering achievement in historical detective work. Here is not emotive tract or ephemeral agit-prop, but a true document of what occurred. As one British reviewer said, **THE LAST TASMANIAN** is the record.

A leading Australian educational journal declared “**THE LAST TASMANIAN** is a must – a memorable cinematic experience for students, teachers and the general public. Miss it and you will miss the best Australian film of the year.”

Until now, release of **THE LAST TASMANIAN** in Australia has been restricted to cinema, television and specially arranged screenings in educational institutions. Now it is available on DVD, complete with the Study Guide.

These notes are intended to help teachers and other who co-ordinate discussion of this film. They provide a synopsis and summary of the film’s content; and some background on the making of the film and the impact it created. They also suggest some points for discussion.

## SYNOPSIS

**THE LAST TASMANIAN** tells the story of the swiftest and most destructive genocide on record.

The Tasmanians were a distinct people, isolated from Australia and the rest of the world for 12,000 years.

In 1803, British colonisation began and in 1876, Truganini died. She was the last full-blood and tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal. Within her one lifetime, a whole society and culture were removed from the face of the earth.

## THE STORY IN SUMMARY

The film opens with a state funeral in 1976 for the remains of Truganini who died a hundred years before. She was the last full-blood Aborigine in Tasmania.

The British colonised Tasmania in 1803. There were then some 4,000 Aborigines. By 1876, when Truganini died, Tasmania was empty of Aborigines. It is the swiftest and most complete case of genocide on record.

12,000 years before, the rising sea had cut off Tasmania from Australia: the Tasmania Aborigines were the most isolated people in recorded history.

The film follows Dr Rhys Jones, archaeologist and anthropologist, in his search to discover and comprehend the life and death of the Tasmanian Aborigines. He has pioneered recent exploration of Tasmania's prehistory. Archaeology has revealed that Aborigines were in Tasmania long before it became an island.

After this introduction, the film proceeds in 3 parts:

### BEFORE 1803 - ANCESTORS

Beginning in 1963, Dr Rhys Jones, with archaeologist and historian Dr Jim Allen, undertook an archaeological survey around the coast of Tasmania. He also searched the records left by earlier explorers.

In 1642, Abel Tasman discovered the south coast naming it Van Diemen's Land. In 1777, Captain Cook paid a brief visit. His meeting with them provided the first known pictures of the Tasmanians. They differed from the Aborigines on the Australian mainland. The Tasmanians were wholly naked, had woolly hair and did not catch or eat fish.

In 1772, a French expedition brought back the first detailed records. Amongst many things, they showed that while the Tasmanians dived for shellfish, they would have nothing to do with scale fish. The discoveries fired the imagination of Francois Peron, a young hero of the French Revolutionary wars. A naturalist and medical doctor, Peron had been strongly influenced by the French philosophers who inspired the Revolution. In particular, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who denounced civilisation and exalted nature, creating an idealised vision of the 'noble savage'.

Peron became the leading member of a new French expedition, which left for Tasmania in 1800. He was to compile, just in time [before the British arrived], the only full account of the Aborigines in their pristine state.

Rhys Jones and Jim Allen reconstructed the simple windbreak shelter on the beach where, in 1802, Peron and his artist friend, Charles Lesueur, first met the Tasmanian Aborigines. Here, the Frenchmen found the few small objects which represented almost the whole technology of the Tasmanians. There was an enormous gap between the Tasmanian technology and that used by Aborigines on the Australian mainland. The Australians had 120 items. The Tasmanians had only 22: no boomerangs, no spear throwers, no nets, no dogs. Theirs was the simplest technology in the world.

At first Peron thought he had realised his vision of the 'noble savage'. But after the first idyllic meeting, he had subsequent experiences that were not so cordial. As for the Tasmanians' simple and natural life, he began wondering about its 'privations and miseries'. These Aborigines did not even know how to make fire, having always to transfer a flame from one stick to another.

On the other side of Bass Strait, 320 kilometres [200 miles] away, the Australian Aborigines, of course, did know how to make fire. The Aborigines had once walked across the land which Bass Strait had drowned 12,000 years ago. Why had the Tasmanian culture become so different from the culture on the Australian mainland?

Rhys Jones excavated in two caves at Rocky Cape which projects into Bass Strait. From 8,000 years ago continuing to 3,500 years ago, he found many fish bones; and also tools made from animal bones. These tools were needles and punches, used almost certainly for the making of clothes. All these, the fish bones and the tools for making clothes, disappeared 3,500 years ago and never returned.

Why, at 3,500 years ago, had the Tasmanians suddenly stopped catching fish, stopped wearing clothes? Jones wondered: was it a result of separation from the Australian continent, a loss of ideas?

The Tasmanians did have a watercraft of paperbark. Might they have used this to overcome their isolation? Jones had the watercraft reconstructed: but the paperbark absorbed water. This craft could travel only a few kilometres from the coast.

Rhys Jones concludes there was total isolation during the last 12,000 years. During these 250 generations, no new ideas were coming into the system. He thinks the archaeological record shows a steady, slow inexorable squeezing – simplification of the technology.

Jones and Allen reflect on the way the Tasmanian Aborigines viewed the world before the Europeans arrived. The Tasmanians' universe was an island surrounded by water and they knew every human being inside that universe until their history ended in catastrophe. Jones suggests that the catastrophe began 12,000 years ago when the sea blocked off Tasmania. In a sense, the doom of the Tasmanians was sealed by that event.

The doom of the Tasmanians was consummated by a nation which was then the most technologically advanced in the world. The British became alarmed at the French presence. At the end of 1802, the British Empire took possession of Tasmania.

### AFTER 1876 - THE DESCENDANTS

Another reason for the British interest, was an important economic resource: seals. The British sealers also raided the Tasmanian coast for Aboriginal women. From this mating there emerged a community of mixed blood descendants. Most of these people came from about a dozen original families who lived on various islands in Bass Strait and finally gathered into one community on Cape Barren Island.

During March and April each year, some of the descendants keep up a tradition of going to various islands in the Strait and collecting the young mutton-birds. For millions of years, the mutton-birds have flown from Alaska to spend the southern summer on these islands and hatch their young.

While she plucks and cleans mutton-birds, Annette Mansell declares that she is 'a descendant. I'm not an Aboriginal, I'm only a descendant of one.' At the time of filming, Annette was President of the Cape Barren Island Community. She contends 'there's a hell of a difference' between the way of living of the descendants and 'the old Aborigines that were here'.

'There are no Aborigines now,' says Annette. 'There's not much in any of us, there's no tradition in Tasmania with the Aborigines.' She claims nothing survives of the Aboriginal language in Tasmania.

Annette Mansell's views are endorsed by Melvyn Everett, 'boss' of this mutton-birding group. 'No, I don't really class myself as an Aboriginal,' he says.

These people explain the descendants know nothing about the old Aboriginal traditions. 'It's only history what we've learnt as you've learnt.'

But the wiping out of the Tasmanian Aborigines is a history largely unwritten. During the first 25 years of their colony, the British made no pictorial records at all of the Aborigines. The new empty landscape is the only witness to most of what happened.

### 1803-1876 - EXTINCTION

The British established their first colony near Hobart in 1803. Within eight months, they had their first encounter with the Aborigines: it became a massacre of the natives.

The British viewed Tasmania as a natural prison for the very worst of their transported convicts. The convicts were let loose into the bush to hunt kangaroos and, in the process, committed hideous atrocities upon the Aborigines. Then free settlers, many of them former British Army officers, came with vast flocks of sheep and the Aborigines lost their hunting grounds. Finally, the Aborigines retaliated and mounted a surprisingly effective guerrilla campaign. Their prime targets were lone shepherds in their huts on the far-flung perimeters of advancing sheep farms.

The Aborigines lived by hunting and were excellent spearmen. They were also accustomed to violence in their own society because the 4000 or so of their population were divided into many small bands, belonging to nine separate tribes and speaking five different languages. Each tribe had its own territory and were often deadly enemies. A frequent cause of war was the abduction of women for marriage. But in the growing conflict with the whites, the Aborigines were outclassed in armaments and increasingly outnumbered. With their apparently infinite supply of people, the whites could replace anyone killed, the Aborigines could not.

The British colonists at first regarded the Aborigines only with contempt, viewing them as less than human. Then, as Europeans were killed on remote properties, the colony was gripped with mounting fear and hate of native people. The racial conflict became an actual 'Black War'. Gun slits were built into woolsheds and homesteads were fortified. Detachment of troops were based at key points around the frontier of the settled regions.

Heading the colony's government was Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, an Army Colonel. Officially, Governor Arthur preached the policy of kindness and reconciliation with the natives, which the British Government in London had called for. But the Government had established no way of communicating with the natives and had to resort to picture boards hung on trees!

In practice, Arthur permitted and then authorised military and civil action, which led to more and more killing of Aborigines. As white deaths also mounted, he declared martial law, under which Aborigines were forbidden to enter the settled regions. Then a bounty was placed on their heads. The colonists became gripped with the fervour of driving every black from the face of the earth.

The diminishing Tasmanians retreated into the high and ruggedly mountainous country of Tasmania and from there, sustained the fight. Under hysterical pressure from the colonists, whose imagination wildly exaggerated the Aboriginal numbers, Governor Arthur finally resorted to a large-scale military campaign. His 'Black Line' of troops and civilians conducted a huge sweep of the colonised regions, but was a dismal failure.

Governor Arthur then turned to a psychological solution, in the person of a 'conciliator' who would use persuasion. This was George Augustus Robinson.

Robinson, a bricklayer by trade and a lay-preacher, was both zealous and ambitious. He formed a small party of Aboriginal collaborators, foremost of whom was Truganini. At the time Robinson met her, she was a young and lively woman. Both she and her community had suffered extremely from the European impact. With Truganini and the others in his team, Robinson undertook many arduous expeditions into the wild and unexplored interior. With fine promises, he succeeded in rounding up the remaining, and demoralised, Aborigines. The last groups were collected from the remote west coast where they posed no threat to the colonists. But Government and colonists wanted every Aborigine gone and Robinson brought in these last people for major financial reward.

Thus were all the remaining Aborigines found and gathered and then, despite Robinson's promises, they were deported to offshore Flinders Island. There, Robinson ran a Government settlement to force-feed them 'civilisation'. They responded by dying and obsessively, Robinson planned every detail of their graves in advance. Finally, he would return to England a moderately rich man. The last remnant of the Aborigines, past breeding age, were sent to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart, where alcohol and influenza abetted melancholy in sending them to their death.

Science pursued the bodies of the last Aborigines. The new theory of Evolution appeared to justify the extinction of these 'lesser' people and also made them objects of intense scientific curiosity. They were seen as representing an earlier stage of human development which had somehow lingered in remote Tasmania. Distinguished scholars robbed graves and rival doctors ghoulishly mutilated corpses after death. The Royal College of Surgeons in London amassed the largest collection of skulls. In 1941, a German incendiary bomb landed in the midst of the collection and the debris, it is said, was swept into the foundations of the new building.

Truganini's body suffered a similar fate after her death in 1876. Her skeleton was long displayed in Hobart. It was on the centenary of her death that a Government, which now sought 'to make amends', gave her remains a State Funeral. The present Aboriginal descendants were there to attend the funeral service and later cast her ashes in the sea from the Governor's launch.



## THE CONTROVERSY

**THE LAST TASMANIAN** had its first release in Australia in 1978. Its primary impact was in alerting white Australians that genocide was a fundamental aspect of their historical heritage. But the film also had its impact upon black Australians. Many Aborigines found it emotionally distressing but at the same time a welcome illumination of events they had only known in rough outline.

However, from some Tasmanian Aborigines, there came protest, based on their view that the film inferred they no longer existed. The makers of the film encouraged this protest to be publicly aired and, at their urging, was covered by the media, culminating in a one hour debate on ABC Television's Monday Conference between filmmaker Tom Haydon and Aboriginal spokesman Michael Mansell.

Much has been written on this issue. Michael Mansell and others object that in its title, its emphasis upon the extinction of traditional Tasmanian Aborigines and, in its treatment of Aboriginal descendants, the film denies the identity of those who today call themselves 'Tasmanian Aborigines'.

It is important to put this controversy in historical context. At the time **THE LAST TASMANIAN** was being prepared and indeed filmed, the descendants of the original Tasmanians [there are now some 3000 of them] were still mostly calling themselves 'descendants' or 'Cape Barren Islanders' and so they were termed in print by historians and other commentators of the time [one or two of these later joined with Mansell in his critique]. Before ever commencing the story of genocide, the film devotes a section to 'The Descendants', explaining how these offspring of some Aboriginal women and white sealers have survived into the present day. The one woman who presents her views in detail was chosen because she was then President of the Cape Barren Island Community, the traditional home of the Descendants. This Annette Mansell [cousin of Michael] says she is 'not Aboriginal, but a Descendant of one...'. Quite accurately, she says the language of the old Aborigines has not survived.

Political activism was gathering force among Tasmania's Aboriginal descendants, even as the film was being made, and the film's emphasis on the termination of their forebears' society did provide an ideal opportunity for winning public attention to their new resolve to be 'Tasmanian Aborigines' still. In this sense, some historians have depicted **THE LAST TASMANIAN** as itself playing a significant role in the development of racial identity among these people.

The makers of **THE LAST TASMANIAN** have always said the issue involved in this controversy is essentially a semantic one. The film uses the terms 'Tasmanian Aborigines' and 'Tasmanians' just as other historians and commentators have used it, to apply to the first people who occupied the island and created there a distinctive society and culture. An old-fashioned term for distinguishing such people from their 'mixed-blood' descendants was 'full-blood' and this term is used in the film when it refers to Government definition. But **THE LAST TASMANIAN** takes an historical view rather than a genetic one. What crucially distinguishes those Aborigines who lived in Tasmania when the Europeans arrived, was their possession of a social system and culture uniquely their own. The genocide conducted by the colonists not only meant no 'full-blood' Aborigines existed in Tasmania after Truganini's death, it meant the society and culture of those people were also gone. Nothing of the old traditional tribal life has survived, except for a few odd things like making shell necklaces. Language, religion, stories, song, dance, relationship to country and so on are all gone.

The Descendants, today's 'Tasmanian Aborigines', evolved a new variety of society and culture on the off-shore island [Cape Barren Island] which was for a long time their home. That island was not occupied by the original Tasmanian Aborigines. And its traditions owed more to the sealer forefathers than the Tasmanian Aboriginal foremothers.

The film and its makers do not question the right of today's Tasmanian Aborigines to call themselves that. The primary concern of the film happens to be with the fully tribal and traditional-living Aborigines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from whom these present people are descended. From that perspective, when the film describes the Mansells and their contemporaries as 'Descendants', its logic is the same as when it describes the earlier, prehistoric people of Tasmania as 'Ancestors'.

The makers are adamant that the politics of the present, whether they be generated by activists or conservatives, should not be allowed to cloud the view of a major and tragic episode in Australian history. It takes nothing from the cause of contemporary Aborigines to dwell for a time upon the fate of Truganini and the people and life she knew.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following Discussion Questions are suggested:

### 1. HISTORY AS A STORY OF PEOPLE

Who are the principal people featured in the film and what roles do they have in the story?

Suggest the way each person or group thinks and feels.

GUIDE:

- Truganini
- Dr Rhys Jones
- Francois Peron
- The Sealers
- Annette Mansell
- The Convicts
- Governor Arthur
- The Settlers
- George Augustus Robinson
- Dr Sir William Crowther

### 2. HISTORY AS A SEARCH FOR EVIDENCE

The film is introduced as 'a search'. What evidence is found and presented in the film? Put this evidence into categories. Where relevant, consider what interpretation is offered of the evidence.

#### GUIDE TO CATEGORIES:

- DOCUMENTS  
Eg. records of maritime explorers, report of 1830 Aboriginal Committee, Letters at Montacute homestead, Robinson's journal, Robinson's papers re Flinders Island, Crowther's scientific paper, Act of Parliament 1974.
- ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS  
Eg. by maritime explorers, photographs of early Aboriginal descendants, map of Risdon Cove, illustrated boards hung in trees, French paintings of British in Hobart, 'Black Line' map, map of

Missionary Bay, Robinson's journal, portraits of 'Robinson's Aborigines', portraits on Flinders Island, photographs at Oyster Cove, portrait of Mathinna, photos of skull collections, photos of 'last Aborigines' etc.

#### \* ARCHAEOLOGY

- Prehistoric  
E.g. artefacts in bark shelter, from Rocky Cape dig, Pieman River midden and artefacts.
- Historical [i.e. after 1803]  
E.g. Risdon Cove site, shepherd's hut, woolshed with gunslits, fortified homestead, Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour, Flinders Island mission, Oyster Cove station.
- Reconstruction  
E.g. bark shelter, firestick, watercraft, musket firing.

#### \* HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

E.g. Peron's tomb at Cerilly, first settlement at Risdon.

#### \* CEMETERIES

E.g. Shepherd's wife and children, Flinders Island, Oyster Cove, Hobart.

#### \* TESTIMONIES

E.g. Premier Doug Lowe, Annette Mansell, Shepherd Jack Hill, Great granddaughter of Shepherd's wife Mary Daniells, Sir William Crowther.

### 3. ABORIGINES LIVING WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT

How did the Tasmanian Aborigines live in relation to their environment? What had been their response to the major change in their environment, brought about by the rising sea, 12,000 years ago.

References to the technology and culture of the Tasmanian Aborigines are scattered throughout the film. Compile a list of these. Compare the technology and culture of the Tasmanian Aborigines with those of mainland Australian Aboriginal people.

#### 4. COLONISATION AND ITS IMPACT ON NATIVE INHABITANTS

What does this film reveal, of the successive stages in founding and developing a colony? How does each of these stages affect the native inhabitants?

##### GUIDE TO CATEGORIES:

- Discovery [1642-1802]
- Sealers' Raids [1799-1803] – informal economic exploitation
- First Settlement, Risdon [1803-04] – establishing colony
- Convict Prison [1803-16] – wholly dependent colony
- Settlers and Sheep [1816-28] – self developing colony
- War with Natives [1828-30]
- Robinson "The Conciliator" [1830-36] – consolidation of colony
- Flinders Island & Oyster Cove [1836-76] – self-determining colony; paternalism towards natives

#### 5. CONFLICT OF CULTURES

What important differences between the culture of the colonising British and the Tasmanian Aborigines led the two peoples into conflict and shaped the course of that conflict?

What is "genocide"? What were the principal ways in which genocide was perpetrated in Tasmania?

##### GUIDE TO WAYS OF GENOCIDE:

- Maiming and killing: unofficial and official
- Abduction and enslaving of women and children
- Pastoral occupation of tribal hunting grounds and seasonal routes
- Introduction of European diseases
- Paternalistic rounding up and 'civilising'
- Stress and depression

#### 6. RACIAL STEREOTYPING

What were the successive stereotypes of the Tasmanian Aborigines which the Europeans fashioned?

##### GUIDE TO SUCCESSIVE STEREOTYPES:

- 'Nobel savage'
- 'Ignoble savage': less than human, vile
- Irresponsible, unfortunate humans needing to be cared for; controlled by, reformed and civilised by the state
- Objects of scientific interest
- People to be appeased.

#### 7. THE DESCENDANTS

How was it that, despite genocide, the Tasmanian Aborigines had descendants?

What view of their identity is expressed by the Descendants who speak in the film? In what ways are they distinguishing themselves from the Tasmanian Aborigines whom Truganini knew?

Today there are other Descendants of the Aborigines in Tasmania who take a different view of their identity, openly declaring themselves to be Tasmanian Aborigines. This issue runs beyond the scope of the film, but the film might be a good starting point for its discussion. Some of the points made earlier under the heading THE CONTROVERSY [Pages 7 & 8] might be drawn upon here.