5.3 Resistance

Many stories about the conflict between European colonists and Indigenous people suggest the latter were easy targets. Indigenous people may not have had the guns of the Europeans, or often their manpower, but they did not lack courage or skill. Their bush skills, for example, could not be matched by the Europeans. Here are the stories of two Indigenous men who fought back.

Pemulwuy

The Bidjigal warrior Pemulwuy, sometimes called the Rainbow Warrior, belonged to the Eora language group (the coastal area in Sydney). Between 1790 and 1802, he led many attacks against colonial farms and settlements, some of which were highly organised, large-scale guerrilla operations. He and his men fought fiercely in a battle in 1797 near the newly settled town of Parramatta.

Governor King became increasingly frustrated by Pemulwuy. He offered rewards, including a free pardon, to any convict who would bring him his head. That happened in 1802; Pemulwuy was murdered. His decapitated head was sent to England to be studied by scientists. They had heard a lot about the native Australians, but had never seen one. Although glad he was dead, Governor King had a grudging respect for Pemulwuy. He said of him: ‘Altho’ a terrible pest to the colony, he was a brave and independent character and an active, daring leader of his people’.

Yagan

Yagan was part of the Nyungar tribe of south-western Western Australia. A tall man (described as being over 1.8 metres), he was both feared and admired by the British colonists.

At first, his tribe lived in harmony with the Europeans, who had established a colony on the Swan River in 1829. However, arguments soon arose over land and resources. The British mistook the Nyungar tradition of burning the land as an act of aggression. In 1831 a Nyungar was shot while taking potatoes from a settler’s garden. The settler saw it as theft; the Nyungar would have seen it as taking the land’s resources, to which he was entitled. Yagan sought revenge for this killing. After more battles, a reward was offered for his head.

When Yagan was finally captured, a European named Robert Lyon fought hard to spare his life. He admired Yagan’s courage and wished to study him. Yagan was exiled to a small rocky island, but escaped after six weeks. The colonists were angry about this; as punishment, they killed Yagan’s father and brother, and increased the reward on Yagan’s head.

For 12 months Yagan managed to avoid capture, continuing to fight for his people. Then, in July 1833,
he approached two shepherds he knew, asking for flour. When his back was turned, one of them, William Keats, shot him. A reward was given for the killing of Yagan, but the editorial of *The Perth Gazette* described it as a 'wild and treacherous act': 'We are not vindicating [forgiving] the outlaw, but, we maintain it is revolting to hear this lauded [praised] as a meritorious [good] deed.'

Yagan's head was sent to England in 1835. The hair was combed, and black and red cockatoo feathers were tied to the head as decoration. It was exhibited in Liverpool until 1964 when it was buried in Everton Cemetery. In 1997, almost 165 years after being sent to England, Yagan's head was returned to Australia for a proper burial.

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. Why did Pemulwuy develop a supernatural reputation among his people? Explain.
2. What evidence is there in this spread to suggest that both Pemulwuy and Yagan were both feared and respected by some European colonists?

**PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

3. Look at Source 4 below. It was taken on 3 March 2005 in the North Head Sydney Harbour National Park. The remains of a number of Indigenous people that have been handed back to their people are being buried.

   a. How do you think the Indigenous people in the photograph might be feeling?
   b. Why were Indigenous remains, such as these and Yagan's and Pemulwuy's heads, not given a proper burial in the first place? Why might museums be interested in wanting to continue to display such remains?
   c. How would you feel if the remains of a member of your family were displayed in a museum? What underlying beliefs do you have that make you feel this way?

4. a. From the list of adjectives (describing words) below, select those you think most European colonists in the early nineteenth century might have used to describe people like Pemulwuy and Yagan. Then select those most Indigenous people might have used to describe them.

   troublesome insubordinate wild brave violent fearless savage rebellious bold clever uncontrollable courageous irritating noble intelligent motivating

   b. Write two paragraphs about one of these Indigenous men from each point of view. Build your adjective word choices into what you say.
   c. What does this task teach you about how emotional words can be used to support a point of view?

5. Work in small groups to design/create a monument to commemorate the life of Pemulwuy. It might be a lifelike statue, similar to that of Yagan in Source 2, or a more contemporary piece that symbolises his life (based on the information in this spread). Allocate tasks according to group members’ abilities and interests. Present your completed work to the class as a group, providing and accepting feedback on its likely cultural impacts.

**Did you know?**

Until recently, the remains of many Indigenous Australians were still held in several British museums, causing great distress to Indigenous communities who believe the souls of their ancestors cannot rest until their bodies are returned. In recent years, some British museums have commenced the process of returning such remains to their communities.
5.4 Tragedy in Van Diemen’s Land

In 1816 Aboriginal resistance around Sydney was crushed by military expeditions sent by Governor Macquarie. By this time British settlements had already been founded beyond the Sydney area. In 1803 and 1804 the settlements of Hobart Town and Port Dalrymple (later Launceston) were established in Van Diemen’s Land, which became a separate colony in 1825.

A people destroyed

There is no reliable evidence of how many Indigenous people lived in Tasmania before colonisation. The most common estimate is between 4000 and 7000 people. But by 1832 there were just 203 survivors and by 1856, when Van Diemen’s Land was renamed Tasmania, there were even fewer. Some historians regard what happened there as genocide (the deliberate wiping out of a race). So complete was the destruction of Tasmania’s tribes that today’s surviving indigenous Tasmanians are mostly the descendants of Aboriginal women who were kidnapped and enslaved by white sealers. How could almost an entire population disappear in such a short time?

Hundreds of Aboriginal Tasmanians were killed in 1803, when they attempted to stop soldiers and convicts building huts near the present site of Hobart. Over the next few years, gangs of escaped convicts raided Aboriginal camps, killing men and kidnapping women. There were killings and kidnappings by lawless kangaroo hunters, sealers and whalers. European diseases also took a heavy toll. Another problem for the first Tasmanians was that whites slaughtered the native animals that were their main source of food. There were reports of shepherds being speared and attacks on settlers’ huts. Settlers often shot any Aboriginal people who came near their dwellings.

War in the 1820s

Official government policy was to treat Aboriginal Tasmanians with friendship but, by the 1820s, there was a state of war in eastern Tasmania. In 1828 Governor Arthur ordered Aboriginal people out of all settled districts. In 1830 more than two thousand soldiers, convicts and settlers were formed into lines for a drive to capture all the Aboriginal people in the area of conflict or drive them through the narrow strip of land that forms Eaglehawk Neck and into the Tasman Peninsula, where they could be kept away from the settlers. Despite the scale of this operation, only two Aborigines were captured.

Exile, disease and despair

From 1829 to 1834, George Augustus Robinson, a Methodist lay preacher, led a group from the Oyster Bay tribe. In a wave of attacks, his fighters killed several settlers and convicts before Musquito was captured, tried and executed in February 1825.

Did you know?

In 1823–24 Musquito, an Aboriginal man from the Sydney area, led a group from the Oyster Bay tribe. In a wave of attacks, his fighters killed several settlers and convicts before Musquito was captured, tried and executed in February 1825.

How many Aborigines were killed by the settlers? We will never know with any certainty … There is no doubt that in the earliest years of settlement from 1804 to 1824 the Europeans took more lives than the Aborigines. But in the period of the Black War — from 1824 to 1831 — the mortality rate on each side was more even: perhaps somewhere between 150 and 250 Tasmanians were killed in conflict with the Europeans after 1824 (with another 100 to 150 dying before that date), while they killed about 170 Europeans … It seems very likely that the mortality rate on Flinders Island was merely a continuation of a catastrophic pattern of death from diseases which had begun even before the first permanent settlements in 1803 and 1804 … As Robinson traveled across Tasmania he was told by his Aboriginal companions of whole tribes, or clans, which had become extinct.

Source 1

The Aborigines were never starving or even seriously deprived of traditional food … How many Aborigines died violently at the hands of colonists in Van Diemen’s Land? … Over the entire period from 1803 to 1831, they [Aborigines killed by colonists] average just four deaths a year … far fewer than the colonists who died at Aboriginal hands …

The orthodox story is that Aboriginal society was devastated by the arrival of the British colonizers … We should regard the total pre-colonial Aboriginal population of Tasmania as less than 2000 … Hence it was not surprising that when the British arrived, this small, precarious society quickly collapsed …