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,

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**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 …

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**Source 2**

From Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, 1995, pp. 4, 81–2, 185

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.
working on behalf of the government, travelled among the survivors. Robinson believed that they would be wiped out if they remained in Tasmania and he convinced some of them to agree to what they believed would be a temporary move to an island off the Tasmanian coast. They were deceived. Between 1821 and the early 1840s survivors from many different language groups were moved to Flinders Island, where they were guarded and forced to wear European clothes and to attend sermons on Christianity. By 1847 most had died of disease and despair. Forty-seven survivors were resettled at Oyster Bay near Hobart but they continued to die. From 1869 Truganini was the only survivor at Oyster Bay. She died in 1876.

CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS
1 Make a timeline of significant events in Tasmanian Aboriginal history from 1803 to 1876.

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
2 List the causes of conflict between Aboriginal Tasmanians and Europeans.

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS
3 Henry Reynolds (Source 2) and Keith Windschuttle (Source 1) represent different sides of the debate about the fate of the Aboriginal Tasmanians.
   a List the causes of the destruction of Aboriginal Tasmanians identified by Reynolds.
   b Windschuttle uses official government records to estimate numbers of deaths on both sides. Do you think such records would be trustworthy? Give reasons for your answer.

   c Outline the main differences in the views of these historians and what you think are the reasons for their different interpretations.

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
4 Read Source 4. For which interpretation in Sources 1 and 2 could this source provide supporting evidence?

5 The poster (Source 3) was intended to tell Aboriginal people that they had the same protection as Europeans under British law. Using the evidence in this spread, design your own poster showing what you think really happened.

6 Look closely at Source 5. It depicts the Oyster Bay and Big River people who came into Hobart to celebrate a negotiated peace. How would these people have felt when they found out that they were to be removed from their homeland?