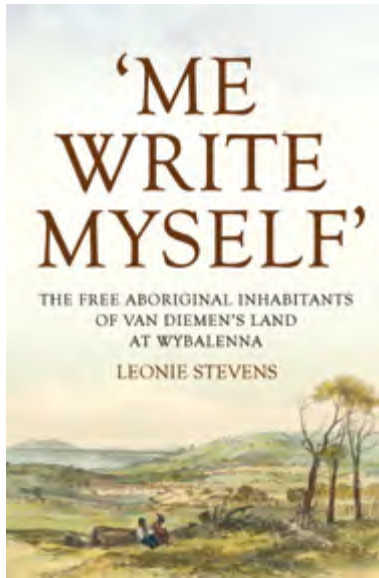


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‘Me Write Myself’: The Free Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen’s Land at Wybalenna, 1832–47

by **Leonie Stevens**

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Wybalenna on Flinders Island became home to First Nations peoples of Van Diemen’s Land in the 1830s and 1840s. In *Me Write Myself*, Leonie Stevens locates the voices of these exiled peoples.

The front cover of the book is slightly disconcerting. At first glance the combined effect of John Skinner Prout’s watercolour, depicting Flinders Island as a pastoral idyll, and the pidgin lingua franca within the title hints that the book might be just another hackneyed narrative of the inevitable, inexorable decline and supposed extinction of a conquered peoples in the face of the power and might of the European colonisers. But this is far from the case. Stevens is toying with us in her choice of title and illustration, inviting us to make an alternative reading of the cover, hearing the authentic voice of the exiles and noting that the figures in Prout’s image are Aboriginal. The cover of her book is emblematic of the way her history effectively discredits the established narratives of colonialism, replacing them with a rich and nuanced account of exile then return to the Tasmanian mainland.

Stevens writes with confidence and clear purpose. Her aim is to move beyond accounts of death and disease to focus on the lives people lived once they were exiled from country. She has achieved this through meticulous research, recounted across more than 300 pages, and fashioned into a tightly argued, compelling narrative arc. The story of Wybalenna is structured chronologically, beginning with the initial years of exile in 1836–37 with a focus on the establishment and organisation of the Friendly Mission community on Flinders Island. The second phase of the history at Wybalenna, 1838–42, is marked by

efforts to colonise through religion, before reaching a climax in the form of the frenzied political agitation during 1843–47. Stevens insists that the denouement of the story, the return to the Tasmanian mainland in October 1847, is a positive resolution, brought about through the efforts of the Aboriginal peoples themselves.

If the chronological, familiar narrative structure of complication-tension-climax-resolution makes this book readable, so too does the approach to writing history. Leonie Stevens, currently a history lecturer at La Trobe University, has a background as a fiction author, and she brings lively prose and creativity to her account of the past. She immediately sets the exciting, compelling tone when she invites readers, in her opening chapter, to join her in ‘checking their baggage’ of unconsciously Eurocentric assumptions and prejudices before journeying from the twenty-first century to nineteenth-century Van Diemen’s Land. Rather than compromising the academic rigour of the work, Stevens’ imaginative flair allows her to fashion a fresh reading of the archives. The First Nations peoples that fill the pages of this history are not at all the powerless, depressed, illiterate individuals that feature in popular ‘understandings.’ Instead, the historical actors at Wybalenna are intelligent, strategic thinkers who are pragmatic enough to devise ways to straddle two cultures, exercising their agency through a variety of tactics including armed conflict and passive resistance, and especially through developing literacy and political activism, keenly following events in the global fight against imperialism, such as the Abolitionist movement and the New Zealand/Maori Wars. In recognising and resuscitating the agency of the individuals and groups exhumed from the archives, Stevens is

relentless in challenging assumptions about the supposed powerlessness of the First Nations people of Van Diemen's Land.

Despite all this, the sometimes-heavy-handed attempts to position her account within, and differentiate it from, the existing literature, as well as several grammatical errors and malapropisms in the initial section of the book, means that it is probably not suited to high school students. Nevertheless, for teachers of Australian history this should be required reading.

It's easy to teach the story of Australia's 'settlement'/invasion by casting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a doomed, vanquished community simply because that's what we are familiar with: where W.E.H. Stanner pointed to the great Australian silence half a century ago there is now a cacophony of scholarship on the centrality of armed conflict over land ownership within the nation's past. The role of history teachers within such a contest is enormously powerful. Through our

teaching, in who and what we choose to emphasise, the ways we present historical actors, through narratives we weave across classroom activities and assessment instruments, we can unwittingly perpetuate myths and inaccuracies. It's vital that we keep abreast of new research and fresh perspectives in the areas we teach within. This book is useful for history teachers because it helps enlarge our understanding of colonisation and points to the multifaceted nature of frontier conflict. Certainly there was armed warfare on the frontier, but the power struggles that marked colonisation were often waged through the written word. By following the lead of this book, we can incorporate a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the colonising processes into our teaching, rethinking who had power and how it was exercised, reconfiguring what winning and losing looked like. This will help us move understandings of Australia's past beyond the sometimes polarised and limiting discourse of the History Wars.