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Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse

By Cassandra Pybus

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Erroneously known as the 'last Tasmanian Aborigine', Truganini (*Trugemanner*) has remained an illuvisely tragic figure—famous more in death than in life. 'Australians should know about how she lived, not simply that she died,' Pybus writes (p.xvi). It is due to the detailed notes of George Augustus Robinson—the self-styled missionary who 'fancied himself an ethnographer'—on the lives of his companions that Pybus has seen the opportunity to tell her story. Pybus acknowledges that without 'the gaze of pompous, partisan, acquisitive, self-aggrandising men

who controlled and directed the context of what they described' (p.xiv) that Truganini and her companions would not be available to us at all.

The biography traces Truganini's life from the 1820s in Tasmania, including three years in Kulin Country, Victoria, before her death in 1876. The perspective and pace of this story is unforgiving and compelling, I did not want to stop reading, so fresh was the perspective and country presented.

The beauty of Lunawanna Alonnah (now called Bruny Island), the country of the Nuenonne clan (where the Pybus family first settled) is brought to life in ways that brought tears to my eyes. As the title reinforces, this is a story of loss, a journey of *Ria Warrahwah* (apocalypse), the intangible force of evil unleashed with European arrival.

Pybus introduces the reader gradually to this apocalyptic landscape of colonial genocide and kidnapping. Throughout the story there are rare glimpses of another world and time, a country of extreme beauty and diversity that for me, as a new Australian, is the most important part of this story. Robinson's daily journal, written during the thirteen years when Truganini was his close companion, provides a precious insight into the lives of the many different clans, country and traditions of a proud and rich people. It is clear from Pybus' narrative that Robinson provides them with an opportunity to continue to travel and practise their traditional culture when all around them is being violently suppressed. The ongoing deception of Robinson is difficult to understand, especially when he was seemingly so often completely dependent upon his companions.

Pybus feels understandably compelled thirty years after reading Robinson's journals for the first time

to liberate the stories of the original people 'whose lives were extinguished to make way for mine' (p.xvii). It is this moral imperative that is both the strength and the weakness of Pybus' *Truganini*, while the author admits that 'there is no way I can truly know what she thought or how she felt ... it would be inappropriate to attempt it' (p. xviii), throughout the narrative Pybus does exactly that by identifying Truganini as 'delighted' or 'deeply regretful' when imagining what it might be like to be her.

At the same time Truganini is brought to life in this biography as an incredibly strong, resilient and adaptive woman with agency and a wealth of spiritual and physical knowledge of her world. There are no footnotes or mention of secondary literature, except for two pages of 'sources' listed at the end of the text, and I strained at times to simply believe Pybus without them.

And yet *Truganini: Journey into the Apocalypse* brings to life Truganini, Wurati, Manalakina and other survivors in such a way that to look at the vivid colour images of them included in the book transformed them from strangers to living people with agency and pride. While this biography 'pushes the historiographical boundary on Truganini (The Guardian, 16 March 2020) by refusing to acknowledge any other sources or narratives of Truganini, in doing so it challenges and demands critical attention, not only from historians but of teachers who are explicitly responsible for developing knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the past and the forces that shape societies. It has challenged me to read and research more closely, to return to the source and connect with country. It is a beginning.