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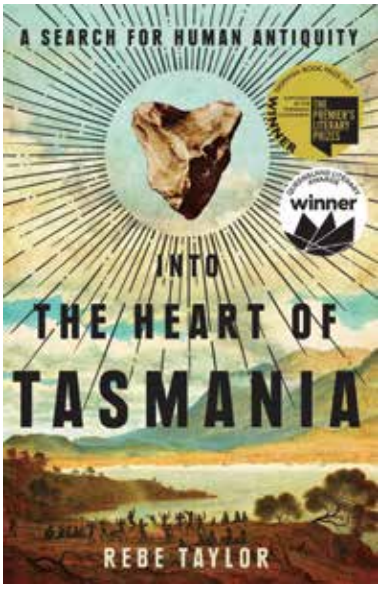


## Into the Heart of Tasmania

**By Rebe Taylor**

Melbourne University Press
2017
Paperback, 270 pages, B&W photographs
ISBN: 9780522867961
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*Reviewed by Katrina Burge*

This book opens with an anecdote that by the third page had me brimming with tears of fury, shame and sadness. In the face of onslaughts onto a sacred site, the local Aboriginal people hold a peaceful ceremony to honour and heal the ancestors and the site before it is destroyed. Are they themselves then honoured for the dignity and courage they showed at this awful time? Of course not—they are arrested. And did this incident, so typical of the dim colonial past, take place in the early years of conflict, documented in a settler diary or newspaper? Of course not—it took place ten years ago (2011) and is documented in media footage and court records. This incident reflects a central theme of Rebe Taylor's book, a theme neatly captured in the title of HTAV's 2020 annual conference—The Past Is Present.

Taylor's writing has an engaging, conversational tone. She follows the popular convention of starting the book by situating herself in an archive, explicitly disclosing her authorial presence and the process of her engagement with this material. Rather than assuming an omniscient narratorial voice, Taylor positions herself within the text, which heightens the impression of a conversation between reader and author.

The book is structured around Ernest Westlake, an English geologist turned anthropologist who 'collected' 13,000 stone tools from Tasmania in 1908–1910 and recorded his contacts with Tasmanian Aborigines. (Taylor points out that 'Aborigines' is the term preferred by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community). Westlake's records include field books, interview reports and letters home, which Taylor uses as a prism to highlight the different perspectives of his contemporaries—black and white—and from later historians and other commentators.

This technique is generally effective, although it is at times a bit laboured, with tenuous links such as 'if Westlake had gone to Tasmania a few years earlier, he would have met her'. The 'her' in question is Fanny Smith, an Aboriginal woman whose story highlights the central paradox of the book. The colonial view of Aboriginality was contingent on being 'full-blood', and it was considered 'extinct' with the death of Truganinni in 1876. Fanny Smith, who died at the age of 70 in 1908, was of interest to anthropologists and 'bone-hunters' because she may have been of unmixed ancestry and that, in their view, made her the last link with the past. These 'experts' could not, or would not, see that Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and society was still going on right in front of them. Taylor explores ongoing issues of land rights, sovereignty, racism and dispossession, which all inflect around that ongoing notion of invisibility and extinction. It is this invisibility that Taylor's book challenges.

Westlake, like most of his contemporaries and many people today, could not perceive that Aboriginality was not contingent on genetics, clothing or abode. He thought that the stone tools that fascinated him were the remnants of an extinct culture. This is a useful way of highlighting to students (and reminding ourselves) that historians generally find only what they are looking for. Even though Westlake noted that Tasmanian stone tools were found abundantly on the surface, whereas he had to dig deep to find them in England and France, he did not thereby conclude that the Tasmanian tools were the product of a contemporary society. He simply could not see that it was very much the living world of the people who shared their stories and histories with him and others. As Taylor points out, this trope of the 'extinction' of the Tasmanian Aborigines was not dislodged from Australia's national myth until Lyndall Ryan's 1981 publication, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*.

Westlake's travels are used to structure rather than limit the book's scope, so the discussion is not limited to the time he spent in Tasmania. Taylor augments the Westlake archive with extensive use of other

documents, particularly those that feature conversations and interviews with Aboriginal Tasmanians and allow us to hear their voices, albeit at several degrees of separation. She includes many fascinating snippets of the kind that enliven classes and broaden student understanding, such as Truganini laughing, telepathy, 'corroboree songs' and bush medicine.

The book is deft in its handling of conflicting points of view, both from settler historians and from Tasmanian Aborigines. An example is the sealer colonies of the Bass Strait islands, which were inhabited by European men, Aboriginal women and their families. That Aboriginal girls and women were abducted, enslaved, tortured and raped is unavoidably part of that narrative. Taylor weaves together different accounts, such as Robert Hughes' description of 'bloody, troglodytic island colonies' (p. 119) and Clinton Mundy's characterisation of his ancestor, Tanganooturra, as a 'slave' who was 'sold a second time and badly beaten' (p. 120), although fortunately she outlived the sealer settlements and survived to a peaceful old age. Taylor contrasts these perspectives with, for instance, Patsy Cameron, who considers that the sealers were the 'founding fathers' of a hybrid maritime culture that created a space in which Aboriginal identity could survive.

Allowing the space for multiple tellings is one of the strengths of this book. It feels like Taylor gives people and their stories room to breathe. She points out that if two historians work with the same material, one might find 'collaboration and creation' while the other finds 'war and destruction'. This is a timely reminder that conflicting accounts should not be reduced to the catch-all judgement of 'bias' but can usefully be interrogated for the insights that lie within their differences.

This book has a clean and readable design. At 270 pages, it is lightweight enough to read on public transport. The 1834 painting of a corroboree on the cover signals that this book is a celebration of culture while recognising the devastation wrought by settler-invaders. There is a smattering of black and white photographs. The book includes the usual scholarly apparatus of endnotes and bibliography, but Taylor's polished and confident prose makes it accessible for general readers as well as academics.

For the teacher-historian, Taylor's book is extremely useful, both for the history it tells and for how it tells us. The process of writing history is not hidden from the reader—Taylor shows us how, by using her own techniques as an academic historian, she reconstructs stories of the past using Westlake's own documents and other records of his time. She helps us to see the continuation of culture and language, the complexities and subtleties of whose story is told and who gets to tell it.

This whole book is a reminder that the past is present, and that what happened then affects what is happening now. This is quite possibly the most important lesson we could teach our Australian History students.