

Into the Heart of Tasmania: A Search for Human Antiquity

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Reviewer: Tom Lawson

On the face of it Rebe Taylor's *Into the Heart of Tasmania* is an intriguing, but essentially straight forward history of one of the many curious connections that define Britain's imperial and post imperial history. Taylor's study focuses on Ernest Westlake, an archaeologist cum anthropologist and his journey to Tasmania in the early 1900s to collect the archaeological remains of the island's Aboriginal communities. The stone tools that he gathered and then brought back to England were for him, and for the scientific communities of which he was a part, vital evidence in the discourse around human origins that detained scholars in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Westlake, who before Tasmania had collected thousands of pre-historic stone implements in Western Europe, believed that Indigenous Tasmanians were a kind of relic from the Stone Age and as such the material that he gathered there could shed valuable light on European pre-history. In making this judgement, Westlake reflected the assumptions of his age (and indeed the previous century) that Tasmanian Aborigines had been a static and undeveloped community for many generations before colonial settlement. What is more he believed, and in this he again reflected a universal consensus, that the Tasmanian Aborigines had been completely destroyed as a people and were now 'extinct'. These assumptions, Rebe Taylor argues forcefully, meant that Westlake was unable to fully understand the significance of either the material that he discovered or indeed the people that he met – which included, Aboriginal Tasmanian communities, especially on its outlying islands.

Taylor's study of Westlake is therefore an analysis of imperial collectors and collections and a history of the scientific discourses in which they worked. It is a history in that sense of the development of 'ethnology into the science of evolutionary anthropology' and the concept of racial superiority – in which at least the idea (if not the reality) of Tasmanian Aborigines figured prominently (p. 62). From Charles Darwin onwards, indigenous Tasmanians were invariably identified within a racial hierarchy (either in terms of culture or genetics). From the late 1800s, for example, their remains were displayed in British museums as evidence of one of the 'lower type[s]' of man. The idea that Tasmanian Aborigines were now 'extinct' was central to this formulation, in that their supposed failure to adapt to and survive colonial contact was used as evidence of their apparent inferiority. In the words of the popular late 19th-century scientist John George Wood, they had been victims of the 'strange but unvariable laws of progression. Wherever a higher race occupies the same ground as a lower, the latter perishes ... the new world is always built on the ruins of the old'.⁽¹⁾

Like his contemporaries and forebears, Westlake believed that time had somehow been compressed in the colonisation of Tasmania. The contact between colonists and the Indigenous inhabitants of the island had therefore been a meeting between modernity and pre-history and should have afforded the opportunity to 'penetrate some of the mist which separates the present from the future'.⁽²⁾ As Taylor reports, Westlake was pained that the 'extinction' of the Tasmanian Aborigines had prevented him from doing just that and that 'this incomparable opportunity of studying this stage of human progress arrested a hundred thousand years ago was lost' (p. 144).

Taylor's book demonstrates admirably the degree to which Westlake was bound by this mythical notion of Aborigines' failed development. But perhaps even more remarkable was Westlake's fidelity to the remarkably persistent myth about extinction. It was one of Westlake's founding assumptions when he journeyed to Tasmania and it endured throughout his visit – despite what Taylor reveals to be some remarkably rich and well documented interactions with surviving Aboriginal communities. Those communities, in part Taylor argues because of Westlake's approach to learning from them, were more open with him than they were usually with white academics. As a consequence, even though he did not recognise it, Westlake collected some of the richest information we have about Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. In that sense Taylor argues that Westlake was a better anthropologist than either he believed or some of his assumptions might have determined that he was.

Taylor also traces Westlake's return to England, and especially his role in founding the 'Woodcraft Folk', the Quaker inspired, rural revivalist and pacifist equivalent to the Scouting movement. That Westlake's journey took him (and the material he collected) from Tasmania, to Oxford via Ipswich and a New Forest caravan park; ensures that *Into the Heart of Tasmania* is also a history of the networks of people and things that bound the Anglo-world and the British Empire in ways that are often rather hidden today. What is more it is a fine example of that genre of history writing – at times moving and always sensitively written.

As the Woodcraft Folk suggest, those links are multi-layered. They are sometimes serendipitous, sometimes haunting. They are also personal. When I was researching Tasmania for example, I lived in Southampton – close to where Westlake lived on his return from Tasmania, and where he stored many of the artefacts that he returned to England with. I have been to the campsite where Westlake stored his stones, blissfully unaware of the connections that bound that landscape to Tasmania. In addition, at the same time as writing about Tasmania I became very interested in the Dorset village of Tyneham which had been requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence during the Second World War and stands empty and abandoned to this day – a kind of memorial to a world that was lost. In the post-war era, an associate of Westlake's in the Woodcraft Folk, Rolf Gardiner, had led the campaign to return the residents of Tyneham to their homes. Gardiner was a prominent organic farmer and member of the rural revival movement with links to a variety of nationalists with whom I have always been fascinated – not least for the intellectual links to fascism.⁽³⁾ For someone who came to an interest in colonial history rather circuitously through Holocaust studies, that there is a link between organo-fascism and the discourse of destruction in Tasmania seems slightly more than serendipity.

It may appear that this segue into my own personal links to Westlake's story is the worst kind of self-indulgence. However, in my defence, it is because Taylor's *Into Tasmania* is actually much more than a straight-forward history that one is led to thinking about one's own position in relation to this story. This book is also about Taylor's own journey in Westlake's footsteps, both in Tasmania and in England – about her confrontation with Tasmania's Aboriginal past and indeed present. In making it a personal history in that way, Taylor asks that all historians position themselves in relation to their work, especially historians of Tasmania's Aboriginal and Colonial past. She writes:

Westlake's papers have taught me to ask myself: How do *I* see the past? How do I see Aboriginal Peoples and cultures in the archive, or indeed in the present? Am I looking in order to prove a point? To advance my discipline? To educate my fellow Australians? To even

chastise them? None of these things are necessarily wrong, but it is important to consider how these goals might colour my vision. It is important to ask myself: Can I look into the past, or even at the present, can I cross cultures and actually learn something new? Can I see what is before me? Can I actually see a new 'lifeworld'? (p. 13)

Ultimately Rebe Taylor can indeed see a new lifeworld and this history ends with her journey into Aboriginal Tasmania today. As I am the author of a study of the destruction of Tasmania's indigenous population, and particularly its implications for British history and identity (published as *The Last Man: a British Genocide in Tasmania* in 2014) these seem like particularly pressing questions for me to answer too. As such what follows is a response to Taylor's challenge about the way in which we use and by implication abuse the past in our writing of history.

First, and perhaps this is true of any book which deals with the destruction of Tasmania's Aboriginal population, *Into Tasmania* is a book about memory – in particular about how the colonial community came to terms with their violent past. Specifically, Taylor shows how the myth of extinction was both a part of that violent pre-history and a means to overcoming it.

Through the study of Westlake's own interactions with colonial Tasmanians, the constant presence of at least the consequences of colonial violence in Tasmanian public discourse at the beginning of the 20th century is revealed. From his arrival in Hobart onwards, Westlake both repeats and repeatedly encountered the idea that Aboriginal Tasmanians had been destroyed, were definitively *past*. For Taylor, this idea had a specific purpose in Tasmania in the early years of a federated Australia – in that it was a device which allowed the colonial era to itself appear as past, as finished. As such the idea of extinction was an important element in a process of coming to terms with the past and as such cleansing the present.

Taylor also demonstrates the degree to which engaging only with the absence of Aborigines allowed the settler community to avoid the problematics of Aborigines presence both in the present but also the past. When Westlake journeyed through Tasmania's midlands for example, he found plentiful evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the land, that the settlers denied – dismissing what Westlake understood to be stone tools and as such the archaeological remains of Indigenous life as the result of natural processes. This was not, Taylor argues, a means to forget the 'the first owners of the land' as much as it was about forgetting the 'war ... waged to ensure their removal' (p. 129). As such while the idea that Aborigines were extinct abounded, the Black War that had presaged their destruction was not remembered. Settler society was happy to talk to Westlake about their shame at the disappearance of Aboriginal society, but this was a shame engendered by the outcome of extinction rather than a confrontation with its causes. As Taylor writes 'their shame was rarely for the invasion of the lands from which they profited, or for the roving parties and military patrols' (p. 141).

Taylor offers a particularly intriguing analysis of the role of the foundational Risdon Cove massacre in these evasion narratives. This conflagration, in May 1804, is to this day written and rewritten in Tasmanian history and has been a central event in narratives of the Tasmanian past since the 1820s. It is difficult now to get to the reality of events which led to the death of an unspecified number of Aboriginal Tasmanians (across the last two centuries estimates have ranged from 5 to 50), but it is often regarded as the foundational error (or sin) which set settler and Aboriginal relations on a violent course. For the British government in the early 19th century this was the fault of the settlers themselves, who in violently engaging Aboriginal communities betrayed the benign intentions of British colonialism. As such it was used as a means to defend the idea of colonialism in the 1820s and 1830s when conflict between indigenous peoples and colonists made it difficult to maintain that colonial expansion was for the good of all men. What Taylor demonstrates is that Risdon was used as a similar evasion narrative by the settler community too – but for them responsibility for the violence lay with British soldiers. Indeed, this was a pattern for their analysis of all violence against Aborigines which was remembered as having been engaged by either British soldiers or convicts – in other words people other than the settler community. As such this remembering was, in Taylor's words aimed, at forgetting.

Westlake demonstrates the degree to which the claim of extinction could happily coexist with an overt knowledge that there was an enduring Aboriginal presence. As I have already said he interviewed these people, and their presence was also regularly reported in the English press or in travel writing at the beginning of the 20th century. That these communities were not regarded as Aboriginal tells us something about the degree to which racial identities were understood to be fixed. The Aborigines that Westlake met were mixed race communities, examples of the creole communities that the colonial era produced. While they were able to describe Aboriginal culture to Westlake, like his contemporaries he did not understand them as Aboriginal because such a designation was, to put it crudely, a matter of blood rather than culture.

The myth of Tasmanian Aborigines' total extinction is at the root of a more contemporary controversy described by Taylor. Much of Westlake's Tasmanian work, both his archaeology and anthropology, was not much utilised following his death – his collections retained but unused in British museums until they were re-discovered by Rhys Jones in the 1970s. Jones used Westlake in his own analysis of Tasmanian Aboriginal destruction, which was famously broadcast on Australian (and indeed British) television in the documentary film *The Last Tasmanian*. Jones' Tasmanian thesis was controversial because it first (in the face of all the evidence it must be said) suggested that Tasmanian Aboriginal communities had culturally regressed after colonialization. Such an analysis suggested, for example, that Aborigines had no access to fire – something which Taylor shows very clearly was simply not true – but was a repetition of the notion that Indigenous populations on Tasmania were somehow particularly 'primitive'. Second, Jones repeated the idea that Tasmanian Aboriginal communities had been entirely destroyed – something which rather flew in the face of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's growing campaign for political recognition for Aboriginal culture and communities at the time.

By tracing the intellectual links between Westlake and Jones, Taylor is able to demonstrate the way in which the myth of extinction in Tasmania was both entirely self-fulfilling and a means to deny Aboriginal identities in the late 20th century. Westlake began work under the assumption that Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct, his work was then used to support the idea of extinction by Jones. In that sense the myth of extinction was entirely circular.

Taylor argues that Westlake had been unable to see Aboriginal endurance largely because he was not looking for it. It was the European past that had been Westlake's focus, and as such he used the Tasmanian past simply as means to an end. Similarly, Taylor suggests that Jones, was not altogether interested in the Aboriginal past or present – but was concerned to indict the criminality of European colonialism. The reality of Tasmanian Aboriginal endurance was therefore much less important than the myth of extinction because the latter, following the work of Clive Turnbull (and indeed Rafael Lemkin), allowed comparison between British imperialism and other 20th-century atrocities such as 'My Lai and Buchenwald' (p. 199). Ironically,

Jones wanted to indict the colonial past but by using the myth of extinction, he ended up offering a narrative which *supported* the colonial present. If Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct in the past, then necessarily the Tasmanian community's claims to Aboriginality in the present were spurious. Taylor writes: 'Jones did not give Tasmanian Aboriginal people a history, he denied them a presence and a future. As one elder said to me in 1999 "No man has damaged our struggle for existence more than Rhys Jones"' (p. 197).

In reviewing this scholarship Taylor identifies and evaluates two fundamental questions which concern both the particularities of Tasmanian Aboriginal history and the discipline of History more generally. To deal with the latter first – what we are confronted with in using both Jones and Westlake's work is no less than the question of who, to put it colloquially, owns the past. They both *used* the history of indigenous Tasmania as a prism through which to view other pasts. Taylor does not repeat what she sees as their mistake and uses (throughout the book) Westlake and then Jones as a gateway into the past and present as defined by its Tasmania's Aboriginal communities and into their lifeworld. This is the *heart of Tasmania* that neither Westlake nor Jones could see. In doing so Taylor, I think, suggests that this is both the logical and ethical consequence of engaging with Aboriginal history.

Clearly, this is an irresistible ethical conclusion – particularly when dealing with the Tasmanian Aboriginal past. After all, this is a community whose very existence has been repeatedly denied. As I have already said, one of the consequences of that was, for example, that the human remains of that community were scattered across the globe and displayed in museums in Britain and indeed in Hobart as examples of racial primitivism. It is difficult to think of a better way of articulating Aborigines' powerlessness. When a newly assertive and organised Aboriginal community demanded the return of those remains from the 1970s onwards, as a means of articulating if not power then just existence, the myth extinction was often presented as a reason why return could not be achieved. The Tasmanian Aboriginal community was told that it could not own the bones of its ancestors, it could not own its past, because it literally did not exist. As such Jones is not the only example in which a version of the past was used as a means to deny the present. It is, as I say, difficult to suggest that there is any other ethical response than to assert that the Tasmanian Aboriginal community should therefore get the right to choose how their past is used – if only as a means to right past wrongs.

However, when one considers the second fundamental question that Taylor poses then I think the issues become at least a little more blurred. Outside of Australian History, the destruction of indigenous Tasmanians is probably most often referred to in genocide studies. As Anne Curthoys and Taylor herself have argued there *is* a relationship between the idea of extermination and the idea of extinction – and at times in genocide studies the two concepts have themselves become confused.⁽⁴⁾ Certainly there have been examples of genocide scholars referring sloppily to the *complete* extermination of Indigenous Tasmanians. In following this line, the idea of genocide can become conflated with the myth of extinction and can start to echo the discourse which rationalised extermination in the first instance. As a consequence, the idea of genocide as applied to the Tasmanian past can be set against the endurance of Tasmanian Aboriginal communities and culture in a zero sum game – which is to an extent what happened with Rhys Jones and the film he came to represent and was decried as an insult to Tasmanian Aboriginal communities in the present.

But, and I would say this, it doesn't have to be that way. Personally, I remain convinced that the idea of genocide does have a conceptual utility in understanding the Tasmanian and indeed the Australian past more generally. Genocide refers to the attempt to remake and remodel the human race at the level of the species – to rewrite what it means to be human. As such both the rhetoric that surrounded Indigenous Tasmanians in the past; the violence visited on such communities; the theft of their land and the destruction of their ecosystem; the stealing and display of the remains of the dead; the denial of their existence in the more recent past; all add up to genocide. No other concept appears to capture the totality of the destruction that was visited on Tasmania's diverse Aboriginal communities – who were *almost* totally physically, linguistically and culturally destroyed.

However, following Taylor's lead in asking that we position ourselves in the history that we write; why do I

need to assert genocide in this way? Am I simply using the Tasmania past to prove a point? What right do I have, ultimately, to impose a conceptual mechanism around the past which the victims of that history themselves may reject?

Ultimately Rebe Taylor's book has made me think long and hard about that question, but in the end I am drawn back to the fact that as well as revealing the *heart of Tasmania*, what Taylor's retelling of Westlake's story also emphasises is the sheer messiness of the past and particularly its connectedness. Tasmania is a part of a much wider imperial story, over which its inhabitants necessarily have no control. While post-colonial scholarship is obviously right to assert the agency of the victims of that history, it is not simply to label them passive to argue that what occurred on Tasmania was a genocide that the British had exported to the other side of the world. That genocide was the result of a complex interaction between colonists and colonised, but it was also the result of a fundamental imbalance of power. In that sense what Westlake's story demonstrates is that Tasmania does have something to tell us about the British past too. History is not a zero sum game. These lands are connected, and as such it does ultimately seem not just acceptable but desirable that Tasmanian history is *used* to help us view the British past (and potentially many other pasts too). It is a history that should challenge Britain's sense of its self and its empire. I write this from a country that stands to lose a great deal because of, in part, the triumph of a mythical version of its imperial past. In that sense the destruction of Tasmania's Aboriginal population (and indeed the rejection and denial of that community's endurance) can remind us that the Empire that is being romanticised in current culture was fundamentally concerned with the export of violence around the globe.

In 2015 the British Museum ran an exhibition on *Indigenous Australia*. There was for me one small triumph in the exhibition. It referred to the treatment and the tragedy of indigenous Tasmanians as genocide. This was not to deny the Aboriginal present, the assertion of tragedy was not deny the triumph of endurance, but in the *British Museum*, an institution that exists to tell the story of Britain's impact on the world, it was an acceptance that in this instance that impact was destructive. That seems to me to be the very opposite of the perpetuation of colonial violence, but in fact the beginnings of a process of coming to terms with the past. But of course it is a further testament to the messiness and confusion of the past that the assertion of genocide was contained within an exhibition in which the artefacts were themselves evidence of the violence of the past and for some the enduring imbalance of power of the present. As I said at the beginning of this review, Rebe Taylor's book is also an account of the messiness of the past and the curious connections that bind the Anglo-world. However, what I have hopefully shown is that it is also much more than that, much more than a straightforward history.

Notes

1. Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London, 2014), p. 161.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Lubbock cited in Lawson, *The Last Man*, p. 163.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Patrick Wright, *The Village that Died for England* (London, 2002), pp. 211–42.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rebe Taylor, 'Genocide, extinction and Aboriginal self-determination in Tasmanian historiography', *History Compass*, 11, 6 (2013), 405–18; Ann Curthoys, 'Genocide in Tasmania: the history of an idea', in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 229–52.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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