

Oxford Pitt River Museum and Cambridge anthropological archives respectively demonstrate the precarious positions as representatives of their culture and communities that Indigenous artists may find themselves in. The myriad artists interrogating historic photography and records of Indigenous people feed into the deconstruction and re-evaluation of imperialistic and colonial narratives that populate the historical record, not a small aspect of contemporary Aboriginal art. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll outlines the reasoning and theory behind the anachronistic revision of past stories and events within modern perspectives that characterises much of the Aboriginal contemporary avant-garde. The investigations and interventions presented in this section nicely conclude the ruminations and research compiled in this book.

A significant thread that runs through *Indigenous Archives* is the recasting of shamanic knowledge and practice into more modern forms, particularly those of visual art and aesthetics. The archival function that a painting or songline fulfils for Indigenous communities is a major part of how these communities formulate and assert their culture and history, as well as consolidating their collective knowledge in forms which do not solely rely on oral transmission. The ways in which Indigenous Australian communities have been taking back their stories and applying an Indigenous lens to them constitute an important aspect of self-determination, and these strategies are aptly demonstrated throughout these essays. My recent postgraduate fieldwork experiences on the collection belonging to the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre in Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia, afforded me the opportunity to observe directly the potency of a living archive as an empowering strategy in strengthening traditional Indigenous culture and knowledge within a modern paradigm. Through this book I was better able to contextualise my experiences and integrate them into the larger current that it taps into.

This illuminating book enriched my understanding of the history of Aboriginal art, as well as its contemporary status and function both within Indigenous Australian communities and beyond. The sole shortcoming is the lack of an index, which makes it difficult for the reader to pursue related subjects and figures across the collection of essays, but by no means should this minor quibble overshadow this worthwhile volume. The authors do not claim this book to be comprehensive, but it nonetheless provides a broad snapshot of scholarship in this area, leaving the reader with many worthwhile threads to contemplate.

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'Me Write Myself': The Free Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land at Wybalenna, 1832–47, by Leonie Stevens, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, 2017, x + 356 pp., AUD\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 925495 63 8

At the beginning of her book *Me Write Myself*, Leonie Stevens imagines Tasmanian history studies as a room filled with over two centuries of writing: books, reports and archives line the walls and spill onto the floors. I find it an evocative image, for it reminds me of my own

little writing room, where the shelves and archive boxes are likewise filled with the books and records on that very subject.

Tasmanian history, and Tasmanian Aboriginal history in particular, has a uniquely long and unbroken tradition of research and writing. Historians began to reflect on Tasmania's frontier war even as it drew to a close in the 1830s and they have continued ever since. The topic has stirred intense debate and more than half a dozen new publications since the turn of this century.

Stevens, an established writer of fiction, has thus chosen for her first book of history a much-studied subject. But she has nonetheless found an area of Tasmanian Aboriginal history that has received less attention. *Me Write Myself* recounts the years immediately after Tasmania's frontier wars, from 1832–48, when almost all the Tasmanian Aborigines were living in exile in the Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment on Flinders Island in Bass Strait. Moreover, Stevens turns her focus to a largely overlooked set of records, the texts written by the exiles: the regular contributions they wrote to the *Flinders Island Chronicle*; their sermons, their correspondence to colonial officials and, significantly, their petitions to the Crown, seeking recognition of their rights.

NJB Plomley's *Weep in Silence* (1987) offered a comprehensive survey of the events and records at Flinders Island settlement, but gave little respect or attention to the exiles' writing.¹ Penny van Toorn and Henry Reynolds among others have contributed more sympathetic, critical reflections on their writing, but Stevens has carried out the closest analysis to date.^{2,3} She carefully corrects and challenges many earlier historical accounts and assumptions to present what is probably the most detailed narrative of the exiles' lives at Wybalenna to date, and certainly the most positive.

Wybalenna's residents were, from the time of their exile, closely scrutinised and copiously written about by humanitarians, historians and officials. They were most commonly portrayed as a disconsolate people, pining for their lost country with neither hope nor a future. Indeed, it was widely, if mistakenly, assumed that the exiles would soon be extinct. This fate drew the curiosity and melancholy of a watching world, often, as Tom Lawson notes, with a disturbing undertone of racial triumphalism.⁴

But in Stevens' account, the exiles emerge as a politically engaged, astute and forward-looking people. This is because she takes the writers 'at their word' to present them not how they were seen from the *outside* – as doomed captives – but how they saw *themselves*: as a *free* people with a future. This is a welcome and fresh approach to an important chapter of Tasmanian Aboriginal history.

There are, however, some aspects of *Me Write Myself* that arguably detract from its overall success. The idea of 'freedom' could have been given better historical contextual grounding, especially in its introduction on page xxiv. Here Stevens explains in a footnote the meaning of being 'free' in a penal colony; it was a significant social status difference from the lower convict class. This is an important and fundamental point that perhaps would have been better elucidated in more detail in the text.

Another concern is the book's structure. It opens with an extensive, critical historiographical reflection. While well informed and largely necessary, it might have been better placed as a series of shorter reflections throughout the book, so that readers could begin Stevens' compelling narrative sooner.

I also had some concern with Stevens' introduction section, 'The Many Guises of Scientific Racism'. This section is an exploration of the intersections between nineteenth-century science, most specifically evolutionary anthropology, and the justification and celebration of colonial expansion. Certainly there was a complicated relationship between the two. As Tom Griffiths writes: 'Anthropology and European Australia were born of the same colonial

moment and derived legitimacy and identity from reach other'.⁵ But there is almost a seamlessness in Stevens' account between science and colonisation that may give readers the sense that anthropologists were motivated by, and complicit in, the colonial project, when in reality they largely understood themselves to be scholars detached from the business and profits of settlement.

A final concern regards the archival records at the book's heart. For a narrative inspired by a set of manuscript sources, there is little detail given in the text about their locations, physical dimensions or the stories of their collection (although the references are excellent, and it is refreshing to see footnotes). Perhaps for reasons of cost, there are no images in *Me Write Myself*. It would have been powerful to see examples of the exiles' handwriting and signatures which Stevens discusses at length, and to see some of the paintings and photographs of the people and of Wybalenna. I also wished to read more of exiles' transcribed words. This critique is in part with the limits of the printed book. It is a great medium for sharing narrative, and Stevens makes excellent use of this capacity, but it is often poor for sharing images, especially of archival records. It should be noted, however, that the George Augustus Robinson archive in the State Library of New South Wales and the Colonial Secretary's correspondence in the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, which contain the exiles' texts, may one day be digitised. If so, Stevens' work will offer excellent historical context.

This leads me to reiterate the strength of Stevens' narrative writing and the depth of her knowledge and research. I learned much reading *Me Write Myself* and others will too. In fact, I found myself increasingly unable to put the book down. Its momentum and power increase, and the final chapter is outstanding. I congratulate Leonie Stevens on the immense effort that she has clearly put into *Me Write Myself* and commend it to all those interested in colonial history.

Notes

1. NJB Plomley, *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement with the Flinders Island Journal of George Augustus Robinson, 1835–1839*, Blubber Head Press, Sandy Bay, Hobart, 1987.
2. Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006.
3. Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Re-examination of the Tasmanian Wars*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995.
4. Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania*, I. B. Taurus, London, New York, 2014.
5. Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Vic. 1996.

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