

CARNE NEEMERRANNER – TELLING HISTORY *on the* GROUND: ONE STORY *from the* VAN DIEMEN'S LAND (TASMANIAN) COLONIAL FRONTIER

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■ Abstract

In the language of the Tebrikunna (Cape Portland) clan, *Carne Neemerranner* is “telling ground”. It is also what we call the research methodology designed for *Meeting at Bark Hut*, a recent community-engaged Aboriginal history project conducted in northeast Tasmania. The project examined, retraced and explored one brief, but poignant, episode in Tasmania’s colonial contact history – a meeting between the parties of George Augustus Robinson, colonial agent charged with the “conciliation” and removal of Trouwunnan (Tasmanian) clanspeople from the Tasmanian mainland, and that most likely including Mannalargenna, one of the last Trouwunnan leaders still living in his own clancountry at the time (1830). While this episode and encounter has profound connotations for present-day Tasmanian Aborigines, its significance has largely been overlooked by academic historians. *Meeting at Bark Hut* was conceived as an opportunity to redress this deficit, to allow the story of this event to be told and to come alive in a dynamic and culturally relevant way. This article offers some insight into the meaning and method of the project from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

■ Introduction

In 1830 the colonial government of Tasmania instigated a campaign, now known as the “Friendly Missions”, led by George Augustus Robinson and designed to circumambulate the island locating and negotiating with Trouwunnan (Tasmanian Aboriginal) clanspeople in preparation for their removal from the Tasmanian mainland. By 1835 most of the Trouwunnan population had been banished to Flinders Island where they suffered incarceration, abuse and untimely death. While for present day Aboriginal Tasmanians, Robinson’s “Friendly Missions” represent a notorious and disgraceful chapter in the colonial campaign to rid Van Diemen’s Land (as Tasmania was then called by the British) of its original peoples, ironically, his journal records of his journeys are of profound historical and cultural significance, representing a valuable compendium of spiritual, economic, political, ceremonial, social, biographical and geographical information about Tasmania’s original clanspeople and their lands, of vital importance to their descendants.

It goes without saying that the events that lead up to, and surround, the Trouwunnan journeys into exile had profound and lasting effects on present day Tasmania’s Aboriginal peoples, and that they are especially concerned with how stories of those events, their country and their ancestors are told. Most work to date concerned with Tasmanian Aboriginal history and conducted within the academy has used N.J.B. Plomley’s (1966) edited version of Robinson’s journals, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson*, as its primary source. However, seldom, if ever, has the opportunity arisen for Aboriginal people themselves to engage with the text in a way that is relevant and meaningful to them. A vitally important part of their “journey home” involves a re-reading of the orthodox historical account of their removal from ancestral homelands and a re-telling of the history of their land and people.

In the languages of the northeast clans of Tasmania (Plomley, 1976, p. 399, 245), *Carne Neemerranner* is “telling ground”. It is also what we

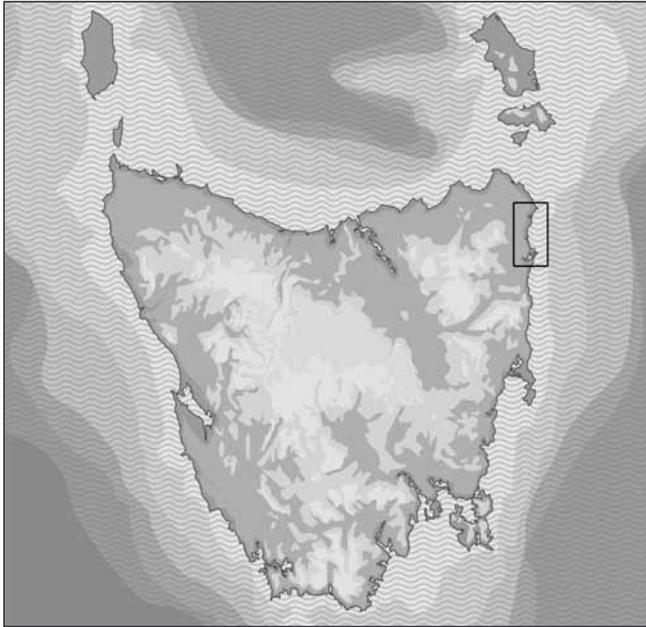


Figure 1. Map of Tasmania with research precinct marked (Image courtesy of Mey Chin).

call the embodied, relational, place-based research methodology of *Meeting at Bark Hut*, a recent Aboriginal history project conducted by the authors of this paper: Aboriginal historian and elder Patsy Cameron assisted by philosopher Linn Miller from the University of Tasmania. Alongside a number of other Aboriginal Tasmanians directly descended from northeast clanspeople we set out to physically retrace and remap a short section of George Augustus Robinson's historic expedition – specifically that which in all probability culminated in his meeting with Mannalargenna – a meeting and a man of great consequence to Tasmanian Aboriginal history. Those who participated in *Meeting at Bark Hut* sought to bring the story of this meeting, previously obscured in the academic historical record, to life in a dynamic and culturally relevant way, and in doing so to reveal and reassert the socio-cultural and historical significance of the meeting as well as that of the people, landscapes and actions it involved. This article offers some insight into *Meeting at Bark Hut* and its meaning and method, from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

■ *Meeting at Bark Hut*: A project outline

Meeting at Bark Hut is the pilot of a larger research project, *Telling Places in Country* conducted by a research team with institutional and/or community affiliations with Riawunna Centre and the Community, Place and Heritage Research Unit, University of Tasmania (Launceston) and funded by The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). *Telling Places in Country* retraces, remaps and reinterprets the historic journeylines of George



Figure 2. Map of research precinct with daily routes marked (Image courtesy of Mey Chin).

Augustus Robinson infamous “Friendly Mission” through northeast Tasmania. The project will eventually involve surveying a geographical area of approximately 800 square kilometres on the northeast coast of Tasmania – the ancestral homelands of the poorrermainrener, pairrebeenne, lemoonnerlanner, pinterrairer, pyemmainrenerpairrener, plangenmairrerwanener and leenethmairrener clans (Plomley, 1971, p. 21). The *Meeting at Bark Hut* survey area is bounded by Georges Bay to the south, the Ringarooma River to the north and inland west to the Blue Tiers.

The pilot fieldwork expedition was conducted in October/November 2007. This involved the project team and entourage (researchers, elders, student group, support and documentary film crew) travelling through the Bay of Fires and Ansons Plain area in northeast Tasmania on the dates coinciding with one of Robinson's foray in that area between 29 October-1 November 1830. It was on the final day of that expedition that Robinson and his eight Trouwunnan guides (Trugannini, Woorrady and Pagerly from the South East nation, Tunnerminerwait or Peevay from the North West nation, Kickerterpoller and Tanleboneyer from the Oyster Bay nation Timme and Bullrer from the Coastal Plains nation) made contact with a group of clanspeople, accompanied by a large pack of dogs, sheltering from the rain in a traditional bark hut (Plomley, 1966, pp. 260-61).

Despite its disregard by other researchers, the encounter between this group, of which we believe Mannalargenna was a part, and Robinson's party on 1 November 1830 on Anson's Plain represents a moment of deep significance in both colonial and more recent Aboriginal history. It was at this location that Robinson persuaded the group to relinquish

their freedom and leave their homeland under his protection. This meeting is particularly poignant for Mannalargenna's present day descendants. Belief in his status as primary male progenitor of the current Tasmanian Aboriginal population is firmly held and widely spread. The ancestral connections, in concert with the gravity of the circumstances, make this a meeting of profound cultural and historical magnitude.

The research project *Meeting at Bark Hut* was designed and implemented with this firmly in mind. In both theory (foregrounding the record of Aboriginal experience and activity in the journals of George Augustus Robinson) and practice (action research by Aboriginal participants walking, reading, considering and surveying country as well as the appointment of a Project Council of Elders) the project sought to privilege Aboriginal connections and concerns with both the historic journey and Trouwunna's northeast country through which it progressed. By doing so the project aimed to provide an appropriate framework to support a re-connection with Aboriginal cultural and spatial heritage, establish shared links with people, places and historical events and to somehow reconcile the ancestral past with a communal present.

To this end, particular attention was paid to establishing and pursuing a genuinely collaborative approach between local Aboriginal and university researchers. This required a depth and scope of community engagement and participation hitherto unusual in the Tasmanian context. In addition, the project encompassed an organisational and operational team of people from several states and from various institutions and disciplines, working alongside local community members, students and local landowners, with the assistance of government bodies, Aboriginal organisations and supportive individuals with relevant expertise and enormous enthusiasm.

The form, nature and impetus of the project were also taken into consideration in determining the mode of presentation of research findings. Relevance, dynamism, inclusivity and accessibility were key criteria. Thus, the research results will comprise a multi-media digital ethno-cartography, including a revised cartographic record of the movements of Robinson's "Friendly Mission" through the project survey area. This digital artefact includes the location of sites and the recording of their socio-cultural and historical significance as well as an inventory of historical characters, their relationships and interactions. The record of *Meeting at Bark Hut* operates as a research resource and community cultural depository as well as an educative tool.



Retracing the "Friendly Mission" through northeast Tasmania

Tasmania has a particularly brutal and tragic colonial history. The colonisation of Van Diemen's

Land in 1804 expanded rapidly with an influx of transported convicts, free settlers and their livestock. Violent conflict soon erupted between Trouwunna peoples and pastoral settlers encroaching upon the homelands and hunting grounds of resident clans. During the 1820s a "Black War" between colonists and Trouwunnans escalated to the extent that in November 1828 the colonial government of Van Diemen's Land declared a state of martial law. It is perhaps ironic that as a consequence Europeans in the settled districts felt able to lawfully conduct raids against clansmen, who reciprocated with violent incursions, and hostilities increased.

By late 1830 three major activities were taking place to deal with the state of affairs – the long standing practice whereby groups of men were organised into armed "roving parties" to conduct forays into the bush "in quest" of the clanspeople continued; Governor Arthur put plans into action to deploy soldiers, convicts and others in a military operation called the "Line" or the "Great Army" that would supposedly force the clanspeople away from the "settled" districts into the Tasman Peninsular, and George Augustus Robinson, commissioned in 1829, had embarked upon his series of expeditions around Tasmania to conciliate with the remaining clanspeople and persuade them to come under his protection.

At that time it was estimated that in the eastern half of the island 700 clanspeople remained in the bush (Plomley, 1966, pp. 252-53), occupying a large area, between the Tamar River in the north and the Derwent River in the south. Robinson soon discovered that this number was exaggerated by at least seven-fold (Plomley, 1966, pp. 266, 276). By this time the Trouwunnans were especially fearful of the military, whose forces were large, weapons many, and who often travelled on horseback. As a consequence of the strengthening of military operations and intensification of armed roving parties, clanspeople were compelled to seek refuge in the remotest pockets of country. The severe impacts on clan populations became clear when Robinson made contact with several isolated confederate groups in the northeast during late 1830 and 1831. These small groups represented all that remained of the Oyster Bay, Penny Royal Creek, Stoney Creek and northeast Coastal Plains nations.

Robinson's forays into the country of the northeast clans began in 1830. In early August of that year Robinson left Launceston with a party of Trouwunna guides to make contact with clanspeople in the remote country to the northeast (Plomley, 1966, pp. 245- 46). With the assistance of his guides Robinson's mission was to locate these clanspeople and convince them to leave country under his "protection".

On 13 August his expedition met an armed roving party of ten to twelve men on the coast near Waterhouse Island who had been engaged by J. P. Cox of Launceston to go in search of "natives" in

the northeast. Their presence reminded Robinson of the urgency of his mission to reach the clanspeople remaining in country before their location was revealed to others with more malevolent motives (Plomley, 1966, pp. 248, 255).

Robinson had decided to use Swan Island as an establishment where he would take clanspeople as an interim place to prevent his exiles or “captives” from escaping back into the bush. He had also established a base camp on the mainland opposite Swan Island between the Little Musselroe and Big Musselroe inlets. For several weeks leading up to the party setting out from the Musselroe base camp, to go south towards Georges Bay, there was intermittent evidence of clanspeople firing their lands, and Robinson used these sightings to plot his trek toward them down the Bay of Fires (Plomley, 1966, pp. 253, 255). He dispatched his boat crew to sail from Big Musselroe Inlet with orders to signal their arrival at “Barren Island” (St Helens Island) where he would be resupplied. With enough supplies for three days his party departed Musselroe base camp on foot and stopped at Georges Point on the night of the 28 October 1830. The next day they sighted smoke bearing South by Southwest from high ground near Eddystone Point. On crossing the narrow entrance to Anson’s Bay they arrived at the place now known as Policeman’s Point, from where they continued travelling in a southerly direction along the Bay of Fires camping for the night near The Gardens (Plomley, 1966, p. 258).

At this point in time Robinson had no information about those clanspeople who were responsible for firing the lands ahead. He did not know the identities or number of people he was searching for, but convinced that they were somewhere in the nearby hinterland he and his Trouwunnan guides were eager to find them. And, so it was that in late October 1830, at the same time as the infamous “Line” campaign moved through the centre of the island towards the Tasman Peninsular, another series of events, of rather less interest to colonial historians, but of equal significance to present day Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples, unfolded in the northeast region.

It would not be for another three days that Robinson would encounter the clanspeople he sought. On 30 October the expedition walked south by the prominent landmark that Robinson called Giants Rock, arriving at the bay he believed to be Georges River, where they made camp for the night. The following day, after confirming with some displeasure that the supply boat had not arrived at Barren Island and running low on provisions, Robinson made the decision to return to basecamp opposite Swan Island, a distance of approximately 50 miles. On the way the women agreed to dive for crayfish at Giants Rock, while the men ascended a nearby tier of hills to look for any sign of the presence of people. From the top of the tier Robinson and his male guides

glimpsed “fresh made” smoke that appeared to be rising beyond a distant peaked hill. After hurrying the women with their fishing they all headed in a westerly direction across rugged country towards the peaked hill and, after reaching its apex where Robinson took his bearings, they descended onto the plain below just as night was setting in. It was raining heavily and Robinson was persuaded by his guides that the clanspeople they sought would have already made shelter for the night. On this advice Robinson also made camp. On the morning of 1 November it was still raining when Robinson’s party set off in search of the clanspeople responsible for firing the land the day before. After only about two miles they came across freshly barked trees and a little further an empty bark hut guarded by a pack of “very large and fierce” dogs. It took some time before its former occupants, who had concealed themselves in nearby bush, would respond to the calls of one of Robinson’s female guides and be convinced to present themselves to Robinson (Plomley, 1966, pp. 258-263). The rest, as they say, is history.

Unbeknown to all present, this meeting would come to represent a demarcation point in the history of the northeast people – between their steadfast commitment to remaining in country and their acknowledgment that their ultimate survival was impossible without substantial concessions (Reynolds quoted in Thomas, 1992). The group of clanspeople met by Robinson on 1 November 1830, did not know what they were soon to endure, nor that they were to become the first of the Trouwunnans to leave their traditional homelands, under verbal agreement that it was for their own safety and only for a short time. Tragically, what they would face instead was death and/or permanent exile.

■ *Carne Nemerranner* – Telling history on the ground

The *Meeting at Bark Hut* research team picked up the journeyline of Robinson and his Trouwunnan guides on 29 October 2007. On the same day, 177 years later than our historic counterparts, we left Policeman’s Point at the mouth of Anson’s Bay and set off retracing their footsteps. The imperative of telling history on the ground is at the heart of *Carne Nemerranner*. Absolutely central to the rationale and design of *Meeting at Bark Hut* was the necessity of “being there”. Following the journeyline in “real” space and time was crucial to the project. In practical terms, this process approach and strategy was conceived simultaneously as a narrative strategy and a research tool. Even after a forensic examination of primary source materials there was still a range of questions about this leg of the “Friendly Mission” left unanswered.

Although Robinson provided descriptive details of significant landscape features in his journals, Plomley indicates his own lack of confidence in the accuracy of his translation of this journeyline onto a route map.

Robinson observed that many of the landmarks he encountered were not marked on the map he carried of 1830 (Plomley, 1966, pp. 258-59). Plomley stated in his endnotes that in regard to the maps that he included in the publication *Friendly Mission* for regions where accurately contoured maps are available the plotting of Robinson's routes are probably fairly accurate, but in other parts, and this (Route Map 14) he acknowledged is one, there is significant doubt. Plomley is explicit in recommending that they be re-worked (Plomley, 1966, map 14, p. 307, 438, note 38). Prior to the *Meeting at Bark Hut* expedition, this had not been done.

It was clear from the outset that an on the ground survey of country was critical to re-mapping the 1830 journey. It was also crucial that if temporal/spatial clues and cues were to be available to us and guide our journeyline that the 2007 journey needed to take place in the same season, ideally on the very same days that Robinson's 1830 journey had. Producing a more accurate and detailed record of that foray was certainly an important aim of the project. However, no less important were the cultural insights gained and the cultures experiences that were shared – both equally poignant aspects of the fieldwork itself.

Robinson's written observations in the northeast country provide us with information about important cultural practices, some traces of which are still present in the landscape, and others that we can only imagine. The burning off of country sculptured the environment for hunting and renewal of habitats for plants, animals and people, and the clansmen continued this significant traditional practice even when doing so revealed their location and put them in great danger. Across many regions of Tasmania there remains vegetation such as buttongrass marshlands that testify to thousands of years of mosaic firing traditions and survive into the present day as living artefacts. Women were the divers and collectors of rich harvests from the land and sea, and men were the hunters of large game. Archaeological and site surveys have revealed coastal and hinterland living places which contain the material remains of meals and stone tool assemblages that relate to men and women. Trees were barked for building huts taking care to ensure their continued growth as living trees. These huts were constructed in dry woodland areas close to perennial water supplies. In some instances where vegetation has survived several hundred years it is possible to identify trees that may have been barked for making huts and watercraft. Robinson told of the clanspeople fondness for dogs, cared for in great numbers by them, and his record of artefacts inside the hut on Anson's Plain reveals the continued use of red ochre and traditional hunting weapons, stone tools and food (Plomley, 1966, pp. 260-61). In 2007 the cultural experiences of the Aboriginal participants were also an integral part of the journey and are worth recounting here as reflections.

We celebrated our cultural traditions at every opportunity and being at one with family and sharing our activities with like-minded colleagues and friends was often very powerful and emotionally charged. We ate seafood, yarned around the campfires, listened to Uncle Ronnie play guitar and sing songs about our ancestors, recovered important places and restored their proper names. We called the ancestors and cleansed the land with smoking ceremonies, ochred our bodies, clapped together singing stones, gave floral tributes to each other and the ancestors, danced and sang beside two mighty peppermint trees that were possibly 300 to 500 years old, and used smoke flares to symbolise the events of 1830. The mutual respect shown by all, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who participated in our research project field study, was exceptional, and deep emotional connections to country were shared and celebrated.

Walking country was of particular significance. All of our senses were alerted to our surroundings. This was the same time of year – mid spring – when the 1830 expedition walked the same path. We ate the seasonal fruits of the land. The leaves crackled underfoot and the new shoots of the yakkas were a brilliant green contrasted against the burnt tree trunks. We saw the living artefact of the button grass marshes and the hues of the flowering heathland shrubs in landscapes shaped by our ancestors. These significant interconnections between country and culture are most fully appreciated when all the senses – sight, sound, smell and touch – are engaged, and cannot be replicated in understandings derived from textual research.

It was during the penultimate days walk, on the ascent of the peaked hill from which Robinson finally located his quarry, that the following incident, now etched in our memories, took place, and is now worth recounting here. As we approached the peak the sense of the presence of the spirits of the ancestors grew strong. The lofty granite boulders stood like sentinels watching our approach. The singing stones, struck together by elders, echoed through the trees and raised the hair on the back of our necks. As we ascended the ridge, we glimpsed through the trees a large white ship in full sail just off the distant coastline. For the moment we thought we had walked through a vortex and time had stood still. Could this be the supply ship that Robinson's had been waiting in vain for – 177 years late? In the distance the kookaburras announced our arrival and in that moment, at that place, we had suddenly and inexplicably walked across the span between past and present.



The challenges and advantages of telling history on the ground

It is easy to dramatise and become emotive about such an experience. Where Tasmanian historical research is concerned, Aboriginal participants are often accused

of doing precisely that. The research conducted for *Meeting at Bark Hut* has also had its critics, and for this reason, if for no other, it was important for us to be clear of our intent. By retracing the footsteps of Robinson and his Trouwunnan guides we set out not to dramatise a past that is already known, but to learn something new about the past through the activity of re-enactment itself. By “being there” we sought to maximise our engagement and understanding of the historical journey and its fellow narrative. In this, the project was a great success. Having said that, however, it would be naïve, if not intellectually negligent, not to recognise and consider potential limitations of the approach we chose.

On this score, there are at least two significant problem areas for investigative “re-enactment” of this kind (Cook, 2005). The first is a problem of analogy. It is fairly obvious that it would be folly to expect any direct equivalence between the experience of modern re-enactors and that of the original historical actors whose situations are being nominally reproduced. Though most historians today are quick to acknowledge the inevitable distance of perspective between themselves and their subjects as well as the cultural specificity of human experience, there is no foolproof method for reconstructing the otherness of a historical moment. The tendency to project the values, commitments and political imperatives of the present onto the past remains a constant risk.

The second issue affecting re-enactment history lies in its potential to privilege an emotional engagement with the past at the expense of a more analytic approach. Re-enactment exercises invariably ask participants to try to imagine sympathetically the lifeworld of those in the original historical situation – to understand what it “really felt like” for people in the past. There is a legitimate question whether the drive to facilitate “authentic experiential insight” might not authorise re-enactors to serve as interpreters of the past on the basis of their experience (either individual or shared), rather than on the basis of a methodical investigation. Too strong a focus on understanding history from the inside may well hinder development of the critical distance that can be one of the greatest assets of historical analysis.

It is necessary, therefore to build in a number of “reality checks”. If the research methodology we call *Carne Neemerranner* is to be employed successfully, it is vital that one accepts that historical re-enactments are about a modern set of activities that place modern individuals in dialogue with a historical imaginary. The disjunction between the outlook of modern re-enactors and the recorded or imagined perspective of their historical predecessors must be recognised and integrated as an essential component. Our experience in conducting *Meeting at Bark Hut* is that, given these checks and measures,

embodied, relational, place-based research can help improve our understanding of a world and the behaviour of people that transcends our own. At the same time, it can also reveal the immanence of past events and places, and the abiding relationship they have with present interests at both a social and an individual level.

■ Conclusion

By telling history on the ground we solved some historical conundrums, amended the historical record and recovered the story of one significant event on the Tasmanian colonial frontier. While the journey conducted for *Meeting at Bark Hut* inherited much from its colonial counterpart, so too was history transformed by its contemporary reproduction, allowing a distinctly Aboriginal placescape to come into view and a distinctly Aboriginal narrative to come into being. By following in the footsteps of George Augustus Robinson and his Trouwunnan guides to their meeting place with Mannalargenna and his party of clanspeople we allowed places to give up their stories in a culturally relevant and culturally appropriate fashion. In achieving this, history, knowledge and culture are all enriched.

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Dr Linn Miller is a Lecturer in the School of Philosophy and Research Fellow of the Community Engaged Aboriginal Research Initiative at University of Tasmania, Launceston campus. Her key research interests include theories of belonging, the interconnected ontologies of place and person, Aboriginal metaphysics and the thought of nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. She is currently working alongside Patsy Cameron on a suite of Aboriginal research projects under the theme *Telling Places in Country*.