

The Other Side

Greg Lehman

Without memory, without the past, there are no stories and no novels, no theatre, no poetry. Memory is the source of all our arts. Without memory, without the past, we have no interior life.¹

The crossing between ‘the Mainland’ and Tasmania is a stretch of water named Bass’s Strait. And ‘the Mainland’ is what Tasmanians call the rest of Australia. There, in two short sentences, are the nuts and bolts of what people call these days ‘the islandness’ of my home. We exist, according to this definition, in a sort of subservience to another place. The Mainland is big; unimaginably big. So big that members of your family will go there and never return. Or if they do, they would be different. On return they would be somehow taller, or richer. They would be equipped with a habit of speaking more quickly and with a confidence that made no sense of who they were before they left.

The Mainland is where things happened, and where things were made. Cars were made there. Ships. Cutlery. Suits. It was a place where we sent raw materials snatched from the sea, dragged from the ground and cut from the forest. There, they would be made into things. Unlike the resources that we sent away, which belonged to us and which were part of who we were; the things that were made elsewhere came back as something Other. The refineries and factories had shaped them into fine objects with lustre, form and colour. But in the process, they had washed, combed, bleached and smelted us out. The Tasmanian-ness was gone. They had become not-of-us.

Where I grew up, in Ulverstone on the north west coast of Tasmania, we had another name for the mainland. Actually it was a bit more complicated than that. The name required a person and an action. Without these two components, the phrase would not be uttered. It was a way of explaining absence. ‘Away over the other side’ is where your cousins lived now. It was where your older sister was going next week to get a job. It was why your uncle was now uncommonly sad – because that’s where he was when your aunty died. These were the consequences of travelling to the other side of that stretch of water.

It was on the coastline of Bass’s Strait that I grew up. My most cherished years were spent exploring the rock pools for anemones the colour of clotted blood, transparent shrimps that darted faster than your eye could follow, and blue ringed octopus that flashed silent fear as your fingers brushed by their weedy lair. Standing atop a rocky point and gazing northwards across the water, the edge of our world was geometrically pure. There were no distant mountains to break the impossible curving line of horizon, just the odd ship returning from its voyage away.

Anything that came from beyond that line brought with it stories of change. Change, you see, comes from somewhere else. At home, we lived in the embrace of a reassuring *present*. Out beyond the horizon is where the past could be found if you travelled far enough. And it was from that place of unbounded vastness that our futures would arrive. In the Tasmania of my childhood, there was no past or future. The past was not spoken of. A clumsy or naïve question would be met with furtive glances and a quick shifting from whatever was being discussed; onto a more mundane and comfortable subject. The past, I was soon to learn, was populated by Germans, convicts and Aborigines. None of these things could be discussed. No-one knew how or, it seemed, even wanted to know. At night I would dream of a more distant past, in which gigantic waves pounded the shore; breaching the dunes to flood the land and carry away all that was known. The future was much simpler. There was no point in raising it. The response was predictable; a shrug of the shoulders and an inevitable “well, I dunno... ”

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To be a Tasmanian Aborigine today is a complicated affair. Yet, after all these years, as I approach old age, I still find myself standing on that rocky shoreline of my childhood, gazing out at the unknowable horizon; half-remembered dreams swirling in the anxious pit

of my stomach. It was from over that horizon that the convict ship *Caledonia* brought my convict mother's great grandfather, Richard Chugg in 1820. There was no pick-pocketed handkerchief, poached pheasant or stolen sheep behind his transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Chugg, a native of Devon, was sentenced to life for murder. My father's grandfather also arrived from afar. Via Liverpool, from the Rhineland vineyards of Lehrensteinsfeld in Bavaria, Jacob Lehman fled with his young wife, Catharina Geiger, on the immigrant ship *Montmorency*. They were economic refugees from a failed German revolution.

Another of my ancestors once stood on a shore like this, watching a whale boat heave to past the breakers on a beach where his own children had been born, along with babies for a thousand generations before. This was a beach further to the east of where I grew up. From atop the dunes of Tebrekunna Bay, the horizon was different. Instead of the blank line of horizon, a short climb to the top of the sand dunes made it possible to see the Furneaux Islands that lay to the north between Tasmanian and the Mainland. It was the abundance of seals on these islands that first attracted European seafarers to Bass's Strait in the late 1790s. Seals and woman. Like all colonial frontiers, there was always labour to be carried out that was more suited to the work of slaves. In Van Diemen's Land the first slaves were Aboriginal women, and the rugged bunch of sealers landing in Tebrekunna were there to trade – with the persuasive currency of force if needed. Before the establishment of the first official British beachhead of the colony at Risdon Cove, it was sealers who first brought the violence of European trade to this island. It is not known how many were killed in resisting these raids, but the numbers were significant. George Augustus Robinson wrote in his journal in 1832, 'there is not a boat harbour along the whole line of the coast, but what number as of the unfortunate native have been shot: the bones are to be seen strewed on the ground.'²

In one of these whale boats was George Briggs. Barely twenty years of age, Briggs had somehow taken the young woman Woretemoeteryener as one of his *tyrelors*, or 'island wives'. Either by 'blackbirding' (kidnapping of local Indigenous people for labour or sale), or through a more amicable arrangement of allegiance with her father, Briggs and his like removed at least seventy Tasmanian Aboriginal women to the Furneaux islands. On the many Outer Islands their expertise in the hunting of seals could be exploited.

The man standing on the shore watching the whale boat heave to was Manalargena. His daughter's name was Woretemoeteryener. He and his brother were chiefs, or *Bungana*, of this region. Amidst the murderous raids, *Bungana* like Manalargena had

commenced trade with the new arrivals. Dogs, tobacco, flour and sugar were valued by the chiefs, and were accepted in exchange for seal, kangaroo and swan meat, or the loan of women for seal-catching. But the terms of trade were hardly free. The sealers were armed and, while party's like Briggs' seemed to have a preference for peaceful transactions, the chiefs were aware of the effect of their muskets – and actively sought them for their own purposes. In the meantime, many sealers converted women in their service to chattels, trading them with other sealers. The original labour agreements, with their promise of a return for the women's clansfolk, became broken and redundant. The *tyrelors* were marooned on a remote frontier of global trade. A few married their captors, but many were tortured or killed. Most bore children to their masters; too often resorting to infanticide, rather than extending their future into a world so cruel and outside of their control.

It was on this horizon of fractured hope that a new generation of Aborigines was born. In just a few decades the *Bungana* and *Tyrelors* were gone. The seals, whose fur was traded in China for tea, porcelain, or shipped to Europe for use as material for coats, hats and boots were almost wiped out too. Global trade made short work of all it encountered. Generations of children like me were left, like flotsam, on distant shores that were soon forgotten in the cities of Asia and Europe that grew rich on the plunder of our world. Not just lives and culture, but time itself was ruptured with a trauma that has lasted for generations – haunting our dreams and lurking just beyond every blue horizon.

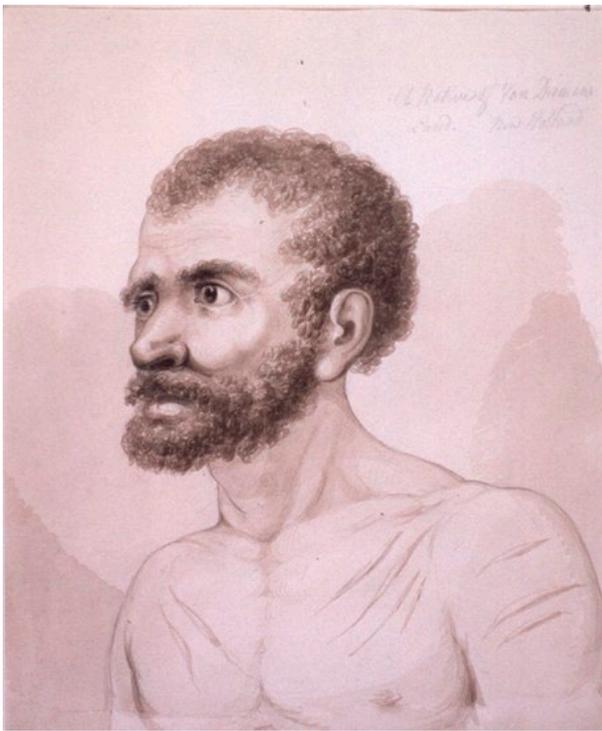
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*Violence is man re-creating himself.*³

When William Dampier became the first Englishman to arrive on the Australian continent, he wrote that the natives stood around 'like statues' and 'grinn'd like so many monkeys' at his unsuccessful attempt to gain their labour in carrying barrels of water to his boats. Dampier greeted this affable gesture of ridicule by writing in his *New Voyage Around the World* (1697) that, 'the Inhabitants of this Country are the miserabest People in the World... setting aside their Humane Shape, they differ but little from Brutes.' This condemnation was widely read, influencing the prejudices of almost every European navigator to visit Australia over the next two centuries. Amongst them was Marion Du Fresne who, on arrival in Van Diemen's Land in 1772, was invited by the Pydairrermes who met them on the shore, to accept a flaming torch and set fire to a pile of wood assembled for the occasion. As soon as he did, he was attacked. The Pydairrermes then refused to allow him to land again. Determined to take on water and timber, he fired on them. Tasmanian Aborigines had been isolated from the rest of the world for ten thousand years since

the rising seas at the end of the last Ice Age. Now, their island refuge had been breached.

Five years later, James Cook arrived on the same shores. He presented the Neunone men he met at Adventure Bay with medals and pigs, and was assisted by them to cut timber for his ships. The ship's artist, John Webber, recorded the scene and made the first known portrait of one of these men. There is nothing miserable or brutish to be seen in his sketch.



John Webber, *A native of Van Diemen's Land, New Holland, 1777*, drawing, Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania.

Captain Nicholas Baudin, arriving in 1802, had also read Dampier's description. But on the first morning of the French expedition's arrival, his zoologist stumbled upon examples of Tasmanian maritime technology. Francois Péron described a canoe made of three rolls of bark, tied together with string. Without realising, he had probably already met a canoe-maker a few hours before. He wrote in his journal,

'He was a young man of from twenty-two to twenty-four years of age, of a strong general appearance, having no other defect than the looseness of the joints of his arms and legs, characteristic of his nation, and of which we shall take occasion to speak in the conclusion of our work. His physiognomy had nothing fierce or austere, his eyes were lively and expressive, and his manner displayed at once both pleasure and surprize.

Moreover, our chaloupe (ships boat) seemed to attract his attention still more than our persons, and after examining us some minutes, he jumped into the

*boat: there, without troubling himself with, or even noticing the seamen who were in her, he seemed quite absorbed in his new subject. The thickness of the ribs and planks, the strength of the construction, the rudder, the oars, the masts, the sails, he observed in silence, and with great attention, and with the most unequivocal signs of interest and reflection ...he made several attempts to push off the chaloupe, but the small hawser which fastened it, made his efforts of no avail, he was therefore obliged to give up the attempt and to return to us, after giving us the most striking demonstrations of attention and reflection.'*⁴

This was a moment of great potential. The fascination with the small French boat that was displayed by the young man could have marked the beginning of a creative exchange across the gulf of millennia. Elsewhere across the globe, wherever seafaring nations came into contact, diverse technological approaches to the task of traversing waterways would inspire and influence adaptation and change. But in Tasmania the moment was lost.

I can't help but wonder what that young man might have absorbed of what he saw of French boat-building; how he might have experimented with these new ideas on his next construction – even collaborated with the French sailors on the task. The Baudin voyage was one focussed on scientific discovery, and the French made no immediate plans to return or to establish a more permanent presence. The British however, upon hearing of the French visit, hastened to send a colonial expedition and had set up a military beachhead at Risdon Cove by September of the following year. Within months, they had opened fire on an Aboriginal hunting party of men, women and children. The scene was set for an escalating conflict that, within a generation, had resulted in the First Nations of Tasmania being reduced from a population of over 5000 to fewer than 500.

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As I stand on that same Bass Strait shore today, half a century distant from the child who pondered with excitement and fear what the world might be like 'over the other side', I still feel the same familiar ache in the pit of my stomach. But I know now that it is much more than a naïve fear of the unknown. It is the imprint of a deeper past. A feint, irrepressible murmur of warning, driven deep into my genes through multiple traumas of ancestral lives. Each one has something in common. The source of fracture lay beyond the horizon. It was brought to my ancestral island home across seas from more distant shores. The ships arriving at our ports today, laden with cars, televisions, and other exotic treasures, distract from the pain of our history, but they do not heal. Our Elders warn us that such material wealth can do no good – only draw us further away from our connections to our country and our past. My

lingering dreams of hungry, rising waves affirm their wisdom.

I have questions that my *tyrelore*, convict and immigrant ancestors cannot answer. My child-self still stares anxiously out to sea from amongst the rock pools of my birthplace. I must, instead, speak with a young man who, like me is neither fierce nor austere. I will gaze into his lively eyes and inquire of his surprize. I will ask him what he sees in thickness of the ribs and planks, the strength of the mast, the spread of the sails. I will ask him what he will make, and where he will go.

¹ Alex Miller, 'Truth in Fiction and History', (Melbourne: Victorian Writer's Centre, 2006).

² Brian Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission : The Tasmanian Journals and Papers, 1829-1834* (Launceston: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966). p. 111.

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1965).

⁴ François Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809). p. 174.

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Background image: Lisa Garland *Mr Irby's Boat* (detail), 2017.

