Eastern Tasmania was the scene of horrific violence between 1824 and 1831. The Black War, as it became known, claimed the lives of well over 200 colonists, and all but annihilated the island’s remaining Aborigines (see Figure 3, page 2). It was a small guerrilla war, but one of titanic proportions for the colonists and Aborigines involved. They were settlers gambling everything in the hope of making their fortune; women and children accompanying their husbands and fathers to the other side of the globe; lonely, underpaid soldiers trying to make the most of a year or two’s hiatus from their sweltering equatorial posts; convicts hoping to serve out their sentences as painlessly as possible; and people who had inhabited the country since time immemorial, now struggling to negotiate the strangers in their midst. Some of these people were victimisers, but all of them were victims. This book explores their attitudes and experiences during one of the darkest periods in Australia’s history.

The Black War in context

The Black War deserves to be considered a conflict of significance. Nowhere else in Australia did so much frontier violence occur in such
a small area over such a short period. And this violence was by no means one-sided. Henry Reynolds and Richard Broome are the only historians to make serious Australia-wide casualty estimates for frontier conflict. Extrapolating from regional counts, both suggested a ratio of ten Aborigines killed for every European, though Broome stressed that this was just an average. Ratios, he argued, could be as high as 40 to one in regions such as Gippsland, Victoria, and as low as four to one in Tasmania.  

In fact, between 1824 and 1831, 219 colonists and 260 Aborigines were reported killed in eastern Tasmania, which implies a ratio of just over one to one (see Figure 3, below). In earlier research I argued that the Aboriginal death toll was probably closer to 600, but this
still implies a ratio of less than three to one.³ In other words, the Black War was also the most evenly matched frontier conflict in Australia’s history, and the Tasmanians the most effective Aboriginal combatants.

The Tasmanians’ effectiveness as guerrilla fighters places them in a similar league to the Māori, despite the latter’s fearsome warrior culture, fortifications and guns.⁴ During the largest of the New Zealand wars, Te Kooti’s War (1868–72), 212 British colonists and Kūpapa (loyalist Māori) were reported killed, compared to 399 anti-government Māori.⁵ These casualties are comparable to those suffered in Tasmania. What is more, Te Kooti began his campaign with almost 1000 followers, of whom about 250 were warriors, which is very similar to the initial aggregate strength of the eastern Tasmanians.⁶ Such parallels are all the more striking in light of the Māori’s relatively sophisticated military technology and organisation.

Historian Mark Finnane has shown that the Black War was an extraordinarily violent conflict, even when using the most conservative casualty figures.⁷ In contrast to the World Wars the Black War appears tiny, but this simple comparison is misleading. When it comes to experience, per capita death rates are far more important than absolute death rates. To use the measure most favoured by social scientists, the recorded European death rate in the Black War equated to 15 killed per 10,000 colonists per year, averaged over the eight years of the conflict.⁸ This was half the death rate of Australians in World War I – 30 per 10,000 per year, averaged over four years – but much higher than World War II, which on average cost the lives of six out of every 10,000 Australians in each of its six years.⁹

If the European death rate in the Black War was high, the Aboriginal death rate was astronomical. In earlier research I estimated that the eastern Aboriginal population was around 1000 at the war’s outset, and that colonists killed about 600.¹⁰ By accepting these figures we arrive at a staggering annual death rate of 1364 per 10,000 per year, again averaged over the eight years of the conflict. Even if we only acknowledge the 260
recorded killings, the reduced Aboriginal death rate of 591 per 10,000 is still extremely high. In fact, it is 11 times higher than average death rates for wars between non-state societies around the world, and 60 times higher than those between state societies.\textsuperscript{11} Per capita, then, the Black War was one of the more destructive wars in recorded history.

Since the late 1940s, the tragic fate of the Tasmanians has been the subject of an international debate that has called into question the character of the British Empire and ultimately the Australian nation. It has also become emblematic of racism and greed at its most destructive. In fact, many historians and social commentators have levelled the gravest of all charges against the British in Tasmania. In \textit{The Fatal Shore}, perhaps the most popular history of early Australia, Robert Hughes called it ‘the only true genocide in English colonial history’.\textsuperscript{12} Accurate or not, this oft repeated and rarely questioned claim has brought Tasmania considerable, if undesirable attention from scholars around the world. In Chapter 3 I bring to bear on this question my findings about colonists’ attitudes and experiences, and consider whether that concept of genocide would have been recognisable to its supposed perpetrators.

The history of the history of the Black War

In 1835, Henry Melville published \textit{The History of Van Diemen’s Land}, the first in a series of worthy nineteenth-century books to examine the Black War. The most renowned and perceptive of these was John West’s 1852 masterpiece, \textit{The History of Tasmania}. West’s seminal book was followed by others, such as James Bonwick’s \textit{The Last of the Tasmanians} in 1870, and James Calder’s \textit{Some Accounts of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania} in 1875. These authors were sympathetic towards the Aborigines, sometimes to the point of compromising their reliability, but their writings, along with the tales of old frontiersmen, kept the memory of the war alive well into the late nineteenth century.
During the first half of the twentieth century, however, the Black War received almost no scholarly or literary attention. This ‘silence’, as WEH Stanner called it, was broken in Tasmania in 1948 by Clive Turnbull’s anthology of government correspondence *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*. Writing in the wake of the Holocaust, amid all the indignation that ghastly episode had inspired, Turnbull was extremely critical of the British government. His book went through several editions, but it was not until the publication of Lyndall Ryan’s *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* in 1981 that the war began to attract substantial pockets of attention. Since then, there has been a proliferation of books, theses and articles by scholars such as Lloyd Robson, Brian Plomley, Cassandra Pybus, Henry Reynolds, Ian McFarlane, James Boyce and, most recently, Graeme Calder. The literature on the Black War has almost always been sympathetic to the Aborigines and disparaging of the colonists – at least, that was, until 2002 when Keith Windschuttle published *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen’s Land 1803–1847*.

Windschuttle claimed that historians, because of their anti-western and postmodern ideologies, had embellished and even fabricated their evidence to portray Europeans in the worst possible light. This claim possessed a hint of truth. Windschuttle identified a number of errors in past scholarship. However, if exaggerations had crept into the profession, none were so egregious as his own charge of an academic conspiracy to deceive the public about Tasmania’s past. The conspirators – the ‘orthodox school’ as he termed them – certainly agreed the Aborigines had been invaded and often maltreated by the British. Beyond this though, all they had in common was a desire to empathise with the island’s vanquished peoples.

Windschuttle was right to point out that, taken too far, this impulse can (and sometimes did) encumber the historian’s objectivity. Yet it is equally true that historians who eschew such emotion will neglect two of the most important considerations for reimagining and reconstructing
the past: what was it like for people at the time, and what does it mean for us today. Objectivity and empathy are both indispensable to the historian’s craft, and need not be incompatible.

While scolding the historical profession, Windschuttle put forward his own version of events, in which he attempted to exculpate the colonists, while painting the Tasmanians as thuggish ‘criminals’ who essentially brought about their own demise. Their mere existence ‘owed more to good fortune than good management’, in Windschuttle’s eyes. Possibly his boldest claim was that ‘[t]here was no frontier warfare in Van Diemen’s Land’. In hindsight, given the weight of evidence and scholarly consensus against him, it can seem remarkable that Windschuttle was taken so seriously, yet the response to his book in the media and in universities was electric. Even prime minister John Howard weighed in to support Windschuttle’s ‘patriotic’ interpretation of history. It seemed the nation’s historical consciousness had awoken from a long slumber.

The furore ignited by Windschuttle raised larger questions regarding Australia’s treatment of Aboriginal and immigrant groups. It seemed everyone wanted to stake a claim to their own preferred version of history. Dubbed ‘the history wars’, these fiery exchanges continue to reverberate. In one sense, the discipline has profited from the greater commitment to empirical rigour and accountability that Windschuttle inspired in his bid to discredit previous scholarship. But the history wars have also had the pernicious effect of further polarising the debate. In the media this has been caricatured as a stand-off between ‘black armbands’ or ‘bleeding hearts’ on the one side, and ‘white blindfolds’ or ‘racists’ on the other.

Sadly, the main victims of this ‘war’ are nuance and balance in historical writing and public discourse, at a time when they are needed more than ever. This book attempts to circumvent the ideological stalemate by systematically juxtaposing Aboriginal and colonial perspectives. Alternating white and black perspectives underscore how vastly different these were, though they also reveal some surprising parallels.
A separate but related shortcoming of Black War literature has been its unswerving tendency to examine the conflict from above, with narratives arranged along the well-worn chronology of government responses. There is merit in this framework, but its dominance has been at the expense of other perspectives, namely those of the people involved. Historians, in their preoccupation with questions about the ethics and legality of government policy, have paid little attention to these people, how they perceived their enemies, what it was like for them to live through the war, or how they fought it. Answering these questions from both a European and an Aboriginal perspective is my overarching purpose in writing this book.

Making the dead speak

Examining contact history from Aboriginal perspectives is not without precedent. In 1981, Henry Reynolds published *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, for which he collected fragments of archival and oral evidence from across the country to piece together an overview of Aborigines’ experiences. In most areas, a lack of evidence has prevented historians undertaking more focused studies, but in Tasmania, there is a relative wealth of observer reports describing the speech and behaviour of Aborigines.

The most important of these observers was George Augustus Robinson (see Figure 6), who abandoned his family and a successful building business in 1829 in order to fully devote himself to ‘the remnant of this much injured race’. Armed with unflinching conviction and determination, he led a party of Aboriginal envoys on an intrepid series of ‘friendly missions’ between 1830 and 1834 in the hope of conciliating the remaining tribes (see Chapter 6). Robinson’s religious zeal was matched only by his moralistic arrogance, yet part of his motivation was an undeniably genuine humanitarian instinct. No European had
more impact on the fate of the last Tasmanian tribes, and no one bears more responsibility for the ways they are remembered. His voluminous Tasmanian journals and papers, edited by NJB Plomley in *Friendly Mission* (1966) and *Weep in Silence* (1987), probably constitute the richest single collection of ethnographic material from the colonial period anywhere in Australia. Replete with descriptions of Aboriginal testimony, actions and emotions, Robinson’s writings, together with other archival snippets, make it possible to reconstruct a substantial, if incomplete picture of Aboriginal attitudes and experiences.

Historians of the Black War have tended to ignore the colonists’ experiences as well. One reason for this is the dearth of surviving first-hand accounts. About 80 per cent of victims were male convicts or ex-convicts. Some of these men were literate, but if they wrote anything about the war, scarcely a word of it has survived. Luckily, there exists a vast trove of letters, diaries, newspapers, police records and reminiscences describing their actions and utterances. By probing these sources it is possible to bring to life the forgotten worlds of the convicts, settlers and soldiers, and rediscover their experiences of the war.

**Chapter summary**

I begin this book by placing the Black War in its ideological, cultural and historical contexts. This is the task of Chapter 1, which looks at who the colonists and Aborigines were, and how they thought, before surveying the nature of frontier relations in the years leading up to the conflict. The exploration of the war commences in Chapter 2 by examining the attitudes of participants. Here we see that colonial violence was initially motivated by the desire for sex and the thrill of killing, but later by revenge and self-preservation. Aborigines were provoked by insult and encroachment, but they were also motivated by the desire and later the need for food and blankets. In Chapter 3, we investigate the nature of the violence and the
tactics employed. Among other things, this chapter reveals that the Black War exhibited an extraordinary solar rhythm, whereby colonists mostly attacked by night, and Aborigines always attacked by day.

Chapter 4 canvases the experiences of Aborigines and colonists, paying special attention to their wartime emotions. The case is made that, on both sides of the frontier, people’s lives were profoundly affected by the relentless threat of violence. Fear dominated the colonists’ experience; while for the Aborigines, emotions such as anger, despair and sadness were equally salient. Chapter 5 examines the ill-fated ‘Black Line’, the largest domestic military offensive in Australia’s history. This ‘Grand Operation’ was not only a failure, it was also a horrendous experience for those involved, and a demoralising blow to the colony. What is more, the event had less significance for the Aborigines than previously thought, and probably contributed little to their decisions to surrender. Chapter 6 focuses on the year 1831 and the ways both sides experienced the end of the war. The frontier community was shocked when the surrender of just a few dozen Aborigines brought the war to a close. Their jubilation was in stark contrast to the sombre anguish of the surviving Tasmanians – the last of their people, now all but expunged.

Tasmania’s eastern interior was the primary frontier on which the Black War was fought, but there were two other theatres of conflict that demand attention. The stories of the north-west and sea frontiers, although they are not the central focus of this book, are indispensable to its story. For this reason, I have included a concise but probing examination of each in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively.

The north-west frontier shared many characteristics with the conflict in the east, but it also exhibited a number of significant peculiarities that helped to foster an especially grisly brand of violence. Aborigines in this isolated region continued their attacks for more than a decade after the eastern tribes had surrendered, though they ultimately suffered the same fate.
On the sea frontier the sealers of Bass Strait established a system of slavery both by trading with and raiding the coastal tribes of northern and eastern Tasmania. Scores of Aboriginal women and girls were enslaved, and in most cases treated appallingly. Some tribes were literally stripped of all females. The sea frontier is a story of deprivation and predation, cruelty and resistance; yet in an ironic twist, it was also the principal birthplace of Tasmania's mixed descent Aboriginal community.

As this book leads the reader back and forth across the frontier, the line between hero and villain should fade. At its core, The Black War is a story about two peoples who just wanted to be free of each other, but were powerless to escape the contingencies of history. The world was shrinking rapidly in the early nineteenth century, and sooner or later Europeans and Aborigines were bound to clash, but it was Tasmania's unique circumstances that turned this encounter into a 'war of extermination'.
White

The peoples of Tasmania and Europe lived very similar hunter-gatherer lifestyles for at least 30,000 years. Then, around 5000 BP, the Neolithic or First Agricultural Revolution began transforming Europe, setting its various tribes on a path of unprecedented political, economic and technological development. Being ignorant of their own humble origins, Europeans assumed a sense of inherent superiority over those peoples who retained hunter-gatherer economies. This intuitive ethnocentrism was nurtured by other motives as well. From the seventeenth century, chattel slavery became one of the most profitable industries in the world, and the enslavement of millions of blacks demanded both natural and moral justification. This task fell to scientists, theologians and philosophers, and the rationalisations they devised left a lasting impression on the European psyche.

European racial thought

The late eighteenth century was the height of the Enlightenment. Europe saw a steep decline in church power, and unprecedented technological
and intellectual flourishing. This was also an era of ambitious exploration and imperialism. As the known world rapidly expanded, questions were raised at all levels of society about the nature and significance of newly discovered peoples.

Enlightenment thinkers worked tirelessly to categorise the living world into hierarchical order. The antecedent of this movement was the ‘Great Chain of Being’, an idea that went back to the ancients, and remained popular well into the nineteenth century. Atop the Chain was the Christian God, followed by Jesus, the angels, humans, animals, and finally non-sentient organisms. Among humans, white European males were superior, followed by white females, Asians, Africans and so on, all the way down to the natives of Tasmania, who were scarcely distinguishable from apes. According to this idea, hierarchical differences were natural and unalterable, so efforts to ‘raise up’ the lowly were considered futile.

Chain of Being thinking appears to have been prevalent among colonists in Tasmania. In 1827, Land Commissioner Roderic O’Connor referred to the local blacks as ‘Ourang Outang’s [sic], [a] disgrace it would be to the human race to call them Men’.¹ In 1830, Mrs Prinsep, the wife of a visiting army officer, also claimed they were ‘like the Ourang Outang’. She believed they were ‘undoubtedly in the lowest possible scale of human nature’.² Many such remarks were penned at the height of the war, but even in 1820 a visitor to Hobart observed that ‘[t]he aborigines of this island are supposed [by locals] to be the most degraded of any known in the world’.³ Only the well-read grasped the specifics of the Great Chain and other complex theories, but over time an understanding of their basic themes percolated down through society.

The Great Chain of Being had an ambivalent relationship with the ascendant evangelical Protestantism of the late eighteenth century. Evangelicals advocated monogenism, the idea that all humans descended from Adam and Eve. Their preachers insisted that, given the right conditions, people of any race might be ‘improved’. Missionaries flocked to
British colonies in the Americas, India, South Africa and the Pacific. In Australia though, the native inhabitants attracted little interest before the 1840s. Missionary resources, it was thought, were best invested in more promising races.

The thinking of frontier colonists was especially influenced by the notion of savagery. More a folk genre than a cogent philosophical concept, savagery was vague enough to sit comfortably with most scientific, philosophical and theological assumptions. It came in two varieties. The ‘noble savage’ was popularised by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1754. Rousseau proposed that social progress led, not to virtue, but ‘toward the decrepitness [sic] of the species’. Savages had not progressed far from the ‘state of nature’, according to Rousseau, thus they retained much of the ‘purity’ and ‘nobility’ associated with this original state. Rousseau’s writings exerted an enormous influence on European thought.

The desire to encounter the noble savage is particularly evident in the writings of the explorers who ‘left Europe when the dreams of Rousseau were the toys of the speculative’. By the early nineteenth century, however, the noble savage was being undermined not just by emerging intellectual trends, but also by the disillusioning experiences of explorers and settlers. In fact, the French explorer Julien Crozet reported directly to Rousseau on the ‘grotesque’ savages he encountered in Tasmania in 1772. To his unflattering description, Rousseau replied despairingly: ‘Is it possible that the children of nature can really be so wicked?’

The noble savage rapidly lost its grip on the middle-class imagination from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its antithesis, the ignoble savage, had always been popular among the less educated working class. These people imbibed their negative views about indigenous peoples from the pulpit, but also from adventure tales such as Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver’s Travels. Respected ethnographer Margaret Hodgen concluded that the majority of Europeans were ‘anti-savage, and strongly so’.
Imperialist ideology also played an important role in the tragedy that unfolded in Tasmania. The unparalleled expansion of the British Empire between 1756 and 1815 brought vast swaths of the world’s population under its rule. During the same period, the French, Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid empires either fell or waned considerably, leaving Britain as the sole imperial superpower. For these reasons, Britain’s imperial policies were increasingly shaped by ideological considerations, the most important of which was legitimacy. The physical, political and to some extent cultural usurpation of so many people demanded justification. Many indigenous peoples were exploited, oppressed and even killed in the process of colonisation, and conscientious Britons needed to rationalise this profitable, but morally ambiguous conduct.

Since Australia was populated by hunter-gatherers, the Colonial Office assumed it was a ‘desert and uncultivated’ land that could be ‘claimed by right of occupancy’. This tradition was first formalised by the English philosopher John Locke, who famously asserted that no man could ‘own’ land until he had ‘mixed his labour with; and joined to it something that is his own’. Together with the pervasive assumption that nomadic peoples had no meaningful attachment to land, this conception of ownership helps explain why colonists were so bewildered by the tenacity of native resistance.

Legalistic defences were strongly reinforced by the biblical injunction to subdue the earth and till the soil. When settlers presented their justifications for appropriating native land in the colonial newspapers, their appeals to international law were invariably laced with religious language. Even those who felt uneasy about such transparently self-serving justifications could not challenge the colonial project without flagrant hypocrisy.

Establishing a right to the land was necessary for settlers’ sense of legitimacy, but not always sufficient. It was widely believed that dispossessed peoples should be recompensed with the blessings of civilisation and Christianity. In fact, the increasingly powerful evangelical and
humanitarian movements considered it imperative to export Britain’s superior customs and religion to the ‘barbarous’ corners of the globe. Viewed through this lens, colonialism was not only a legal right, but also a moral obligation.

In reality though, there was a fundamental contradiction inherent in the very concept of ‘humane colonisation’, since colonisation entailed dispossession, which was manifestly inhumane. Humanitarian colonisers were nonetheless convinced that, once Britain’s ‘superior’ laws, customs and beliefs had been imposed, native peoples would thank them.

Of course it was only the conscientious colonisers who felt the need for these justifications. Most of Tasmania’s first colonisers were unencumbered by such scruples. Convicts and soldiers were not there by choice, and needed no contrived excuses to soothe their consciences. To them, the blacks, like the landscape and the authorities, were simply dangers to be negotiated. Most felt bereft of rights, and they had no intention of extending any to ‘savages’.

Who were the colonists?16

There was considerable diversity among Tasmania’s early colonists, but those engaged in the Black War can be divided into four main groups: emigrant settlers, soldiers, convicts and ex-convicts. Before examining the roles these people played in the conflict, we must first establish who they were and the circumstances in which they lived.

Emigrant settlers began sailing to the colony in droves after 1817, hungry to exploit the offer of free land and a new start. Most were young, middle-class families, though some men came alone. When Governor George Arthur took office in 1824, he was instructed to provide these wealthier settlers with sizeable grants and a corresponding number of convict servants, which allowed a group of about 200 large landowners to monopolise the island’s agricultural economy within just a few years.
Free emigrants were not the only settlers on the Tasmanian frontier. In the first two decades of settlement, convicts could be granted a small parcel of land on completing their sentence. These men became settlers in their own right, and some did well. By the time the war began, however, many were working for the wealthier emigrant settlers, having found it impossible to compete. Those ex-convicts who persisted as small landholders often had no convict servants; others had just one or two. Consequently, these men were almost as likely to encounter natives as those under sentence.

This is in stark contrast to emigrant settlers, who often had dozens of servants and relied on overseers to manage their estates. They spent comparatively little time in exposed situations, often running their operations from Launceston or Hobart. Their servants, on the other hand, were regularly exposed to attacks, and it was these convicts and ex-convicts who comprised the bulk of those killing and being killed by blacks.

The vast majority of convicts were men, transported on sentences of seven years, 14 years, or life (see Figure 4, page 18). Most were assigned to free settlers, for whom they laboured in exchange for their upkeep. About ten per cent earned tickets-of-leave, entitling them to limited probationary freedoms, while approximately four per cent gained conditional pardons, restricting them only from returning home. None were convicted murderers, and few were professional criminals. In fact, most were just young working-class men who had fallen on hard times.

Convicts’ lives were tough, both before and after conviction, but while we may pity them, we must not forget the hardening effects of squalor and violence. The archives are replete with testimony affirming the bad character of convicts, and not all of this can be dismissed as class prejudice. The experiences of convictism and frontier life were highly conducive to the callousness that will be described throughout this book. Once sentenced and torn from their families and homes, the life of a convict was characterised by harsh discipline, loneliness and deprivation.
Those sent to Tasmania were repeat offenders and, therefore, even more likely to have been affected by the cruelty of convictism. Many did not have the strength of character to resist the brutalising effects of such an existence.

The military comprised the remainder of the frontier population. In 1829, Tasmania’s garrison consisted of nearly 1000 soldiers from the 40th, 57th and 63rd regiments, about half of them distributed throughout the interior. Small detachments of between two and eight men were dispersed widely on the frontier to protect outlying settlers against blacks. This deployment was highly unorthodox, and it left many detachments without the supervision of an officer. While soldiers grumbled about the boredom and privation of their posts, settlers complained of their drunkenness and inefficiency. These men came from the same socioeconomic backgrounds as the convicts – indeed, many convicts were former soldiers – and they were subject to similarly harsh punishments. The convict system and the military both produced hardened and brutalised men; the one major difference was that soldiers were trained to kill.

Very few colonists were interested in learning about the island’s native inhabitants, and even fewer were concerned about their welfare. Settlers were concerned with economic prosperity, to the exclusion of most other considerations. Convicts and soldiers were the engines of colonisation, but they were not there by choice, and their interest in the natives rarely went beyond killing them, having sex with them or avoiding them. Theirs was a situation that gave little encouragement to humaneness, and much to inhumaneness. Thus, the colony’s demographic and socioeconomic characteristics helped incubate the war.

First contact

On 4 March 1772, French explorers under Marion du Fresne became the first Europeans to encounter the natives of Tasmania. When the
sailors rowed ashore at Marion Bay, neither they nor the tribe poised nervously on the beach could have grasped the full significance of the meeting. Culturally and technologically, there had never been a meeting between such fundamentally different people. As the esteemed biologist and historian Jared Diamond put it, ‘no two peoples on earth were less equipped to understand each other’. The historic meeting began on friendly terms, but for reasons the visitors did not understand, it ended with a sailor being speared and several natives killed or wounded.

Thirty-one years passed between du Fresne’s departure and the arrival of the first settlers. In that time, seven British and two more French expeditions visited south-eastern Tasmania, most achieving some communication with the natives. These encounters were often tense, but never openly hostile. The explorers were men of science, curious and
generally well intentioned towards the island’s inhabitants, but the colonists who came after them had different priorities altogether.

**Kangaroo economy**

The British seized Tasmania on 12 September 1803, in a flurry of paranoia about French interests in the region. The colony was split in two after its first year, with Colonel David Collins assuming command in the south, and Colonel William Paterson in the north. After its initial establishment at Risdon Cove, the southern capital was moved to Hobart in 1804, while the northern colony was administered from Launceston. From the outset the home government effectively abandoned both settlements. Britain was now fully preoccupied fighting Napoleon, so resupplying her most distant and inconsequential outposts became a low priority.

Both colonies were forced to fend for themselves during the early years of settlement (see Figure 12). Collins was heavily dependent on indigenous foods, and Paterson could procure almost nothing else. Hunting was the island’s main industry for most of the first decade. Kangaroo meat became the staple food and its fur was widely used to make clothes. As game levels were depleted, hunters were forced to venture further into the interior, facilitating the first significant encounters with the natives. Such men were exposed to considerable danger from the more numerous and powerful blacks, who attacked them on at least two dozen occasions during the first decade of settlement.²³

This early violence went both ways. Bushrangers were becoming a serious problem by 1808, and several of these well-armed bandits were notorious for their cruelty towards blacks.²⁴ They were clearly not alone, however. Four government proclamations issued between 1808 and 1813 condemned the killings, rapes and kidnappings of blacks that were apparently common at the time. Although some amicable contact did take place, a clear pattern of occasional, small-scale violence predominates in the accounts of early frontier contact.
Expanding beyond the beachheads

By 1813, the now united colony had become largely self-sufficient. Although hunting remained common, cereal crops, sheep and cattle had replaced marsupials as the staple foods. Intermittent contact with blacks continued as the settlements spread further and further along the lush river valleys radiating from Launceston and Hobart. Soon after his arrival in 1817, Governor Sorell reprimanded those ‘in the habit of maliciously and wantonly firing on and destroying, the defenceless NATIVES’, and threatened ‘to punish any ill-treatment’. Two years later he was forced to issue a similar threat, yet no punishment was ever issued. ‘The government disapproved of oppression’, as John West pointedly observed, ‘but it was either too weak, or too indolent, to visit the guilty’.

Archival records for the second decade of settlement are scarcely better than those documenting the first. Our knowledge comes from official documents, the Hobart Town Gazette, and a handful of private letters and journals. There was much hearsay regarding frontier violence between 1813 and 1823, but only about 50 specific incidents were recorded. Again, there was some friendly intercourse, but the evidence indicates that frontier relations continued to be infrequent and mostly hostile. This is unsurprising given that the majority of those making contact with natives were convicts and bushrangers.

Sex and the shortage of women

In 1822, there were six times as many men in the colony as women, and the ratio among the convict population was 16 to one. The military permitted only one soldier in eight (usually the officers) to have their wives and children accompany them on overseas duty. The few available women in the colony were mostly convicts, who could take their pick of men, and generally opted for wealthier, free suitors. For convicts and soldiers this made sexual opportunities – to say nothing of
loving relationships – depressingly scarce. Thousands of predominately young men in their sexual prime were forced onto the frontier without any ‘acceptable’ sexual outlets.

This situation produced its fair share of homosexuality and bestiality, but it also meant that native women were highly coveted. Initially, some frontiersmen were able to trade for sex, but as demand outstripped supply, and as more and more women were taken by force, the relationships necessary for such exchanges broke down. Consequently, rape and abduction became increasingly common.

The link between the gender imbalance and sexual predation did not go unnoticed. One settler writing to the *Tasmanian* went so far as to suggest that the government should release all female convicts into the interior in order to stem the prevalence of ‘nameless crime’ and ‘the aggressions of the Stock keepers upon [the natives’] Wives and Daughters’. West drew the connection more explicitly: ‘It would be impossible even to hint [at] the series of facts, which are authenticated to the writer, and which strangely blended ferocity and lust. The sealer, or stockman, who periled his life to accomplish the abduction of a native female, thought that danger but fairly avenged by the destruction of her relatives.’

‘Keeping’ native children

Colonists also coveted native children. By 1813, Governor Davey was convinced ‘the resentment of these poor uncultivated beings has been justly excited by … the robbery of their children’. Thirty-seven baptisms of native children are recorded between 1810 and 1820, and there were probably others that were not baptised. Governor Sorell echoed Davey’s condemnation in 1819, demanding all colonists who acquired their children ‘illegitimately’ to hand them over to the government, but this was never enforced.

Tasmania’s first chaplain, Robert Knopwood, was aware of the prevalence of kidnapping from the outset. In January of 1806, he recorded that
some convicts had brought a ‘little native girl’ into Hobart, but that she promptly ‘made her escape out of a window’.\textsuperscript{37} In 1814, Knopwood was gaining the trust of a local tribe until ‘[a] number of children were forcibly taken from them, and they disappeared’.\textsuperscript{38} According to the \textit{Colonial Times}, the practice of kidnapping only subsided in the early 1820s, when ‘many of the native tribes were suffering severely from some most loath-some coetaneous [skin] disease … [which] prevents many of the Settlers in the interior from taking into their service infant natives, as has been the case, for the purpose of bringing them up in a civilised manner’.\textsuperscript{39}

Colonists stole native children for several reasons. Some entertained genuine, if misguided, civilising intentions. Not far beneath the philanthropic surface, however, was the need for labour. Many native children who were taken under the pretext of being ‘civilised’ became little more than slaves.\textsuperscript{40} In some cases, there were almost certainly sexual reasons for keeping native children. Chapter 8 describes how the Bass Strait sealers regularly took native girls from mainland Tasmania to keep as sex slaves, but paedophilia also occurred elsewhere in the colony.\textsuperscript{41} In 1824, for instance, convicts raped two nine-year-old ‘half-caste’ girls in separate incidents. Likewise, one convict was hanged for raping a four-year-old girl the same year; two more were executed on the same charge in 1828; and in 1830, yet another three convicts swung for gang-raping a magistrate’s five-year-old daughter.\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{Colonial Advocate} recognised in 1828 that the problem of ‘child rape’ stemmed from ‘the transportation of male convicts without a due proportion of females’.\textsuperscript{43} If such men were unable to restrain themselves in the face of certain execution, it stands to reason that native ‘orphans’ were also preyed upon.

\textit{Pre-war encounters}

About 1814, one or more groups of blacks began visiting Hobart.\textsuperscript{44} By 1822, a tribe known as the ‘town mob’ was regularly seen on the outskirts
of Hobart, attracting some curiosity, but more often pity and disgust. Colonists’ attitudes towards these ‘fringe-dwellers’ are difficult to gauge. One resident complained it was ‘disgusting to behold, the state of nudity in which they wander about our streets’. There was even a ‘barbarous custom of encouraging the Black people [with rewards of alcohol] to murder or mangle one another … for the [onlookers’] amusement and gratification’. These ‘unsightly prostitutes’, ‘drunkards’ and ‘beggars’, most of them detribalised orphans or refugees, gave newly arriving colonists their first impression of the island’s natives.

Despite their visibility, few references to fringe-dwelling blacks survive, and the so-called wild tribes seem to have attracted scarcely more attention. Settlers were usually too busy establishing themselves to spend time musing over the island’s ‘degraded blacks’. The occasional spearing was readily explained away as the barbarism of ignorant savages, provoked by unscrupulous convicts. No one seems to have considered the impact of encroachment on the original occupants. It was assumed they would simply ‘move on’.

The natives were of greater interest to convicts and free labourers. These frontiersmen, West pointed out, were often stationed ‘forty and fifty miles [64–80 km] from their masters’ dwellings, were rarely visited, and were under no immediate control’. Some stockmen and sawyers seized on the sexual opportunities presented by this lack of surveillance. The company of a black woman, whether obtained by exchange or by force, was probably one of the few pleasures these men experienced. Eventually though, many frontiersmen found themselves watching their backs – especially those who had incurred the natives’ displeasure.

In 1819, Governor Sorell predicted that, ‘if the natives were intent upon Destruction … the Mischief done by them … would be increased a Hundred Fold’. But as expansion continued, and no major resistance was encountered, the Governor’s concerns were abated. When he was recalled in 1824, Sorell did not even mention the natives in his lengthy handover letter to George Arthur. That same year, the *Hobart*
Town Gazette reassured its readers that ‘the sable natives of this Colony are the most peaceable creatures in the universe’. This complacency appears to have been ubiquitous. Preoccupied as colonists were in the mid-1820s, with suppressing an unprecedented epidemic of bush-ranging, scarcely anyone imagined that a much deadlier threat was imminent.

Black

Tasmania was once joined to mainland Australia by land bridges across which humans migrated in several waves before Bass Strait flooded for the last time around 10,000 BP. Sites in both the north and south of the island bear evidence of human occupation extending back at least 34,000 years. Remarkably, Tasmanians never became culturally or linguistically homogeneous. Tribes from different areas retained distinct hunting and gathering practices, butchery and cooking methods, stone tools, shelters, watercraft, art, rituals and mythologies. What all Tasmanians had in common, however, was a marked divergence from their mainland ancestors. The most visible of these differences was technological. Tasmanians’ toolkits were much simpler than those used by mainland Aborigines. In fact, as they adapted to more favourable conditions, they abandoned unnecessary technologies until they had the simplest toolkits of any modern humans. They were, nonetheless, a spectacularly resilient people, who had evolved rich social and spiritual lives. Understanding something of these ways of living and believing is essential for putting into context the Aboriginal perspectives discussed in this book.

Social structure

The most prominent unit of Tasmanian society was the tribe (see Figure 13). Depending on the carrying capacity of the land, these consisted of
30 to 80 individuals, all sharing a common dialect and migratory pattern. Tribes were comprised of hearth groups of four to ten (generally related) individuals. Hearth groups shared a campfire, and had the capacity to be semi-autonomous with regard to movement and subsistence, though most endeavours appear to have been coordinated at the tribe level.

Two or more tribes occasionally met to trade, socialise, perform ceremonies, arrange marriages, settle disputes, and carry out various other businesses. Tribes occupying contiguous areas and speaking similar dialects were more likely to be allied, but a failure in diplomacy could result in war. These affiliates, as I will call them, do not appear to have been especially tight-knit, but they may have been important for support and communication during the Black War.

Tribal affiliates did not have names, but historian Graeme Calder utilised the term ‘Mairremmener’ to refer to an affiliate known to colonists as the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes. These were in fact many tribes. They utilised the territory north of the Derwent River, south of the highland lakes, and east of the Dee River to the coast (see Figure 2, page xviii). They were responsible for much of the violence during the Black War, thus it is useful to have a collective term for them, even if they were never fully united.

The tribal leadership structure in Tasmania is poorly understood, but it does not appear to have been particularly hierarchical. The most common observation, exemplified by the Quaker missionary James Backhouse, was that ‘the chiefs among these tribes are merely heads of families of extraordinary prowess’. It seems chiefs were not autocratic leaders, but respected patriarchs and warriors looked to in times of turmoil. Naturally, these men played a pivotal role in the Black War.

**Territory and movement**

Tasmanians were territorial, and certain places appear to have been central to their identities. Linguist John Taylor identified 33 Tasmanian words
for ‘country’, and showed that part of a tribe’s name ‘was a geographical reference to the location of the[ir] territory’. In 1838, after ten years of experience among the surviving Tasmanians, Robinson asserted that the island ‘was divided and sub-divided by the natives into districts, and contained many nations’. A tribe’s territory was expansive and often shared with allies, but if venturing into foreign country, access had to be negotiated lest they invite conflict.

Tasmanians knew their country inside and out. They were deeply in tune with their surroundings, knowing where to go, when to go there, what to take, how to take it and when to leave it. Tribes were almost always on the move, manipulating the country as they went using sophisticated burning techniques that encouraged the proliferation of game.

*Shelter, diet and health*

During the summer months most Tasmanians slept in the open air, employing windbreaks where necessary, while in the winter they built huts. On the rugged west and south coasts, tribes constructed large beehive huts that could house up to a dozen people. Eastern tribes, on the other hand, tended to build smaller, less robust structures. Tasmanian food economies were also regionally distinct. When inland, tribes subsisted largely on kangaroo and other marsupial species, but when on the coast, they lived predominantly on shellfish.

Pre-colonial Tasmania appears to have been free of serious endemic diseases. The island’s inhabitants were nevertheless susceptible to common ailments, and like most humans at the time, attributed illness to evil spirits, sometimes called ‘Raegeowrapper’. In response, they employed a range of treatments, but the standard panacea was to make deep incisions into the affected area ‘to let out the devil’. Through the medium of a shaman, Tasmanians also enlisted the help of good spirits. One colonist observed that ‘[e]very tribe of the Blacks has a medical man, peculiar to itself, who is consulted in all cases of sickness
or accident’. For Aborigines, health was an important concern, indistinguishable from spiritual wellbeing.

Violence and law

Gender relations in Tasmanian society were strongly patriarchal, and some European observers wrote unfavourably about the mistreatment of women. The early settler George Lloyd emphasised ‘the slavish exactions of savage husbands’, and claimed that ‘[h]ard labour is the matrimonial inheritance of the poor gin’. During migrations, women carried everything except the weapons, so the men could hunt. They were also primarily responsible for the collection of shellfish and plant materials, as well as for food preparation, hut construction, and the care of infants. This was a normal and appropriate division of labour to the Tasmanians.

Domestic violence was also normal. French explorer Jacques Labillardière reported that women were ‘often victims of the brutality of their tyrants’. He was one of several observers who recorded evidence of domestic violence, and to some extent, it was probably part of most women’s lives. However, as Chapter 4 reveals, Tasmanian society generally seems to have been characterised by loving relationships, not just between men and women, but between relatives of all kinds.

Internecine violence was common in most pre-modern tribal societies, and Tasmanian society was no exception. Robinson’s Aboriginal envoys gave him more than a dozen accounts of small but fierce clashes between tribes, mostly ambushes or arranged battles. One source of provocation appears to have been trespass, but most violence centred on women. Jealousies or failed marriage agreements could precipitate fights, but there is also evidence that tribes raided their enemies for women. When vendettas got out of hand they could result in generational feuds, though most conflicts appear to have been constrained by a ritualised system of law based on honour and proportional retaliation.