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## Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian journals and papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834, by N. J. B. Plomley

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*Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2011/1

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***Friendly Mission: The  
Tasmanian journals  
and papers of George  
Augustus Robinson,  
1829–1834***

NJB Plomley (ed.) 2008  
(2nd edn)

Queen Victoria Museum  
and Art Gallery, Launceston,  
Quintus, Hobart, xvii+1162pp,  
ill., maps, port., 25 cm, ISBN  
9780977557226 (hbk)

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In recent years there has been a small but significant explosion of writing about the history of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania and the impact of British invasion. All of it owes a profound debt to a single publication by the Tasmanian Historical Research Association in 1966, which after more than 50 years has now entered its second edition.

An edited collection of journals, correspondence and associated lists produced by the evangelist George Augustus Robinson, *Friendly Mission* is the record of a London builder's extraordinary and by no means selfless industry in offering Lieutenant Governor George Arthur an alternative to the escalating conflict that was crippling development in the colony and resulting in the annihilation of Palawa tribes on the lawless frontier of Van Diemen's Land. Resulting from painstaking work by Plomley during the period 1959 to 1965 at University College, London, *Friendly Mission* constitutes one of the most extensive collections of first-hand information on the impact of British invasion on Indigenous people ever published. The book, more than any other, has profoundly influenced the scholarly understanding of a decisive period of Tasmanian history.

While Plomley published a range of monographs and books during the later part of his scholarly career that specifically examined Aborigines and their culture, *Friendly Mission* is his most important legacy. Republished in 2008 by Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (of which Plomley was the Director in 1946) and Quintus Publishing, this edition includes a comprehensive new index and additions from a 1971 supplement. It also incorporates corrections that

Plomley compiled during years of further work on Tasmanian Aboriginal people and history, additional journal material from Robinson's clerk, Charles Sterling, and Plomley's revised account of the Bruny Island Mission.

Primarily an account of Robinson's quest to 'conciliate' the Aboriginal nations of the British colony of Van Diemen's Land, *Friendly Mission* is also an inadvertent ethnography of Tasmanian Aborigines, which emerges as Robinson attempts to underline the harsh vicissitudes he faced in his pioneering travels across the island. It provides biographical detail on hundreds of Palawa people, many of whom would now be unknown to history were it not for the publication of Robinson's records. Some of these individuals, such as Trucanini, are now familiar to popular imagination. Others, without whose expertise and ingenuity Robinson's mission would have failed, would otherwise be unknown. Most importantly, *Friendly Mission* paints a unique and detailed landscape upon which an intense period of Tasmanian Aboriginal history is played out — a landscape that has influenced almost all work carried out in this arena since its original publication in 1966.

For many years, the pioneering scholarship of Clive Turnbull's *Black War* (1974) and Lyndall Ryan's (1996) *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, first published a decade later, were all there was to accompany Henry Reynolds' transformative series of books, culminating with the publication in 1995 of *Fate of a Free People*. Reynolds had published earlier work investigating Tasmanian colonial conflict. But this book more than any other reinvigorated interest (and contention) about the island's bloody past and recast Tasmanian Aborigines from being victims and survivors to diplomats and guerrilla fighters exercising sovereign agency. All of these drew heavily on *Friendly Mission*. Like other writers at that time such as Cassandra Pybus (*Community of Thieves*, 1991), Reynolds took a personal, almost introspective path into the story of a people who were arguably more beset by tragedy and injustice than anywhere else in Australia. It is perhaps for this reason above all else that the story of Indigenous Tasmania has provoked so many exploratory works by authors who, as Reynolds (1998:20) put it, were troubled by 'this whispering in our hearts'. Others, such as Vivien Rae-Ellis (*Trucanini: Queen or*

traitor, 1976, and *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, 1988) focused on biographical narratives to explain the drama that had unfolded in the British colony of Van Diemen's Land during the nineteenth century, but still relied largely on Plomley's earlier work.

Fiction writers too have been caught in the dazzle of events that swept across the island and almost decimated a people and their culture. Robert Drewe's first novel, *The Savage Crows* (1976), Beth Robert's *Manganinnie* (1979 and made into a film the following year) and Colin Johnson's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) all occurred against the backdrop of the Black War in Van Diemen's Land. This was a period of martial law during which more than half the colony's budget was dedicated to the 'extirpation' or removal of Aboriginal people from their country. Its consequences are detailed intricately in *Friendly Mission*. Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), the story of Mathinna, one of the survivors of Robinson's mission, is also indebted to Robinson's journals and Plomley's later publication *Weep in Silence* (1987), detailing the history of the Wybalenna, the Aboriginal settlement established by Robinson on Flinders Island. Most recently, Rohan Wilson's Vogel/Australian Literary Award-winning novel *The Roving Party* (2011) recreated a chilling tale of gothic horror set at the height of the Black War. It is noteworthy that both Wilson's and Flanagan's novels have achieved critical acclaim and national awards, pointing perhaps to the persistence of 'this whispering in our hearts' in the national literary psyche — and the enduring legacy of Plomley's *Friendly Mission*.

The popularity of Ryan's and Reynolds' works also attracted the attention of counter-historian Keith Windschuttle, who in 2002 sought to discredit them in his self-declared 'forensic' re-examination *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*. Windschuttle's book lingered on *Friendly Mission* as a source of first-hand evidence selected to challenge earlier writers. But while he may have attracted praise from the ageing Geoffrey Blainey, he also stimulated an energetic critical reaction. This response is best presented in *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal*

*history*, an anthology of rebuttal edited by Robert Manne (2003). The most important contribution made by *Fabrication* was not through any new understandings, but in providing the stimulus for a new wave of writing about Aboriginal history, particularly in Tasmania — and a refocusing on the foundational importance of Plomley's research.

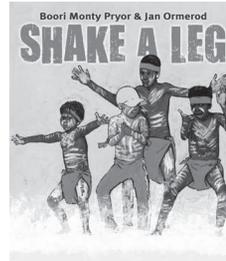
As part of this new wave of research, a series of regional Tasmanian histories has recently appeared, examining in finer detail the course of events that overtook Van Diemen's Land in the early nineteenth century. The first of these emerged from scholars associated with the University of Tasmania: Ian McFarlane's (2008) *Beyond Awakening: The Aboriginal tribes of north west Tasmania, a history*; Graeme Calder's (2010) *Levee, Line and Martial Law: A history of the dispossession of the Mairremmener people of Van Diemen's Land 1803–1832*; and, most recently, Patsy Cameron's (2011) *Grease and Ochre: The blending of two cultures at the colonial sea frontier*. An independent but nonetheless significant addition to this body of work is Robert Cox's (2010) *Baptised in Blood: The shocking secret history of Sorell*, following his earlier *Steps to the Scaffold: The untold story of Tasmania's black bushrangers* (2004).

Without *Friendly Mission* and Plomley's extraordinary scholarship, many of the works outlined above simply could not have occurred. Others would have been less compelling, relying instead on researchers piecing together a fragmentary picture of a discordant and savage period of Tasmania's history from unrelated records and often-subjective accounts. Instead, *Friendly Mission* provides a grand first person narrative populated by people and events that would otherwise be less well understood, or missing from the historical record entirely. Most importantly, the publication has stirred a lasting storm of academic and creative energy that is likely to make the life of its second edition just as productive and challenging as its first.

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### **Shake a Leg**

Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod 2010

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 1 v. (unpaged), ill., maps, ports., 29 cm  
ISBN 9781741758900 (hbk)

Reviewed by Beatrice Murray, Jesse Murray and Lawrence Bamblett <Lawrence.bamblett@aiatsis.gov.au>

Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod's *Shake a Leg* is an exciting children's book from a gifted Murri storyteller. It is reviewed here by three members of one Wiradjuri family — an 11-year-old school boy (Jesse), a K–12 classroom teacher with experience in tertiary and vocational education (Beatrice) and a researcher (Lawrence), who examine how representations of Aborigines affect community engagement with schools.

Jesse's first impression of the book was that he would pick it up if he saw it in his school library. On the cover illustration he recognised one of the characters who 'looks like someone' he knows. The first success of Ormerod's illustrations is that the characters are familiar to an 11-year-old Koori reader. Jesse was drawn into the book by the colours and familiarity of the cover illustration.

Jesse also commented that he recognised the scenes where the boys were preparing for dance. He took pleasure in understanding that there is meaning attached to the designs used in body painting for dances. It was clear from Jesse's comments that he enjoyed reading about a topic that he understood through shared experience.

Here is an important children's book about contemporary Aborigines that delivers a message about cultural continuity. *Shake a Leg* depicts working-class Aborigines in a story about integration. The characters are employed *and* they work to maintain the cultural traditions they value. In this way the characters in the book represent our family the way they do many Indigenous families. It is this familiar representation that Jesse related to when reading the book. Being published by a major Australian company should make the story accessible to many people.

My concern, whenever I (Lawrence) pick up a book about Aborigines is how it represents

2008. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829–1834*. Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. Google Scholar. Research Literature. Cite this chapter as: Bischoff E. (2020) The Case of Francis Cotton and George F. Story: Quaker Settlers and the Tasmanian Frontier, 1829–1831. In: *Benevolent Colonizers in Nineteenth-Century Australia*. Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series. *Friendly mission: the Tasmanian journals of George Augustus Robinson 1829–34*. Kingsgrove. pp. xiv–xv. ^ J. Milligan, 1859. *Vocabulary of the Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania*, vol. III of the *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Van Dieman's Land*. Hobart. ^ "Tasmanian language". ^ "Notes on the Aborigines of Tasmania", extracted from the *Manuscript Journals by George Washington Walker, Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania for 1897*. pp 145–175. Quoted in Wurm, M. & H. J. H. & Tryon, 1996. ^ Geoff Lennox, 1984. Books that describe the extermination of the Tasmanians and other native Australian groups include N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834* (Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966); C.D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Vol. I (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970); and Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1981). Patricia Cobern's letter indignantly denying that Australian whites exterminated the Tasmanians has been reprinted as an a *Friendly Mission* book. Read 2 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Robinson's diary record of his travels across Van Diemen's Land in... ^ Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking *Friendly Mission: the Tasmanian journals and papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834* as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... | Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. *Friendly Mission: the* by George Augustus Robinson. Other editions. Want to Read saving... | Related Papers. From *Terror to Genocide: Britain's Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia's History Wars*. By Benjamin Madley. *tunnerminnerwait and maulboyheenner: The involvement of Aboriginal people from Tasmania in key events of early Melbourne [to be read alongside Forms for Monuments to complex histories]*. By Clare Land. *Massacre in the Black War in Tasmania 1823–34: a case study of the Meander River Region, June 1827*. By Lyndall Ryan. *Re-inventing Social Evolution*. By Shayne Breen. *Extermination, Extinction, Genocide: British Colonialism and Tasmanian Aborigines*. By Shayne Breen. READ PAPER...