

## **Myth of extinction of Tasmanian Aborigines stubbornly refuses to die**

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We must look back at history before we move forward into the future, says Jenni Connor

When I was a child, the books I read were the classics of English children's literature, such as Frances Hodgkin Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), the adventures of the headstrong American heroine in Susan Coolidge's *Katy* series (1872) and Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894).

Since I was not born anywhere near the time of their writing, I assume they were favourites from Mum's childhood and considered suitable for children. While Turner creates larrikin characters with a more authentic Australian feel than her predecessors, she does not delve into matters of race. Turner's ignorance of this nation's indigenous people is revealed in an autobiography (quoted in *Australia Through the Looking Glass*) where she expressed disappointment that when she landed in Sydney in 1880 at age 8: "No chocolate-coloured beings, clad in bright, scanty garments, darted down to a yellow beach and pushed off in strange boats to welcome the ship." Ignorance, avoidance and prejudice persisted in children's literature through the 20th century, especially in relation to Tasmanian Aborigines.

In 2012, Margaret Bromley wrote her PhD thesis *Lost and invisible: The representation of Indigeneity in Tasmanian Children's Literature 1950-2001* that most children's writers in the period perpetuated a myth that Tasmanian Aborigines were killed off last century, despite contemporary knowledge to the contrary.

Dr Bromley acknowledges Tasmanian writer Nan Chauncy's representation of Aborigines in *Tangara* (1960) and Mathinna's *People* (1967) "reflects a conscious attempt at non-racism" and an attempt to "dignify and respect her Aboriginal characters". Nonetheless, Chauncy regarded Aboriginal people in Tasmania as "extinct".

University of Tasmania sociology professor Maggie Walter encountered a version of this myth when she journeyed in the country of her Aboriginal matriarchal family in the North-East (Talking Point, *Mercury*, January 5, 2015). She found a distinct pride in the history of colonial settlers, together with the firm belief there were "no Aboriginal people around here". This is astounding, when midden lines in the landscape bear abundant witness to Aboriginal habitation and when early explorers gave landmarks names such as Bay of Fires, because of the many campfires they observed.

Walter asked: "Isn't it time for a mature discussion at the public and political level, of how we move beyond seeing Tasmania as a place with a 200-year-old history?" Tasmanian Aboriginal academic Greg Lehman picks up this theme of needing to

respect our shared history in order to construct ourselves in the future as a cohesive civic community. In "Oath signed in oil on canvas" (Talking Point, Mercury, August 20, 2015). Lehman reminded us of the deal made and broken by colonial authorities with the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and asserted that current moves to constitutional recognition must acknowledge this history, "its legacies and implications". He has a passion for ensuring young Tasmanians hear, read and understand the history of our heritage, indigenous and non-indigenous, in this island state.

Bruce Pascoe, an award-winning Aboriginal writer from Victoria, agrees we need to set the historical record straight about the long and rich history of Indigenous occupation in Australia. To do this, Pascoe believes we need to challenge the prevailing stereotype of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as "mere hunter-gatherers".

In *Dark Emu*, working from the journals of explorers, surveyors, pastoralists and protectors, Pascoe provides startling evidence of a complex civilisation with sophisticated agricultural methods, sociopolitical systems, law and spirituality.

Tasmanian Aboriginal elder Jim Everett, with filmmaker Troy Melville, has created an elegiac short film, *Blood of Life*. The haunting, evocative images and words poetically capture the strong spiritual connection of Tasmanian Aboriginal people to their country.

Walter, Lehman, Everett, Pascoe and more - together with Aboriginal singers, dancers and filmmakers - are presenting at two exciting events at Moonah Arts Centre in September. The first, on Indigenous Literacy Day, September 7, will focus on "the conversation about our shared history". Indigenous Literacy Day was chosen in recognition of the critical role identity plays in young people's learning success, and the power of story to construct that identity. The second, September 11, celebrates the contribution of Aboriginal people to Tasmanian life and culture with an afternoon of storytelling.

*Jenni Connor has been state and national president of the Children's Book Council of Australia, a board member of the CBCA, and judge for the Book of the Year Awards.*