

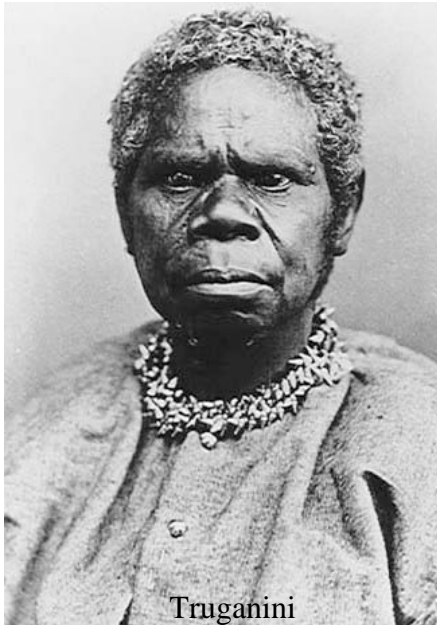
PLOD ESSAY:

Truganini and the Murders at Coal Creek

Earlier this year Terri Allen gave a lecture to U3A as part of a series on Wonthaggi presented by different members of the Historical Society. She told a complex story of the pre-history and pre-State Coalmine days of Wonthaggi.

About ten minutes into her lecture, she spoke about sealers and whalers, who were left on remote beaches and Bass Strait islands to collect sealskins and blubber for the London markets. She told the audience that these were rough men who lived isolated lives; and “to assuage their loneliness and harsh life, they stole native women, using their sexual favours and putting them to work cooking, gardening, harvesting food, clubbing seals, stripping bark, tending cauldrons of blubber... In 1841, a party of whalers from Lady Bay on the east coast of Wilson’s Promontory set off to walk to Melbourne. When they reached Coal Creek (Harmer’s Haven), they were set upon by Tasmanian Aborigines who killed two of them; this led to a hue and cry and eventually the first hangings in Melbourne Gaol.”

Joe and Lyn Chambers told this same story a bit more elaborately in their book, *Out to the Wreck*. In the chapter entitled, “Murder on the Dunes” they describe a complex set of circumstances involving two huts, a family, five whalers on their way to Melbourne and five Tasmanian Aboriginal people – two men and three women – well-known in the Westernport area. For forty-five days “although on



Truganini

foot, heavily laden with stolen firearms and provision, the group managed to elude the various groups of police, soldiers, settlers and trackers sent out to capture them. ...Finally, a party of twenty-nine soldiers, police, trackers and volunteers, surprised the five sleeping at their campfire in the early morning and the chase was over.” They were caught between the dunes and Lake Lister due west of the Rifle Range Reserve in Wonthaggi. The Chambers go on to tell of an unfair trial conducted by a hanging judge who was later acknowledged by Governor Gipps to be “an apologist for the cruellest practices by some of the least respectable of the settlers.” At the time of the trial, Aboriginal people were not allowed to give evidence or be cross-examined in court because “they could not speak or understand English and they had no knowledge of a supreme being and could not comprehend the nature of an oath.” The two men in the group of five were sentenced to hang and the three women, one of whom was none other than Truganini, were supposed to be “transported” to Flinders Island.

I first came across this very same story when I read *The Savage Crows* by Robert Drewe way back in 1984 although it was published in 1976, way before Reconciliation was part of our consciousness. Drewe is one of Australia’s finest writers; he writes with immediacy and blistering honesty. His description of the rape of Truganini in the channel between Bruny Island and the mainland, and then much later of Truganini witnessing the hangings in Melbourne of her two companions are two of the most poignant scenes I have ever read. Perhaps their impact upon me allowed me to be ready for Pauline Mullett’s request that I help her father tell the story that was to become *Jackson’s Track*. Drewe wrote the scenes in the (fictionalised) words of G. A. Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Tasmania and, later, in Victoria. Robinson is a real person and the words Drewe gives him in his book are based on Robinson’s extensive diaries.

The Rape of Truganini:

“...I came to the realisation that in the person of Truganini stood the blueprint for the larger tragedy of her people. She was the daughter of Mangana, who had been the chief of the Bruny people, giving way to Wooraddy as he reached middle age. Her mother, Mangana’s first wife Thelgelly, I discovered, had been stabbed to death by white settlers before her eyes. Her elder sister, Lena, had been raped and carried off by sealers to the islands of the Straits. While a young girl Truganini had been the intended wife of a young warrior, Praweena. Wishing to return to Bruny from the mainland [Tasmania] one day, the



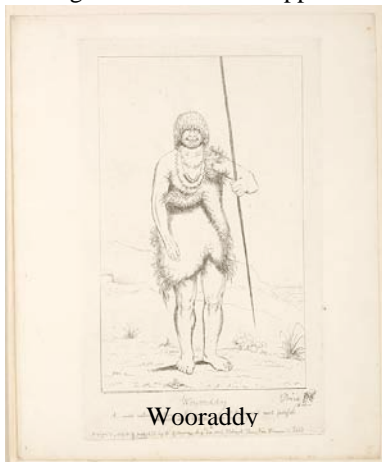
young lovers and another warrior, Pogenna, were offered a ride across the channel by two sawyers known to them, Watkins Lowe and Paddy Newell. In mid-channel, Lowe and Newell threw the males overboard and dragged Truganini to the bottom of the boat. As the natives swam to the boat and grasped the gunwales, the whites chopped off their hands with their hatchets. The helpless men waved their arm stumps and drowned before Truganini. The Europeans were free to do as they pleased with her. Such were her first encounters with our civilisation.”

Truganini grew to be a wily and clever woman, who befriended Robinson in an attempt to get what was best for her and her people. He respected her intelligence and set about attempting to Christianise and civilise her. She went along with him to a certain extent, but in Drewe’s account of her character, she shows the reader a clear-eyed view of the tragedy befalling her people and the hypocrisy of civilising efforts of the White invaders on her land.

As indicated by his surviving diaries and, as Drewe constructs him, G.A. Robinson was a complicated man with many conflicting attributes to his character. ~~Even though~~ ^{G.A. Robinson} he understood Truganini and viewed her with deep respect, even love, he could not help himself in making one last attempt to civilise her in forcing her to watch the death of her husband, Wooraddy, at the hands of the hangman. In the court record, held at the Public Records Office of Victoria, the two men to be hanged were called Bob and Jack, but according to Robinson, who lived with them and felt deep affinity for the Aboriginal people of Tasmania, their real names were Wooraddy and Umarrah.

The Hanging of Wooraddy, Chief of the Bruny People:

“As it was [Truganini] was with Wooraddy and Umarrah when they killed the [whalers] who were trying to entice her away at Westernport. Suffice it to say that she learned a good lesson from this folly; her acquittal and placement to my charge showed her the generosity of the British legal system and her obligatory viewing of the executions served to stress the severity with which the system – the envy of the civilised world – regards crimes of atrocity... She was much affected as Wooraddy and Umarrah climbed the scaffold, Umarrah crying, but Wooraddy, the stoic, uttered nothing. Truganini was amazed enough at the crowd of approximately six thousand people, which had gathered for the event, but never



Wooraddy

had I seen her so confounded as when the chaplain said, ‘In the midst of life we are in death,’ and the hangman signalled to the puller below and the drop fell. (Unfortunately the drop descended only halfway and the natives twisted and writhed convulsively to mounting exclamations from the crowd until an alert member of the audience had the presence of mind to knock away the obstruction, thus clearing the fall. Umarrah died instantly; Wooraddy struggled for some five or six minutes.)”

It seems to me that Wooraddy and Umarrah had all the provocation in the world to murder the whalers attempting to ‘entice’ their women. If only they had been allowed to testify in court. No white settler was ever hanged in Melbourne in colonial times for murdering an Aboriginal person, although some were convicted of atrocities and given short sentences of weeks or months. It is an extraordinary story and all began here at Harmer’s Haven. I imagine it will go on to be told over and over again.