

ONE

WHALERS, SEALERS, AND MARINERS

Australian Aboriginal Men and Women in the Southern Oceans 1790–1870

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;
These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For
he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the
waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to
the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and
fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits end. Then
they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of
their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof
are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them
unto their desired haven.

—Psalms 107:23–30

On a shelf above my desk I have a copy of a lithograph of “King Billy,” William Lanné, who was widely, and incorrectly, regarded to be the last Tasmanian Aboriginal male. I bought the image as a cutout picture in a plastic archive sleeve at a secondhand bookshop in Hobart, Tasmania.¹ At the time, I did not know who made it or even from which book it came. The etching is based on a well-known photograph of William Lanné taken by the photographer Charles Woolley in August 1866 (Fig. 1.1).² It took a bit of effort but I eventually found that the image is actually an engraving created for the 1886 *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*. Engravings were a much easier way of mass producing images in the nineteenth century and many photographs were subjected to the treatment of metal or wood engraving. Like all photographed people in the nineteenth century Lanné would have

had to hold his pose for a considerable time. The results are often very stiff looking images, with faces contorted slightly in a fixed stare. However, in this image I detected something more. Lanné, undoubtedly frozen in the photographic moment, seemed to stare back, his gaze interrogative, strong, and certain. All I knew of Lanné before this encounter was confined to an understanding that, after his death in 1869, his body was mutilated and his remains were at the center of a macabre series of events, which took place in the name of “science,” after which his body seemed to simply vanish. In this photograph Lanné seemed to me not merely alive, but vibrant and engaged. But what I noticed most about this photograph was that Lanné is dressed in the clothes of a common seaman; he wears the heavy woollen short-coat of a whaler and there appears to be a kerchief or cloth shirt beneath the jacket. I could almost imagine the quintessential whaler’s item, a “sou’wester,” sitting on his lap. His hair and beard are well trimmed, suggesting he has been in port for a little while, at least. It was his very humanity that intrigued me and compelled to find the man beneath the image.

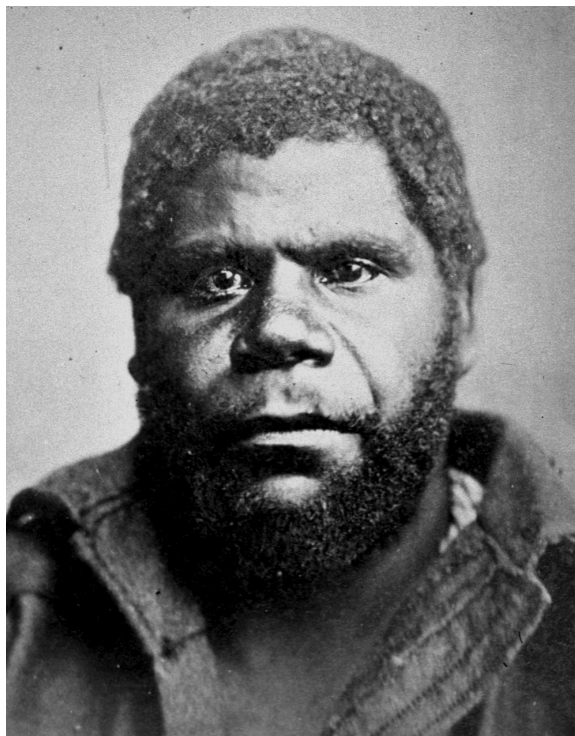


Figure 1.1. Photograph of William Lanné. Note the label “King Billy.” He is wearing the heavy cloth short jacket of a whaler. Image courtesy State Library of Tasmania.

History has been interminably cruel to the Tasmanian Aborigines. For tens of thousands of years they lived in the resource-rich Tasmanian landscape. The rise of the sea level at the end of the last ice age created the island of Tasmania and isolated the population from the rest of Australia. Tasmania has a mild marine climate, with cold winters and generally mild to warm summers. Unlike much of Australia, which is arid and dry, Tasmania is well watered, and prior to European settlement it was heavily wooded with large grass plains, the result of Aboriginal fire use or “fire stick farming.”³ When Europeans first colonized the region there were between three and five thousand Aboriginal people living in nine distinct tribes spread across the island. Although there had been sporadic contact with Europeans from the seventeenth century it was not until 1803 that the British established its second permanent Australian settlement with a penal colony at Hobart. From this point onward, interactions with Aboriginal people increased with devastating effects.⁴

The early European settlement brought violence, dispossession, disease, and dispersal. Commentators of the day spoke of a “war” between the colonists and the Aborigines.⁵ This was known as the “Black War,” and though controversy over how many people were murdered and massacred continues to the present, few disagree it was a bloody and violent mismatch.⁶ After nearly three decades, in the 1830s the surviving Aborigines were rounded up onto a government-sponsored station on the Bass Strait Islands, settling on Flinders Island at a site known as Wybalenna.⁷ The colonial authorities appointed bricklayer George Augustus Robinson as conciliator and later “protector” of the Aborigines.⁸ This attempt at salvation was an unmitigated failure, and the death toll suggested to the colonial politicians and the general public alike that the Tasmanians were doomed to extinction.⁹ By 1847, the Colonial government recognized that the Flinders Island Aboriginal settlement had been disastrous. Only forty-seven people from the original two hundred survived.¹⁰ These people, sometimes disparagingly described as “remnants,” were no longer perceived as a threat to European settlement and were relocated to Oyster Cove station, a former convict government settlement nearly sixty kilometers south of the city of Hobart.¹¹

The American sailor Robert Elwes visited in the late 1840s and made the following astute observation:

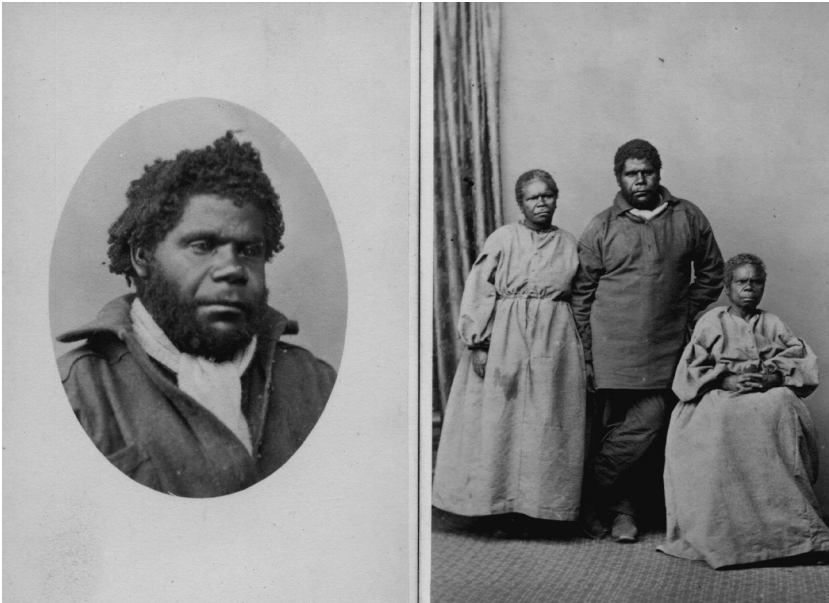
In a bay called Oyster Cove, towards Mount Wellington, are the miserable remains of the Aborigines of Tasmania. They are supported by Government, a commissioner being appointed to look after them, and do almost nothing, seeming to wait in apathy for their own extinction. They now number about forty, and at last census only one child was reported. They were removed to Flinders Island in 1835, and then amounted to two hundred and ten, but they were

afterwards brought back and placed in Oyster Cove—an example of what the blessings of civilization will do for savages. They were civilized, or rather their country was appropriated by Englishmen and Protestants; and have they not disappeared even faster than did the Indians under the tyrannical Spaniards? Here they had the advantages of a liberal government, trial by jury, and all the benefits of the Magna Charta [*sic*]—and what has followed?¹²

Within three decades the entire people were generally thought to have become extinct when, in 1876, Truganini died.¹³ This understanding of extinction did not take into account the vibrant mixed-race community that descended from the sealers and their Aboriginal “wives” who occupied the Bass Strait Islands and who refused to join the government station on Flinders Island.¹⁴ Instead, the Aboriginal Tasmanians were relegated to the past, and terms such as “extinction” and “last of” were powerful signifiers of this mindset. In this book, I use these terms only in the manner that they were used in the period under discussion. Of course, Truganini was not the last Tasmanian, as evidenced by the contemporary Aboriginal community of Tasmania. Their survival and persistence to the present echoes the story of the whalers: success in the face of interminable odds.¹⁵

In the 1850s and 1860s William Lanné, unlike many of his compatriots, was not confined to the government station, but instead for many years had a “life at sea.” As a whaler and sealer he was relatively free to come and go as he pleased, particularly as he had economic independence. Rather than live in the Aboriginal settlement when on land, he resided in a local Hobart hotel, a common practice for mariners. Here he shared quarters with others; shipmates and fellow sailors who would often bunk five or six to a room. Reading about Lanné and studying the contemporary images, it occurred to me that Lanné had somehow found a way to create a space for himself within the dispossession and British colonization of early Australia, and this space he found in the maritime industry. I wondered how many others might have done the same?

In my search to find out more about Lanné, I located several other photographs, a sequence of two, in particular, intrigued me (Figs. 1.2 and 1.3). These were apparently taken on the same day by photographer Woolley in his Hobart studio. The thing that really impressed me in these photographs was that in the first Lanné had his hair long, his beard unkempt, while in the second, taken later in the sitting, he was neatly trimmed. These two images somehow characterize the differences between his life as a whaler at sea, where freedom was possible, and his life on land, where Aboriginal people were confined and controlled. I wondered who might have suggested he cut his hair. Was it the women in the other photo? Did they tease him that he looked messy, or perhaps the photographer recom-



Figures 1.2 and 1.3. These two images were located in Captain Bayley's personal photo album at Runnymede mansion. The first is a *carte d'viste* of Lanné in whaling gear with his hair long, suggesting he had just come off a ship after time at sea. The second image has Lanné with Maryann and Truganini. These images are dated to circa 1868 and are assumed to have been taken on the same day. The group image is often erroneously referred to the "last Tasmanians." Image courtesy Gemma Webberley, National Trust, Tasmania.

mended it? Or did Lanné himself decide he needed to be groomed? Did one of the women, using borrowed scissors, cut his hair, or did they all leave the studio so that he could go to the local barber? As I pondered each of these questions I realized how little I knew about nineteenth-century Aboriginal people's lives away from missions and government stations, and especially what life had been like for those who went to sea. These images convinced me that I needed to know more about the Aboriginal people who worked in the maritime industries.

This book considers the life of some Tasmanian Aboriginal men and women who, like Lanné, helped to make up the whaling and sealing industries. The period of focus is from 1798, the beginning of the sealing industry, through to the late 1860s, by which time the whaling industry that had followed was virtually over. In each case, life on sea or on shore consisted of Aboriginal people moving, often great distances, from their homelands. This movement facilitated engagement with new colonial formations, lan-

guages, customs, and social structures. Some Australian Aboriginal¹⁶ people, particularly women, moved between Kangaroo Island and Tasmania; and Bass Strait and Southern Victoria (Fig. 1.4). Others traveled out into the Indian Ocean, and to the sealing grounds east of New Zealand. As I started to follow these threads I began to uncover anecdotes about Aboriginal men voyaging to China and even London, and I realized that there was an exciting story to be told.

There can be no denying that for most Australian Aboriginal people the impact of colonialism was blunt—dispossession, dislocation, disease, murder, and missionization. Yet there is another, largely untold story of Australian colonial history. It's a story of enterprise and entrepreneurship, of Aboriginal Australian people seizing the opportunity to profit from participation in the colonial economy and pursuing life at sea as sealers and whalers. In some cases participation was voluntary, in others it was more invidious and involved kidnapping and trade in women. In many cases the people involved maintained and exercised a degree of personal autonomy and agency¹⁷ within their new circumstances. They acted and reacted, sometimes they made unexpected choices and decided to sail the world's oceans, moving between their own native worlds and the world of nineteenth century European colonialism.

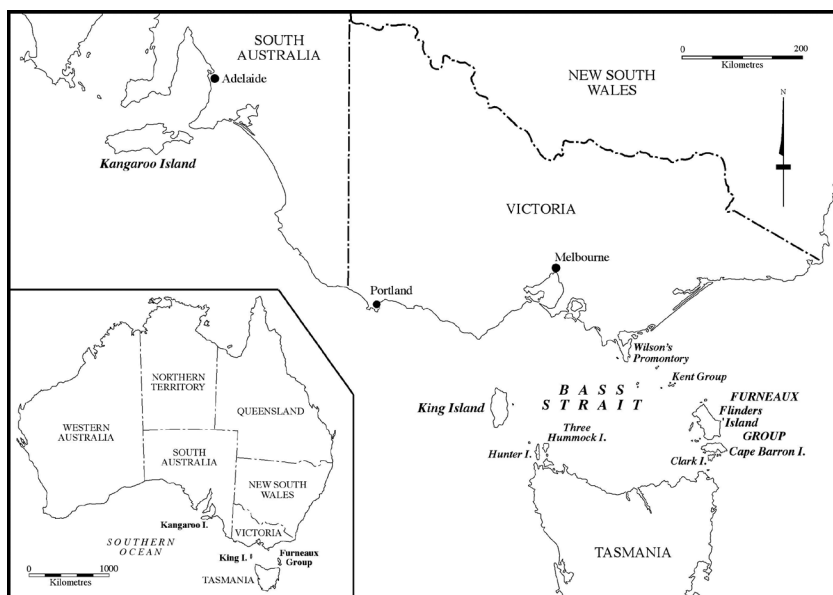


Figure 1.4. The sealing grounds of southeastern Australia. Map drawn by staff from Monash University, School of Geography and Environmental Science.

Perhaps we might consider, given the range of associated qualifiers that what we see here is a kind of attenuated agency. These are people that history has often classified as victims, disempowered slaves or even indentured servants. Yet it seemed possible too that they made choices that made sense to them, enabled their freedom, and sometimes allowed them to move beyond colonial imposition. This book explores some of the lives and adventures of those Aboriginal people who became what I call roving mariners.

The sea has been romanticized, mythologized, vilified, feared, exploited, and explored. It has provided sustenance and salvation across millennia and enabled the unremitting colonial expansion of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even today, when the travel of information is measured in microseconds and global communications networks ensure the Western world is permanently “logged on,” vestiges of our seafaring past remain. To be financially secure involves “safe harbor” investment, to lack caution is to “sail close to the wind,” and when all preparation is completed we are said to be “shipshape.” The sea is also the location of disputes over resources and boundaries, over ownership and control. As the contentious Japanese government’s move to recommence commercial whaling has revealed, there are significant cultural differences in how the sea and its bounty are viewed.¹⁸ In this book I try to understand how the sea figured in the lives of nineteenth-century Aboriginal men and women who spent time as mariners.

When I first encountered the stories of the early days of sealing and whaling I was struck by the small multicultural communities that sprung up on the islands and peninsulas of the southern oceans. A good example is provided by the Chatham Islands, a group of ten islands located eight hundred kilometers east of New Zealand. In 1870, a population survey was undertaken and it was reported that

[a]t the present time, the islands are inhabited by as varied and motley an assemblage of people’s as can be imagined. There are Morioris, Maoris, Kanakas, Negroes, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Danes, Germans, English, Irish, Scotch [sic], Welsh, Yankees, a native of South America, a Manilla native, a Laplander, a Russian Finn, a half-caste native of New Holland, several Maori half-castes, and a few whose nationality it is impossible to determine.¹⁹

Like the fur skin trade in North America and Canada, the whaling and sealing industries in Australia and New Zealand attracted natives and newcomers alike.²⁰ On the Chatham Islands, and in the many other small-scale communities established throughout the region, they created a new society made up of many cultures, languages, and customs. The shared aims of harvesting whales and seals in order to profit from the sale of oil and skins

brought together often unlikely colleagues and community members. In their classic book *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker showed that beginning in the seventeenth century and ongoing for the following two hundred years British ships were crewed by British, African, Native American, Irish, American, Dutch, Portuguese, Lascar, and Polynesian sailors. These men were “the nails that fasten together the planks of the boat’s bow” and “the rivets of the fellowship of the world.”²¹ The men that journeyed to the Australian and Pacific whaling and sealing industries came from various localities. There were African Americans, Tahitians, English, French, and Anglo-Americans, as well as many labeled Lascars or Bengali. The women who worked the sealing industry were mostly Aboriginal from various tribes or clans. There is evidence that in Bass Strait there was at least one newcomer woman from India, a Hindu who lived with her European sealer “husband.” The ethnic diversity of the sealing trade has tremendous similarities with the North American fur trade and it is important to heed the warning posed by Sylvia Van Kirk to avoid regarding the newcomers as a single homogenous group. As she notes, “In seeking to discover the norms of the fur-society, one is immediately confronted with the enormous complexity of the social interactions between Indian and white. The broad categories ‘Indian’ and ‘white’ must be differentiated.”²² It is useful to recall also that many Europeans, and especially the British, also had little sense of being part of a cohesive or national group, and most saw themselves in regional rather than national terms. The European sealers and whalers were more likely to regard themselves as Irishmen, Cornishmen, Mancunians (from Manchester, England), Scots, and Yorkshiremen. Likewise, the Aboriginal women were from distinct and often linguistically independent clan groups and tribes, and they did not necessarily recognize each other as family. Added to this multicultural and diverse group we have the added complexity of transportation, those convicts who were forcibly removed “down under.”²³ In Australia the society that developed on the sealing islands was polyglottal and multicultural, a checkerboard society of small-scale settlements and communities.

Much of what we know or imagine about the Southern Pacific Whale Fishery owes its origins to Herman Melville’s monumental whaling novel *Moby-Dick*. In the pages of this book, Melville depicts the diverse backgrounds of the crews of south sea whaling vessels as native to America, Africa, Europe, Polynesia (“the Feejeeans, Tongatabooans, Erromangoans, Pannangians”),²⁴ and other parts of the Pacific.²⁵ Historical descriptions of whaling and the Pacific Whale Fishery, especially those written from an Australian perspective, tend to imply that ships were manned by white European and American captains and first officers, while “colored seamen,” the term used often in the nineteenth century, held the physically tough jobs

as general crewmen, stokers, harpooners, and so on. Australian Aboriginal whalers are almost invariably depicted as providing brute strength rather than skill. This is a misconception. Black and white seamen, European, American, currency lads (the colloquial term for the colonial-born sons of convicts), native, and native-born held all manner of jobs on ships in the Pacific. Some “colored seamen” became captains, including Afro- and Native Americans, Native Canadians, Pacific Islanders, Maori, and at least one Aboriginal man, and many were promoted to first mate; most white sailors never rose above able seamen status. And in fact, far from unskilled gruntmen, many Aboriginal mariners were praised for their particular skill with the harpoon.²⁶

These ethnically diverse crews were from various socioeconomic classes. Popular depictions of whaling as the refuge of the impoverished are not entirely accurate. Seamen, particularly those who were European or Anglo-American, were generally from working classes, but there were also “swells” who chose a life at sea.²⁷ Sometimes the sons of very wealthy families ran away to sea, seeking adventure if not their fortunes. Like whaling, the earlier industry of sealing, especially in the Bass Straits between Southern Australia and the island of Tasmania, attracted a wide variety and type of man. Iain Stuart has considered the class of Australian sealers, particularly those from Europe and America, and has found that it suited the colonial authorities to characterize them as lawless “rat-bags,” escaped convicts, and lower-class “scum.”²⁸ In the American context, whalers in the nineteenth century were described alternately as heroic or as “social outcasts and moral pariahs,” depending on the inclination of the viewer.²⁹ In fact the sealers of Bass Straits and the whalers of the southern oceans came from a variety of locations both geographic and social.³⁰

The context in which these polyglot crews of whale ships and sealers camps lived is difficult to conceptualize historically. Over the past few years it has been something of a historical trend to see all of Australia’s history as part of colonialism, so that the diverse sealing and whaling communities are usually situated within the framework of colonial enterprise.³¹ However, when regarded as part of the colonial project they emerge as a more coherent group than they probably were. Indeed, the deeper I delved the more it seemed that this approach had homogenized the industries and experiences of the men and women, natives and others. When thinking about the categories of people involved in colonial history, the American scholar, anthropologist, and historian Ann Laura Stoler cautions us to remember that the diversity of the groups that settled in North America (and elsewhere) was such that to label everyone “colonizers” is meaningless. Some came to seek fortune, others adventure, while others sought land or to escape from poverty and religious persecution. They did not inevitably have the same goals or “share common interests and fears,” as Stoler puts it.³² To see all

of these groups as somehow part of the “colonial project” can be, I think, misleading.

Motivation for joining the whaling and maritime fleets varied. Some mariners were “ticket of leave” convicts while others were hopeful of overcoming the economic and social disadvantage that was rife in the Antipodean colonies.³³ The motivations for Aboriginal people joining these maritime industries was also diverse, and though it might seem that economics and profit making were important, there was an added incentive, and that was a kind of freedom that life at sea afforded. Indigenous people traveled for a range of reasons; some sought adventure and escape, or desired to acquire the goods of the newcomers and the chance of economic gain. There are probably many other compelling reasons to seek a sailor’s life, which we can only imagine.

Needless to say, for Aboriginal sailors there were diminished choices and these were often imposed by the changing circumstances of the European occupation. Government mission stations, for example, were originally developed to house the “remnants” of what was thought to be a dying population, but these soon became expensive burdens on the colony’s coffers. Aboriginal men, especially those who were young and able-bodied, were frequently forced off the mission stations and sent to seek employment elsewhere. Within the confines of the colonial structure, where Aboriginal people were usually subjects rather than agents, there are moments when we can observe the exertion of personal freedom and choices. One such place where such actions and choices are evident is on board whale ships.

Both sealing and whaling occurred early in Australia’s history. Within the first year of the settlement (1788) Captain John Cox, an entrepreneurial businessman with significant interests in Canton, China, chartered the ship *Mercury* to explore the oceans around eastern Australia for potential trade opportunities. This is considered to be the forerunner to the sealing industry.³⁴ However, the industry really only took off after 1797. The sealing grounds of Bass Strait became known as a result of the loss of the cargo ship the *Sydney Cove* near Preservation Island. The *Sydney Cove* was traveling from Bengal with a cargo of seven thousand gallons of spirits as well as other goods.³⁵ Somewhere between what are now known as Rum and Preservation Islands the ship was lost. Many of the crew were lost; the survivors washed ashore, along with a sizeable portion of the valuable cargo. Although seventeen crewmen set out in the ship’s longboat hoping to make it to the penal settlement of Port Jackson, only three survived the voyage. Government authorities sent the schooner *Francis* to facilitate the rescue of the captain and the six Lascars who had been left to guard the valuable cargo.³⁶ The discovery of plentiful sealing grounds on this voyage created a flurry of activity in the straits.³⁷ Captain Bishop of the *Nautilus* mounted what is generally regarded to be the first expedition to the islands of Bass Strait.

One of the first American vessels that arrived in the Pacific for the express purpose of whaling was the *Rebecca* who traversed the region in 1791–93.³⁸ By the 1840s “[t]here were more than six hundred American vessels as well as smaller (and declining) numbers of British and Australian vessels in the Pacific.”³⁹ The Pacific, an idyllic location of great beauty and climate that was much desired by Europeans, quickly became the location for the slaughter of millions of seals.⁴⁰

The development of the seal fishery was vital for the struggling convict colony. Up to this point the colonists had found few exploitable resources and the “tyranny of distance” made trade exceedingly difficult and the preservation of trade goods a serious problem.⁴¹ On a global scale, sealskins and oil were important for creating export opportunities with Europe and Asia, most notably China. Whalers, especially those that whaled into the areas where the seal breeding grounds were located, often took seals for their skins and their oil. Seal oil was highly prized as it burned particularly slowly, brightly, and without smoke. As whaling took vessels close to the massive Antarctic seal grounds, the opportunity to increase the trade was seized. As such the seal fishery had always been allied to and a subsidiary of pelagic whaling. American vessels also pursued sealing in both Antarctic and Arctic waters, and after the Revolutionary War large numbers of their vessels were fitted out to secure cargoes of fur sealskins to carry to the Canton market.⁴² Indeed, China was the main trade partner for sealskins from both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

Within a few years of the discovery of the sealing grounds up to two hundred men had moved to the straits to take up sealing.⁴³ Today it is difficult to imagine the relative tranquility of the Bass Straits as a seething industrial landscape, where the hunting and processing of seals and sealskins was dotted across its many islands. Hundreds of thousands of seals were slaughtered and their skins processed; these small sandy islands would have been ringed by a foaming bloody sea undoubtedly attractive to sharks and other predators.

Many Tasmanian Aboriginal women were forced to labor in the industry alongside the men. One of my focuses in this book is the relationships that developed between the newcomer men and the Aboriginal women. While determined not to underplay the violence that some women experienced, I want also to identify their resistance and adaptation, rather than focus on violence. Depictions of violence were often facilitated by an underlying assumption that Aboriginal women in traditional settings (and before Europeans arrived) were subject to degradation and a lack of autonomy. As Marilyn Lake has noted, there has been a recent trend in historical and anthropological writings to see Aboriginal women as strong and powerful, whose “independence and self-sufficiency may be read as a source of status and self-esteem rather than subordination.”⁴⁴

While it is not my intention to diminish the suffering or violence of the industry, particularly in terms of its impact on Aboriginal women, I do think the picture is more complex than other histories might suggest. This complexity was emphasized to me in conversation with a colleague who spoke as both a descendant of the sealing women and an academic. He saw the sealing industry as ironically responsible for both the near-genocide of the Tasmanian Aboriginal People *and* their survival.

Sealing had a relatively short life span in Australia, the intense period lasting barely a couple of decades. Although in its time the sealing industry contributed to the colonial economy, its influence was restricted. After the first lucrative decades most of the sealers moved away; some moved on to whaling, others eked out an existence of farming and/or gardening supplemented by small-scale seal oil and skin sales. Whaling on the other hand contributed significantly to Australia's economy over a long period of time. The early whaling industry coincided with the decline of sealing, and in 1826 the total value of whale exports was £34,850. The growth in the industry was phenomenal and by 1840 the export income had jumped to more than £335,000. Like the Californian gold rush (and almost simultaneous with it) the 1850s Victorian gold rush affected the numbers of skilled and available men, so that by 1853 the total value had dropped to just £16,000.⁴⁵

Twentieth-century whaling, highly industrialized and mechanized, was lucrative. In the 1920s the Australian whaling industry contributed £25 million to the country's economy.⁴⁶ In this book I will consider the two industries as intimately connected and implicated. Many men, William Lanné included, worked as both whaler and sealer, depending on the season and the availability of resources. As such, these industries (sealing and whaling) created similar community structures, which often functioned outside of wider society.

As I noted previously, the Australian sealing industry has many parallels with the North American fur trade, especially in the role played by Aboriginal people and particularly Aboriginal women. Histories of the Canadian experience have revealed the complex nature of the relationships that developed among the women themselves and between the women and newcomer men. I've been particularly drawn to Susan Sleeper-Smith's examination of the relationships between French men and Indian women in the Canadian fur industry. Among her many fascinating insights, Sleeper-Smith describes how European (particularly French) men were altered and transformed by their engagement with Indian women and more generally by their "encounter with Native people."⁴⁷

The idea that both native and newcomer are transformed by their encounter with the other is central to my understanding of the Australian experience. It was not only the Aboriginal men and women that were changed by coming into contact with European and other newcomers, but

they exerted change on the newcomer men that lived and worked among them. These changes, adaptations, and modifications led to what I think was the formation of a new society which I call creolized and hybridized. Within this new social form, people were able to perform and maintain their traditions and at the same time adapt to changing circumstances. Far from assimilating into the dominant European culture, Aboriginal people and their cultural forms simply, to use Sleeper-Smith's term, hid "in plain view."⁴⁸ In the pages that follow I will explore some of this plain view hiding and reflect on the complex hybridized cultures that were formed as a result.

Needless to say, this might well be seen as a very optimistic view of an otherwise violent and depraved history, a history that resulted in the popular assumption that the Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct. It is not my intention to diminish the horror of much of that history. Rather, in doing so I am trying to redirect the gaze slightly so as to see Aboriginal people as agents and actors in their own destiny. However, if I am to use the concept of agency as Giddens developed it, then I need to note the following caveat. For Giddens and many who have followed, "agency" requires that an individual's actions are effective in changing their cultural or material conditions. To do this they must be intentional and sufficiently free, so that their actions are unconstrained, and, perhaps even more importantly, the historical actor must possess the ability to predict and understand the consequences while remaining reflexive in his judgment of their success or failure.⁴⁹ The men and women whose stories follow did not always have the freedom to choose from a variety of options; indeed, their options were reduced and in a manner not dissimilar from the options afforded slaves. In short, they were bounded and constrained in ways that limited the range of choices they had. Notwithstanding this, I argue that a kind of attenuated agency existed within these limits.⁵⁰ Although the coming together of the two groups (colonizers and colonized) is often seen as leading to the demise of Indigenous people, in my reading of this history I see resilience and capacity where others have seen despair and loss.⁵¹

One of my key desires is to create a more complex and less linear narrative than has been previously produced for southern Australia. One of the complexities I wish to develop concerns the question of the boundaries surrounding who was categorized as native, who was not, and who was described as newcomer. Added to this, I want to know how these people changed over time and how individuals sometimes passed back and forth between the categories. I believe these categories were not stable, and during the sealing and whaling period they were perhaps in a greater state of flux than they were either before or afterward. In taking this approach I have been deeply influenced by the innovative and challenging book *Facing East from Indian Country*, by historian Daniel Richter. Richter argues that the new society that formed out of the North American fur trade, and

the emergence of the metis population that resulted from the intermix of Indians and fur traders, created a “blurring of ethnic and cultural lines.”⁵² In contrast, previous Australian historical studies of these cross-cultural relationships have emphasised the divisions between black and white, and rarely considered the fuzzy nature of these blurred categories.

It was out of the realm of interpersonal relationships—the domestic sphere; hearth and home—that the new society emerged. Families became communities, and new social forms developed. This took place in what American historian Richard White has described as the “middle ground,” where cultures are constructed “in interaction with one another, not in isolation.”⁵³ These new social forms were a mix of Aboriginal and newcomer, but they were also liminal sites. Like the voyageurs of the Canadian fur trade the sealers of southern Australia “lived in a state of liminality, literally a ‘threshold.’”⁵⁴ In this in-between world native languages and English became fused and created a *lingua franca*.

This *lingua franca* and the composite culture from which it emerged demonstrates how both natives and newcomers were changed and altered. Creolized and hybridized language was common on whale ships, where a kind of pidgin would be used by native and European sailors alike. Its emergence in the sealing industry is not surprising. Rebe Taylor has studied the Tasmanian Aboriginal women who were taken to Kangaroo Island off the Southern Australian coastline in her book *Unearthed*, which documents how European men became regarded as, and perhaps even resembled, “natives.” These men occupied a liminal and hybridized place, where some apparently even forgot how to speak English fluently. For years many of these men had spoken and heard only Aboriginal languages, or a creole of dialects from the Kurna, Ngarrindjeri, Pallawah, and English languages.⁵⁵ According to Taylor one of the sealers was recorded as “‘quite nativified [sic].’ His voice appears to have lost his native tongue.”⁵⁶ These men had much in common with the Canadian fur traders especially the authorized, government-licensed *Voyageurs*, the hybrid nature of whose lives with their Indian wives has been described as undergoing “continuous transformations in identity and cultural association.”⁵⁷

A similar experience took place in the Australian fur skin trade. Within the liminal and transitive space of the domestic camp of the sealers (and onboard a whale ship too, one might argue), work and labor were the conduit for new social forms. These sprang up on the islands of the southern oceans where Aboriginal women and newcomer men created industries, domestic spaces, and families. Here in this “middle ground” the two groups developed ties to each other.⁵⁸ The men were in many ways dependent on the women’s skills and knowledge. Their physical strength and ability to hunt, butcher, and skin the seals was important. But these women were probably most valuable for their capacity to provide food,

especially native or “bush tucker” such as vegetables and mutton birds. Whites learned from the Aboriginal women. While observing Kangaroo Island in the early nineteenth century, one contemporary noted that “a resident here fifteen years” was wallaby hunting by using snares, a “skill taught by the Aboriginal women, [which] provided an essential item of trade on pre-colonial Kangaroo Island.”⁵⁹ When anthropologist Norman Tindale visited the island in the 1920s he was told by descendants of the sealing era that the “women’s survival and hunting skills were passed on to the white men. Without Aboriginal knowledge there would have been no Islanders; no Englishmen turned complete savages.”⁶⁰

In the American fur trade there was an added imperative of protection. As Richard White notes, if Europeans “were to survive as traders they had to find means to protect themselves either through force or by establishing personal ties within the communities in which they traded.”⁶¹ It is unclear if in the Australian case the women offered protection to the newcomer men, but many of these relationships were mediated by Aboriginal men—by fathers, brothers, and uncles. In those cases where women were abducted from neighboring groups it was the men of the capturing clan that facilitated the women being sent to work with sealing gangs. For the Aboriginal men, access to Europeans goods such as axes and kettles was probably a motivating factor in these exchanges.

In Southern Australia in the early colonial period there were relatively few white women. The free settlers in this period were predominately male. These men often sought sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women. Indeed, the historical record suggests this was a relatively common occurrence that was accompanied by significant sexual violence against Aboriginal women.⁶² For the most part, these women have been rendered mute in the pages of history. Their apparent silence is usually accompanied by their anonymity, and we rarely hear their own words or voices in historical texts, archives, and records. In this book I too struggle to find the voices of these women, but I have attempted through a variety of methods to imagine their lives and develop plausible narratives for them.⁶³ These are narratives that must be fleshed out with readings of material culture and with fictional musings, as such they are speculative, often imagined, though never imaginary. The nature of historical documentary evidence is that it can only ever illuminate empowered historical actors, whereas disempowered or colonized people need to be imagined into being.⁶⁴

Both the sealing and whaling trades have been the inspirations for novelists and short fiction writers. *Moby-Dick* is perhaps the most obvious example of this influence, but there are many others. Melville wrote several whaling novels all based on his experiences in the Pacific Ocean as a whaler and his time living on islands after escaping from the mutiny on board the *Acushnet*. More recently, the novelists Brian Castro, Sarah Hay, and Bruce

Pascoe have written novels that are based on the lives of Aboriginal women who sealed along the southern coastline of Australia. In the pages of these books there is a chance to find, extend, and imagine answers to some of the questions posed by this historical period. How did they live, what did they think, who were they, and, most important of all, how should we think about them today?

Sarah Hay, in her novel *Skins*, creates an evocative visual picture of the homes of the sealers. Skins stretched across doorways to keep out the cold southern winds. Basic lean-to shelters with blackened fireplaces, rough-hewn furniture, a table, a few stools made of tree trunks, animal oil lamps, kettles, knives, and bottles. The women of Hay's novel were companions who spent time together and looked out for each other. Dressed in skins as well as the occasional cast-off piece of Western clothing, tattered and soiled, they decorated themselves with shells made into necklaces and hair pieces. I have found such imaginings to be a wonderful supplement to the dry and often colorless ship captain's logs and other historical documents I have pored over while researching this book. Looking beyond conventional historical sources for information about this past, something which I recognize must be done with caution, has nevertheless allowed me to interrogate and reject passive stereotypes, and given me a larger picture of this history. It has given me a deeper appreciation of the day to day existence of the roving mariners' lives.

The techniques I used to delve into these stories were a combination of individual stories, analyses of diaries and journals, visual materials including photographs, and an exploration of European artifacts housed in museum collections. The sources for these stories are the archival records of the maritime industry, captains' logs, ships' records, recollections of sailors, and the reflections of those who took to the sea.⁶⁵ Having trawled through a vast ocean of materials, I have discovered that there is ultimately a paucity of sources.⁶⁶ Such limited material presents both challenges and opportunities. Perhaps the most unexpected and interesting consequence has been the enabling of space in which to imagine the lives and labors of these roving mariners. My narrative style is intentionally creative, as I believe the textual sources need to be fleshed out with imaginative understandings of life at sea in the nineteenth century. Like many who have a fascination for the sea and sea stories I am greatly indebted to the writing of Herman Melville. Melville's whaling novels act as a prism through which relations aboard ships may be viewed and understood. For its part, *Roving Mariners* uses both history and literature to explore the lives, lifestyles, friendships, and sexual relationships that these seafaring people formed.

In order to undertake the task I set myself in this book it was important that my narrative was able to move beyond documentary texts where possible (or plausible). As Daniel Richter noted in the North American

context, documentary evidence “illuminates the European cast of characters, yet only imagination can put . . . [the Indigenous] in the foreground.”⁶⁷ My way of entering into this imaginative space has been to include wherever possible the “doing of history.” I have traveled to the Pacific, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, to America and the home of the whale industry in New Bedford, to Greenwich in London where the British maritime world began, and throughout New Zealand and coastal southeastern Australia. I have spent time on ships observing whales, and scrambled around seal colonies in order that I might better understand the experiences of the men and women I am writing about. And I have sought the advice of members of the contemporary Aboriginal community so that I might hear their thoughts and reflections on their ancestors.

Standing on the deck of a ship as it crossed the waters of the southern ocean off the coast of New Zealand, I encountered a pod of sperm whales.⁶⁸ It was only at this moment that I truly appreciated the size and threat these creatures pose. Recently off the Sydney coast we sailed past a humpback whale, which revealed its presence with the unmistakable sound of exhalation through its blowhole, and I was reminded of an old whaler’s recollection: “When a whaler has once noticed the periods [of breathing] of any particular Sperm Whale, and which is not alarmed, he knows to a minute when to expect it again at the surface, and how long it will remain there.”⁶⁹ The sounds of the sea can transcend the decades and centuries. On Kangaroo Island we stood amidst the colony of fur seals, noisy, smelly, and anything but docile. Sneaking up on and killing these animals, as Aboriginal women frequently did, would not have been easy; it would have taken strength and ingenuity. Likewise, it was only in conversation with descendants of some of the sealing women that I could appreciate their legacy and experiences. This experiential approach has been instrumental to my developing a feel for the lives of these roving mariners.

Out of these experiences, I write in a style that is in conscious opposition to historical models that depict the Indigenous historical actor as either a disempowered victim of the colonial encounter or in violent resistance mode. I do this so that I can appreciate the subjectivity of Indigenous actions and render visible the otherwise invisible moments of collaboration and negotiation. In this project archival and textual sources will mesh and engage implicitly with the theoretical writings of Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Homi K. Bhabha,⁷⁰ who have all sought to understand the past in all its complexity and to see people as the ambiguous, often ambivalent and uncertain beings they are. Each of these authors has in his own way sought to find the liminal space between groups, sometimes called a third space. This is the place where enunciation, exchange, and interaction takes place. It then follows that in doing so, I am seeking an alternative view of this past that disrupts the idea that it can be easily and unproblematically

divided into simple dichotomies and binaries of colonizer and colonized. The past, its events and people are never one or the other, they are always more than the dichotomy. I am constantly striving to seek an alternative view which disrupts the idea that colonial contact and the relationships between the “natives” and “newcomers” that emerged can be categorized as either exclusion *or* incorporation, resistance *or* accommodation. Along with the rejection of dichotomies *Roving Mariners* proposes models of interaction that include negotiation, economic imperatives, and alliance formations, providing a nuanced understanding of the ambiguities of cross-cultural encounters as these were played out in the maritime industries of the early-contact period.

Exploring negotiation and alliance building requires an appreciation of the relationships and friendships between the men, between the women, and across the genders. These relationships shifted over time, and ranged from violent and forced to domestic and settled. Kangaroo Island was a focus of activities, and many Tasmanian Aboriginal women were taken there by force. Rebe Taylor has imagined what such an arrival might have been like. She supposes that the woman’s capture involved violence, possibly even rape. Confined and ligated she may well have been isolated and alone or possibly accompanied by a kinswoman. She may have witnessed the murder of family members, or perhaps she was traded with their consent. No matter what, as Taylor notes, “[s]he would never see her home again.”⁷¹ A contemporary observer seemed unfazed by the violence of these interactions:

It must be confessed that having discovered the utility of native women, they [the sealers] did not confine themselves to obtaining them by the lawful way of barter, making excursions, principally to the shores of Australia (i.e., the mainland) for the express purpose of obtaining by violence or stealth such valuable partners!⁷²

Notwithstanding this violence and subjugation, it struck me that the manner in which the women entered these relationships might not be useful for understanding their internal dynamics over a long period. I wondered: should whether they were captured or traded, were forced or voluntarily arrived at their location, be the frame through which we see the rest of their lives? This is a question I have spent a great deal of time thinking about, particularly in view of the fact that it emerges out of my previous research into my Aboriginal great-grandmother who spent sixteen years in and out of a psychiatric institution. In the process of investigating and writing about her life, as I composed it from the fragments of her medical records, I became intrigued by how these references skewed my view of her life. My biography of her focused on the time she spent in mental hospitals, but this probably would not have been how she might have chosen to depict her