

FATE OF A FREE PEOPLE

Henry Reynolds, Penguin, 1995 \$16.95. Michael Mansell, Legal Manager, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, reviews a new work on Tasmanian colonial relations with Aborigines and considers what implications the so called Tasmania Treaty could have for Tasmanian Aboriginal people today.

Fate of a Free People re-examines the history of the Aboriginal relationship with Tasmania's colonial invaders. It reappraises and exposes some of the myths arising from the colonial takeover of Tasmania: were the Aborigines tamely enticed to surrender their lands and sent off to Flinders Island? Once there, did the Aboriginal people succumb entirely to white control of them and their lands?

Reynolds' analysis of Tasmania in the 1800's is - unlike other historians such as Bonwick, Plomley, et al - based neither on romantic paternalism nor on racism. He looks hard at the factual events of colonialism: the invasion of the territory of Aboriginal groups and the people who owned the territory, and the fierce blood-letting response of the Aborigines to the white incursions.

Well constructed and enthralling, *Fate of a Free People* centers upon a petition to Queen Victoria dated February 1846, signed by eight Aborigines at Wybalenna settlement on Flinders Island. It lies at the heart of Reynolds argument: there was an agreement reached between Aborigines and the colonial government, it was breached, and Aborigines complained strongly about the breach.

The knowledge of the petition, which becomes the core of Reynolds' examination, is not a recent discovery. Many historians have trivialised the petition because, he believes, they assumed that Tasmanian Aborigines were "incapable of taking political action on their own behalf" and that the petition represented little more than manipulation of Aborigines by feuding

white commandants. By examining the extensive Aboriginal resistance which threatened the very success of the colony in the period leading up to the making of the petition, Reynolds is able to challenge this baseless opinion of other historians.

It becomes apparent from the forced changes in colonial policy that the colonial powers were at their wits' end about what to do with the Aborigines. Tracing the policy swings (which range from early aggression, to conciliation, to open warfare against Aborigines) Reynolds reveals a despairing colonial administration which sought the services of George Augustus Robinson, who in turn made promises to the Aborigines. The petition, he urges, represented more than a bun fight between white overseers - it referred to broken promises on matters of substance.

If there was an argument, what were its terms? Reynolds unfortunately doesn't pursue this in any detail. However, he reproduces Robinson's own written account which clearly refers to his promise that Aborigines would return to their homelands in summer periods, and would be taken care of. The Aboriginal petitioners spoke of being free citizens dependent for their rights on government. Most importantly, the petition states, "... Mr Robinson made for us and with Colonel Arthur an agreement which we have not lost from our minds since and we have made our part of it good:" that is, "freely gave up our country to Colonel Arthur then the Governor after defending ourselves."

Whilst Reynolds' case makes it difficult to dismiss the possibility of a binding

agreement between Aborigines and the colonial government, his reliance on one petition to substantiate his assertion of a treaty in Tasmania is fraught with risk. Information is lacking about who Robinson dealt with, what was said between Robinson and the government, and how the government perceived the agreement. Such supporting material is not, of course, readily available. What scant sources do exist, Reynolds has used well to forge a serious questioning of agreement made by Robinson with the Aborigines. Robinson was clearly the government's agent; he clearly made promises; and he - and the Aboriginal petitioners - acknowledged the breaches of those promises. Do these facts have any legal meaning? Already Aborigines in Tasmania have given notice of their intention to pursue possessory title claims through the Supreme Court. The litigation is dependent on historical material of the type Reynolds examines. The timing of the book could not have been better.

Henry Reynolds does not surface as an enlightened historian simply because he adopts a generous view of the survival of Aboriginal rights. Nor does he romanticize the Aboriginal resistance of the invasion, for he makes it clear that Aborigines fought back, quite violently at times. He represents a modern historian freed up of the cultural bias of the historians of a past generation. His frankness with facts and events is accompanied by a contemporary view that all history which shakes the present should be examined, so that all the consequence of the past and not just the negative ones suffered by Aborigines are realised.■

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