

***A Very Secret Trade* by Cassandra Pybus**

Preface

‘The great Australian silence’ was how the anthropologist Bill Stanner characterised the history of colonisation and settlement. In a series of consequential lectures in 1968, Stanner made his now famous observation that we had a national ‘cult of forgetfulness’, a deliberate amnesia about the past—not so much denying the trauma of the colonial invasion and violent displacement of the original owners as forgetting that such things ever happened. The presentation of Australian history, Stanner said, was ‘a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape . . . We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.’

Half a century ago, Stanner was right on the money. As an undergraduate completing honours in history at the University of Sydney, I was an exemplar of the cult, knowing nothing about the history of my country and having not the slightest interest in finding out. When I began my doctoral research, I chose to focus on the intergenerational trauma of African slavery in the American South, extrapolating on the quote of the novelist William Faulkner: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ The irony that a descendant of colonial settlers in Australia should turn to the United States to explore that theme was completely lost on me. I was astonished when my friend Lyndall Ryan told me that her doctoral thesis was on the history of Aboriginal Tasmanians. *Who would care about what happened in Tasmania?* I wondered. I remember her telling me that ‘during my research, I found your ancestor, Richard Pybus’ and suggesting that I should read the journals of his friend, George Augustus Robinson, to find out more. It was more than a decade later, when I had moved to live in the place settled by my ancestor, that I took her advice. Reading Robinson turned my world around. I came to understand that Tasmania could be for me what Mississippi had been for William Faulkner: a landscape of memory that allows a personal exploration of the dark recesses and moral complications of national history.

One of the things I have learnt in the process is that Stanner’s brilliant trope of the ‘cult of forgetfulness’ was the perspective of a man who was not a historian. My research into the colonial past in archives, newspapers, diaries and personal papers has revealed much that has been wilfully forgotten, but also there was a good deal that was deliberately hidden at the time, especially interactions with the original owners of the land. Communications never committed to paper, official records never made, diaries that spoke of events in enigmatic riddles or code, personal papers discreetly laundered to remove problematic evidence . . . all of these hidden histories vastly complicate the task of truth telling.

While writing my book *Truganini: Journey through the apocalypse*, I was haunted by Truganini’s anguished request that, after she died, her body be sunk into the D’Entrecasteaux Channel: ‘Bury me here, it is the deepest place. Promise me. Promise me.’ It was only after I had written her life story that I began to understand the full extent of her anguish. When that book was all but finished, I was browsing the personal papers of a distinguished Tasmanian historian when I happened upon the transcribed letter of a colonial lawyer who was a very prominent member of the Royal Society of Tasmania. This letter took my breath away. Written six years before Truganini’s death, the letter boasted ownership of the complete skeleton of one of her closest companions. Once I had recovered from the shock, I made a hasty addition to my book to include this startling information. Then I went looking for more.

It is something of a truism of historical research that you never see what you are not looking for, which may explain why this colonial lawyer escaped my notice. I would not have thought to pay him any attention, let alone read through multiple volumes of his business letterbooks to find—among correspondence about investments, wills and interest payments—a number of letters about his acquisition of the skeletal remains of the First People. That these incriminating letters had remained among his archived papers could be explained by his unexpected death in 1878, while he was only in middle age. That did not explain why the distinguished historian who had transcribed the letters into his own voluminous archive in the 1960s had chosen not to remark upon them in his published writing.

These letters were a revelation to me. I realised that even after years of exhaustive research, I still did not know the full story of what happened to the First People of Tasmania who had been exiled from their country and died in the custody of the colonial government. I had never seen an official death notice or burial record for anyone, other than the two supposed ‘last’— memorialised as King Billy and Queen Truganini. There were no official records in the archives, nor had any been created.

I was driven to investigate what this was all about, but could never have imagined how hard it would be to excavate the story of what I came to regard as ‘secret whitefella business’. More than once over the past four years I have wanted to abandon the project. It was the words of the Noongar poet and novelist Claire Coleman, which I heard on ABC Radio National in July 2022, that convinced me to persevere. She said: ‘There are truths out there that need to be found.’