

1. Aboriginal people and early European activity

The first people to live in Clarence were the Moomairremener, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, a band of the Oyster Bay tribe. Their home was all of present-day Clarence as well as Pittwater. There were probably up to eighty people in the band, made up of a number of extended families. They were hunter-gatherers, moving around the area to take advantage of its plentiful food supply. Until the end of July the Moomairremener lived on the coast, eating shellfish and seaweed, then they followed the ducks which arrived in lagoons and rivers to lay their eggs and bring up their young. Around October the Moomairremener went to hunt on the inland plains around Risdon and Pittwater, firing the bush to maintain pasture for kangaroos.

Each Aboriginal tribe had a co-operative arrangement with another, by which they could spend some time in the other's territory, and in summer the Moomairremener went up the Derwent to the New Norfolk area to hunt, while the people there came down to the coast. In autumn they returned to the coast. Many middens along the shore, especially at Droughty Point, Bedlam Walls and Shag Bay, and Pipe Clay Lagoon to the east, are evidence of their activity in catching shellfish and game, and cooking it around fires. Shell and stone artefacts on Betsey Island show that Aborigines went there, travelling across the water in bark canoes. They probably paid only short visits, possibly to obtain mutton birds, penguins and penguin eggs in season. Other evidences of Aboriginal activity are stone tools, mainly scrapers, found at three stone artefact sites at Bedlam Walls, and a rock shelter at Shag Bay which has evidence of occupation up to ten thousand years ago. Europeans later recorded some Aboriginal place names: More.der.tine.ner and Reemere were South Arm, Trum.mer.ner pine.ne was Droughty Point, Nannyeleebata was Rokeby, Mole.he.ac Kangaroo Bluff, Lore.by.larner was Betsey Island, and Ray.ghe.py.er.ren.ne was one name for the Derwent River.¹

Aboriginal people lived a complex lifestyle. With spears and waddies (clubs) the men hunted large game like kangaroo, and they also carried fire, in a slow-burning brand. The women found roots, plants and small animals, dived for shellfish, and carried the children and belongings such as water containers and digging sticks. They also climbed trees for possums, made necklaces from shells, and wove grass and reeds into baskets. At night, the band would make a windbreak from branches and bark, or sometimes a more solid shelter. Women cropped their hair, while men grew

theirs longer, and loaded it with a mixture of grease and red ochre. For decoration, both wore shell necklaces, and cut their bodies then rubbed powdered charcoal into the wounds to raise scars in traditional patterns. Women often wore kangaroo-skin cloaks, useful for carrying children or equipment, and everyone protected themselves from the cold by rubbing their bodies with a mixture of fat, ochre and charcoal. Men and women married in their late teens, and if a spouse died the survivor usually remarried quickly, with the new partner taking responsibility for children of the first marriage. Family life was important, as were spiritual beliefs, and song and dance.²

One Aboriginal legend told of some girls who crossed over to Betsey Island, Lore.by.larner. While they were enjoying themselves there, probably catching shellfish and lighting a fire to cook it, some men of another tribe saw smoke from their fire, and followed them. Alarmed, the girls fled to the south end of the island. The men chased them, and when the girls reached the end of the island all they could do was jump into the sea. The men followed them. The Evil Spirit, Rageoropper, disapproved of this action and turned the men into rocks, which remain off the southern end of the island. The girls swam back, and rejoined their own people on the mainland.³

Our knowledge of the Moomairremener people comes from European observers, who came and went from 1642 onwards. Though they met different Aboriginal groups, early visitors did not describe any in the Clarence area. A little further up the Derwent River, near Herdsman's Cove, in 1798 Bass and Flinders met a man and two women, possibly from the Moomairremener band. The explorers went up to them, taking a black swan as a gift. The women snatched up their baskets and ran away, but the man, who had some spears in his hand, stayed to meet them, and accepted the swan 'with rapture'. He looked intelligent, benign and frank, thought the explorers, and was short, slight and middle-aged. They made signs asking him to show them where he lived and he led them into the bush, but was so 'slow and wandering' and stopped so often pretending to be lost, that they decided his aim was 'amuse them and tire them out' (and perhaps he did not want intruders visiting his home). Afraid of losing the tide, they parted from him 'in great friendship'. Along the river they saw huts and fireplaces, which were surrounded by heaps of mussel-shells and bones of small animals – possums, 'squirrels', kangaroo-rats and bandicoots. They also landed on Betsey Island and saw signs that Aboriginal people lived there.⁴

The Moomairremener people continued their usual life in Clarence until 1803; European explorers came to south, east, west and north of Clarence but rarely landed there. In other areas the Europeans met Aborigines and there was some conflict and even murders, but in Clarence their main

legacy was place-names. Tasman in 1642 named the island Van Diemen's Land, and provided the Dutch names Stoom Bay, after the weather he experienced there, and Frederick Henricx Bay, which he gave to a bay on the east coast. The next visitor, Furneaux in 1773, moved the name Frederick Henry Bay to its present site. He and the next few British explorers concentrated on Adventure Bay, but Bruny D'Entrecasteaux surveyed Storm Bay, the Derwent River and the present Frederick Henry Bay. His men bestowed many names in Clarence, but the only ones surviving are Cape Deslacs, after a seaman, and Cape Contrariety (originally Contratiété), after the difficult time his sailors had with contrary winds. John Hayes, the next explorer, was unaware of D'Entrecasteaux' activity and gave sites his own names: Clarence after his ship the *Duke of Clarence*, Relph's Bay (now Ralphs Bay) and Risdon after two of his officers, Mount Direction as it pointed north, and the Derwent River and Betsey Island.⁵

These visitors had no effect on the people in Clarence, but Bass and Flinders' visit did so. Bass thought that Risdon Cove would be an excellent place for a settlement, with its good creek (he saw it at the start of summer), fertile park-like valley, rich soil and 'thick juicy grass'.⁶ (This arcadian scene had been created by the Moomairremener people, firing the bush each year for their hunting.) In Sydney Governor King was afraid that the French would try to settle in Van Diemen's Land, so in 1803 he sent a group to forestall them. Impressed by the Bass report, and ignoring Flinders' comment that the creek at Risdon was so insignificant he could barely fill his water casks, King gave instructions that the settlement be formed about this area.⁷ In September 1803 Lieutenant John Bowen, aged twenty-three, arrived at Risdon Cove with two ships, the *Albion* and *Lady Nelson*, and 49 people: rebellious convicts (naturally the overseers in Sydney had got rid of their most troublesome people), lazy, unco-operative soldiers (for much the same reason), a few free settlers, a surgeon, provisions, livestock, and his seventeen-year-old mistress, Martha Hayes, who had just become pregnant. For the rest of her life she enjoyed boasting that she had been the first white woman to set foot in Tasmania – she won a race with another woman to tread on the shore.⁸

Bowen sent reports back to Sydney with the returning ships, and these sounded quite promising: the stream was good (it was springtime), the settlement was on a hill with a good view (but quite a walk from the water supply at the bottom of the hill), the three settlers had been allotted their five acres each, the soldiers and convicts had comfortable huts. As instructed, he called the town 'Hobart', after the British secretary of state for the colonies. Bowen's main problem was that the workmen were 'very few and very bad' and the soldiers 'very discontented ... and give me some

trouble'. He reported that he had not seen a single 'Native'; some people had, but found them shy and since then they had not reappeared. This probably referred to the visit of a man, armed with a spear, who entered the camp, accepted the trinkets offered him, but did not look surprised at the scene. 'By his gestures [the Europeans] inferred that he discharged them from their trespass. He then turned towards the woods, and when they attempted to follow, he placed himself in the attitude of menace, and poised his spear.'⁹ People on the ship which had brought the expedition to Risdon reported that the Aborigines were numerous, very friendly, and undaunted even when a musket was fired, though they could not be persuaded to visit the settlement. One of the sailors from the ship and an Aborigine from Sydney shot a kangaroo, which a group of Moomairremener tried to take, 'making use of every policy to wheedle [the sailor] out of his booty; but, as they did not offer or threaten violence' he managed to keep it. They treated the sailor with 'much affability and POLITENESS', but were indignant towards his Aboriginal companion.¹⁰

King was pleased with Bowen's report, and sent more soldiers and convicts, bringing the settlement's population to about a hundred. But Bowen was young and inexperienced, said to be weak and easily led, not the stuff of which leaders are made.¹¹ His problems worsened; he quarrelled with his second-in-command, as summer approached the stream started to dry up, and no progress was made in planting government crops. Three settlers did prepare land for ploughing, but they had no seed to sow – and growing crops was vital in a new settlement. A storehouse was built by the stonemason, Richard Clark, but that and some huts and outbuildings were all Bowen could point to as achievement.¹² Late in 1803 he deserted his command. He discovered that some convicts were planning to rob the store, and when a ship happened to put into the Derwent for water, bringing news that war had broken out with France, he took the opportunity to go to Sydney to take the offenders for punishment, saying patriotically that he was then going back to England to fight the French.¹³

As summer wore on, life at Risdon Cove was dreadful. The Moomairremener, attuned to the area, would have been hunting game, but at Risdon rations were cut as food started to run out, and water too was running out as there was no rain and the stream dried up to a few pools.¹⁴

February brought change, as more ships appeared. In England the authorities had also been alarmed at French interest in southern Australia, and sent Lieutenant David Collins to form a settlement, with a much larger expedition. He tried Port Phillip in Victoria, found it unsuitable, and sailed to the Derwent.

Collins was appalled by the Risdon settlement, with its lack of water and progress; the land was poor, the people were miserable, the landing place was silted up, the storehouse was poorly situated, and there was almost nothing to show for five months' work. He chose a far better site at Sullivan's Cove across the Derwent, and once he had established his camp there, the western shore became the focus of European activity and even took over the official name of the first settlement. Risdon continued for a while, however, as Collins had no wish to take over its unpromising people. But his feelings about Risdon must have been mild compared to those of one of his settlers, Henry Hayes, who in February 1804 discovered among the wretched people there his daughter Martha, about to give birth, abandoned by her lover, with no money or prospects and not even enough to eat.¹⁵

March saw more arrivals. In Sydney, Governor King was furious with Bowen for deserting his post and sent him back to Risdon, to hand over charge of the settlement to Collins and settle his 'private concerns' – King took good care of his own illegitimate children. With Bowen he sent Martha Hayes' convict mother and her uncle, possibly thinking that this served Bowen right. They all arrived together in time for the baby's birth, at which both parents and two grandparents were present. The baby was called Henrietta after her grandfather, and was the first white child born in Clarence.¹⁶

By now Collins organised almost all white activity and little was happening at Risdon. Bowen remained as 'the Governor of Risdon Creek', and went shooting, walking and dining, sometimes with the clergyman from Hobart, who came over to take occasional services. Bowen also established Martha Hayes in a farm of her own at New Town, with a house, livestock and her parents close by. Then eight of his men said guard duty was too hard, and rebelled. Bowen flogged the ringleaders and marooned the men on Garden Island (from which Collins rescued them). He also went exploring in the south, and while he was away the Risdon massacre occurred.¹⁷

The Risdon settlers had seen a little of the Aboriginal people since September. When out hunting kangaroo, some of the Moomairremener people met them. Naturally they did not like the newcomers using their food supply, and took the white men's catch. They also tried to stop survey parties from pegging out the ground for farms and ships' crews from collecting oysters, another valuable part of their food supply.¹⁸ There was no actual conflict, however, until 3 May 1804.

There are different reports of what happened, but it appears that a large group of Aboriginal men, women and children came down the valley at Risdon armed with waddies or clubs, hunting

kangaroos. They looked peaceful to the first person to see them, a workman hoeing land, but the acting commandant – accused of being drunk at the time – panicked and ordered that a cannon be fired, and at least three Aborigines were killed, though there were also claims that fifty died.

Whatever the true story, it is clear that the Aborigines were peaceful hunters, and violence came from the Europeans. Collins was afraid of reprisals, which did happen; a few days later men collecting oyster shells on the river bank opposite Hobart were beaten off with stones and clubs by some Aborigines. An orphaned Aboriginal child left behind in the rush to flee was taken to be raised by Europeans and was christened Robert Hobart May. He was cared for by a ‘gentleman’ in Hobart, who reported that he was very fond of kangaroo meat, was remarkably active and tractable, handled a spear with ‘surprising agility’ and ‘opposes with firmness every imagined danger’. It is not clear what happened to the boy.¹⁹

The Moomairremener could have felt victorious for a period. They beat off the men collecting oysters, and later that year the Risdon settlement was virtually abandoned. The Moomairremener continued to visit the area as they always had until at least 1808, for their fires were seen there every summer and autumn.²⁰