



The white hunter-gatherers

GOVERNOR Phillip chose Port Jackson for the first European colony in Australia because it was a fine harbour, and Sydney Cove for a village because of fresh water from the Tank Stream.

However poor soils made the site unproductive for agriculture and the brave colonists on the far side of the world lacked the knowledge and skills to harvest native foods from the bush.

As the supplies they carried dwindled the convicts, soldiers and administrators began to starve and hoped for help from the home country, from Cape Colony in Africa or Norfolk Island. But it was their sister colony in then Van Diemen's Land which saved them.

Unlike the unfortunate Sydneysiders, the first Vandemonian colonists who landed at Risdon Cove near the mouth of the Derwent River encountered a fertile, well-watered land with a climate agreeable to northern Europeans. Moreover, there were abundant natural foods which were easy to procure.

After a short period of privation as their supplies grew low, they adapted to the new, relatively benign environment and began to flourish. The first grain harvests were

successful and surplus was sent north to help out those starving at Port Jackson.

There were no walls to keep the several hundred convicts locked up so, presuming there was little incentive for them to abscond, they were just let go.

Many of them immediately went feral, but maintained contact with the administration and were employed hunting for the government store.

They easily killed kangaroo, wallaby, emu, echidna and black swan which were relatively tame, fished and harvested mussels and large oysters which littered the shorelines.

They had relatively good relations with the natives and adopted from them kangaroo skin cloaks, hats and mocassins, and sheltered in low, A-frame thatched huts. They were Australia's first and only white hunter-gatherers.

Game in the vicinity of the colony was soon exhausted so the feral population moved out onto the Midlands – open grasslands teeming with wildlife which extended 200 kilometres north to the satellite colony of York Town, later Launceston, on the Tamar River.

Greyhound-type hunting dogs were imported and were so successful catching kangaroos they were enthusiastically adopted by all classes including the Aborigines and became valuable items of trade or theft.

Convicts employed as shepherds adopted similar lifestyles and merged with what were then called "bushrangers". Some committed atrocities and were pursued, caught and hung. But most were tolerated because there was little the governor or soldiers could do anyway.

The rest were employed on government projects, public works and farming. It was a comfortable system with the various elements cooperating and had little reason to change. Visitors often remarked on the primitive

nature of improvements, and the feral convicts felt no need to settle, build or farm.

By 1817, the population of bushrangers was so great it threatened the power of the government, and Lt Governor Sorrel had to negotiate personally in writing with self-proclaimed "lieutenant governor of the bushrangers", Michael Howe.

In the 1820s new settlers arrived with the notion of absolute property rights which was developing in England along with the conquest of nature in the early years of the industrial revolution.

This was at variance with the convicts who came from the poor forced off communal land they relied on by enclosures in England and Ireland.

In the Midlands there were two decades of shared land use by the feral population without seeking exclusive possession.

The needs of orderly government and expectations of free settlers, however, eventually forced both the ferals and the Aborigines off the plains into the wooded hill country.

The two economies were not compatible so a divergence in culture occurred which is apparent on the Apple Isle still today.

There's a lot of free camping in Tasmania and over the summer whole extended families often camp together with tents, trucks and boats, fishing and lobster-potting semi-commercially.

A unique culture has developed with a heritage preserving an anti-establishment and independent outlook.

To this day, wildlife harvesting continues as a tradition in Tasmania. It is legal to kill Bennet's wallaby, Tassie's version of the mainland's red-necked wallaby which is stringently protected. The meat is on sale in major supermarkets, labelled "Wallaby Meat".



A young Donald Blundstone with a freshly harvested rack of mutton birds on Big Dog Island.

Brushtail possums can be taken under permit for crop protection or commercial purposes either by spotlight shooting or trapping and shooting on site. Muttonbirds are still harvested on offshore islands.

Tasmania's relatively tame wildlife, attributed to historically lacking a sprinting predator like dogs, can still be seen in the fat, waddley pademelons which litter the country as roadkill and with a license can be shot too.

Large Tasmanian oysters frequent the shoreline everywhere and a meal can be had in minutes, although you can't eat them from the Tamar River south of Launceston because of pollution.

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