



Tasmania's dark history involved dozens of Aboriginal massacres, how should we recognise them?

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Cape Grim is still owned by a farming enterprise but Aboriginal people are given access to the site. Sunday marked the date of one of the bloodiest days in Tasmania's history, but the anniversary of the Cape Grim massacre — on which about 30 Aboriginal men were killed — passed unknown to most Tasmanians.

Key points:

- Aboriginal massacres are not formally marked in Tasmania
- Some in the community say there are too many to commemorate
- Community is still waiting for names like Suicide Bay to be removed

On February 10, 1828, during the height of the period known as the Black War (1824–1831), the men were massacred by four Van Diemen's Land (VDL) company shepherds near Cape Grim, in the state's far north-west.

After tensions over a previous killing and stock theft, the shepherds shot the men, threw their bodies from a cliff and fired on their families camped on the beach below.

But for more than 100 years, historian Lyndall Ryan says the true story of the Cape Grim massacre was lost, and myths and lies were left in its place.



A graph marks the area of the Cape Grim massacre where 30 Aboriginal men were killed and thrown from a cliff.

The company's initial version of events was very different.

"The company was certainly not willing to make it better known, so they went in for a big cover-up and they acknowledged that three Aboriginal people had been killed," Professor Ryan said.

That version was accepted until 1966, with the publishing of journals written by controversial conciliator George Augustus Robinson, who was involved in the removal of Tasmanian mainland Aboriginal people to Flinders Island.

"He interviewed some of the Aboriginal survivors ... and at least two of the perpetrators ... they were convict servants working for the company," Professor Ryan said.

"They were quite open about what they did."

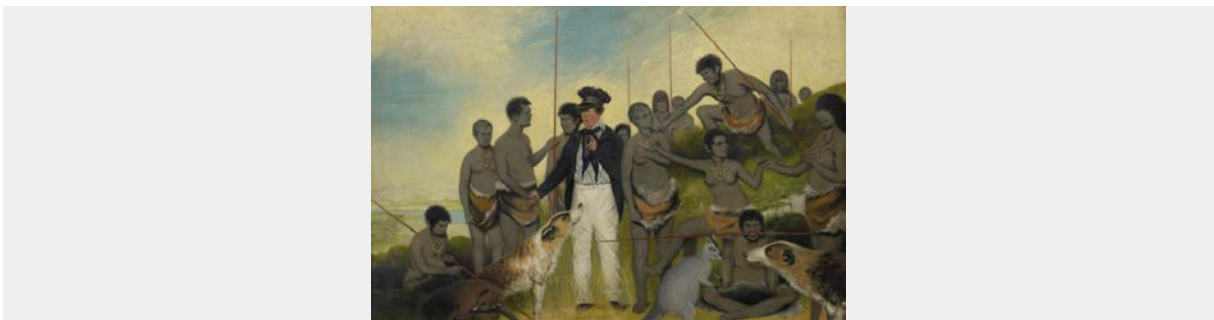


PHOTO George Augustus Robinson wrote about the Cape Grim massacre in his journal.

By comparing the records of the VDL company with Robinson's journals, historians were able to piece together what happened on that dark day.

Heather Sculthorpe from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) said it was just one of many atrocities.

"The attempted extermination of our people was so almost complete that few of those stories have been handed down," she said.

'Time to change the names'

The cover-up of the Cape Grim massacre left scars and even shaped the name of the landscape.

"The place where our ancestors were run over and killed, that has been named Suicide Bay," Ms Sculthorpe said.



PHOTO Tunnerminnerwait witnessed the 1828 massacre as an 11 year old.

The TAC wants the name of Suicide Bay to be changed to its original name, luwuka.

In 2017, the centre submitted 11 new names in palawa kani, the revived Tasmanian Aboriginal language, as dual and replacement names for sites around the state, nine of which are in the north-west.

But the Tasmanian Government has yet to change any of the names.

"One of the main ways to get the general Tasmanian, Australian and world population to know about the history of Aboriginal-white relations on this island, is to get our names for places back in use," Ms Sculthorpe said.

While the bid to change place names plays out, there are mixed views in the Aboriginal community about whether the Cape Grim massacre and others should be formally marked.



PHOTO Professor Lyndall Ryan with a map that plots massacres of Aboriginal people in the Frontier Wars.

It occurs in other parts of the country, such as at Myall Creek in New South Wales.

The TAC commemorated February 10, 2019 in a social media post, but Ms Sculthorpe said she did not think the day itself needed any special recognition.

"If we were doing some public ceremony each time then we'd never get anything else done. There's just so much of it."

She also said by focusing on one day, it could "undervalue the significance of all those other people who lost their lives".

State Government called on to recognise massacres

But chief executive of the Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation (CHAC), Dianne Baldock disagreed and called on the State Government to acknowledge the day.

"They acknowledge the events of Port Arthur, so why can't they acknowledge Aboriginal history?" she asked.

Coordinator at CHAC Camilla Woolley believes that should go even further.



PHOTO Heather Sculthorpe wants to rename the site of the massacre.

"I think they [the Government] should recognise all the major massacres that happened not just in Tasmania, but Australia-wide during that period of time," she said.

CHAC would also like to see some sort of memorial on the site to help educate visitors and encourage reflection.

Cape Grim and the surrounding land is still in the hands of VDL, but the farming enterprise was purchased by Chinese company Moon Lake Investments in 2016.

The company allows Aboriginal people access to traditional sites, once they acquire the correct permissions.

Ms Sculthorpe said she would like to see the Aboriginal community given more resourcing to educate the wider Tasmanian community.

"We don't think it's a job for the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs to educate the people," she said.

"It should be our own community that does that, but we can't do all that without resourcing."

The State Government said the revised dual-naming policy, which will could see offensive names removed, is due to be completed by mid-year.



PHOTO Smithton High School students learning about the history of Cape Grim.