

Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse

Cassandra Pybus

Allen & Unwin (Sep 1, 2020)

Softcover \$24.95 (336pp)

978-1-76052-922-2

Truganini is a near-mythic figure in Australian history; called “the last Tasmanian,” she died in 1876. Drawing on contemporary sources, Cassandra Pybus reconstructs Truganini’s eventful life, from her early abuse at the hands of whalers to her final days as a romanticized curiosity. She peers beyond the legends and recovers the human being who saw her people wiped out and her lands stolen by white colonists.

The book’s main source is the diary of a self-styled evangelist, George Augustus Robinson, with whom Truganini traveled for many years. On their arduous treks through the Australian bush, Robinson rounded up as many Aboriginal people as he could, collecting them on barren islands that killed Robinson’s captives, rather than protect them as he intended. Maps at the beginning of the book help with visualizing the stolen lands through which Robinson and his company traveled, and the islands where the Aboriginal people were imprisoned.

As her ever-dwindling circle of friends and family succumbed to illness and violence, Truganini survived to witness the decline and disintegration of her world. But among horrifying tales of exploitation and abuse are moments of joy. Truganini loved diving for abalone, staying underwater for close to five minutes at a time, and performing nighttime dances with loved ones. She and some of Robinson’s other guides even managed to pull the wool over his eyes a time or two.

The book has an inevitable unhappy ending and is an important reminder of the continuing impact of racism and colonialism. However, Truganini’s life is worth more than its surrounding circumstances. Her words and thoughts are lost to us, but she was a human being whose story deserves to be told for its own sake.

Truganini is a powerful biography set during the colonization of nineteenth-century Australia.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2020)

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