

## **Minutes of a meeting of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association, held in the Royal Society Room, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, on Tuesday 12 June 2012**

Present: The president, Caroline Homer, in the chair and about 55 members and friends.

Apologies: Michael Roe, Elspeth Wishart, Mary Ramsay

Minutes: The minutes of the April meeting were not available and so not read.

Business: No business.

Speaker: The President introduced Mr Robert Cox, who spoke on the topic, 'Black Tom Birch: Fact and Fiction'.

The speaker began by observing that Black Tom Birch, also known as Birch's Tom or more correctly as Kickerterpoller, was the most hated and feared man in Tasmania during the 1820s. This was due to his successfully leading a sustained guerrilla war of resistance against the white invasion of the island. He noted that many myths have surfaced about his life and career. The speaker had written about him in two earlier books and became fascinated by his story, seeing him as an admirable character – a patriot, a hero and leader. He is currently preparing a biography, which he hoped would make people more aware of his importance.

Contrary to the generally received version of his life, Mr Cox argued that evidence indicates that Kickerterpoller was not fostered by Thomas and Sarah Birch from an early age but came into their household in 1819 as a youth after he being given medical treatment and baptised by Rev Knopwood. He therefore cannot be classed as one of the stolen generations. He initially worked as the Birches' servant at Macquarie House, Hobart, then at their properties at Duckhole Farm and Lovely Banks. After Birch senior's death in 1822 he seems to have been mistreated by convict workers upon whom he later exacted revenge during his war of resistance, and by Birch's executor, and Sarah Birch's second husband, Edward Hodgson. He joined Musquito's 'Tame Mob' and was involved in the killings of two stock-keepers at Grindstone Bay in November 1823. Citing correspondence from Roderic O'Connor Mr Cox argued that the killings, which are usually thought to have begun the eight year war of resistance to Europeans, were instigated by Kickerterpoller after an Aboriginal woman was shot in the back.

That Kickerterpoller was the key leader in the ensuing war of resistance is shown by the frequency with which he was mentioned, usually in vituperative terms, in the colonial press.

Umarrah who many consider a significant leader, by contrast, was mentioned rarely.

Kickerterpoller was captured three times, the second in 1826 when a number of his companions were killed in a covered-up massacre. On the first he avoided transportation to Macquarie Harbour through the intercession of his well-connected 'foster' mother, Sarah Hodgson.

Despite his well-known activities, Kickerterpoller was always released from gaol, perhaps due to his connections. Perhaps his command of English and having been baptised made authorities nervous to prosecute him. In 1827 he served as a clerk of the Hobart Gaol and Floating Chapel. At around this time he appears to have changed sides and guided Gilbert Robertson's roving party that captured Umarrah. He was then a guide on George Augustus Robinson's 'Friendly Mission'. Why he changed sides is unclear. Mr Cox postulated that he possibly realised that the invaders were too numerous and determined, and that negotiation was the only way for Aboriginal Tasmanians to survive. He may have seen himself as a statesman who could save his people. His activities for Robertson and Robinson were never simple as he often seemed to hinder as much as help their efforts to capture Aborigines. Eventually Kickerterpoller died, still a young man, at Emu Bay in 1832, while working for Robinson.

The speaker concluded that Kickerterpoller should be better known and memorialised beyond an obscure waterhole on Duckhole Farm which known as Black Tom's.

The President thanked Mr Cox for his fascinating and well-presented talk bringing to attention a little known yet significant Tasmanian. After a lively question session, members enjoyed supper.

Ian Terry for Michael Roe.