

Cape Barren Island Reserve

1881 – 1951

Other Names: • The Reserve

Details

Cape Barren Island Reserve was created in 1881 for the use of the descendants of Aboriginal women and European sealers living in the Furneaux Islands of Bass Strait. From the late 1920s, many Aboriginal children were removed from their parents on Cape Barren Island. It ceased to be a reserve in 1951.

Following the death of Trucanini in 1876, most white Tasmanians believed that there were no more Aboriginals left alive. Yet the descendants of Aboriginal women and white sealers continued to live on the Furneaux Islands. In 1871, the Islanders petitioned the Governor for a reserve and the exclusive use of the mutton bird rookeries. Instead they received two ten hectare blocks on Cape Barren Island for homesteads and agricultural pursuits. In addition, the rookeries on Chapell and Big Dog Islands were gazetted under the *Game Preservation Act*. According to Lyndall Ryan, by its actions, the government accepted that the Islanders were a separate community but did not acknowledge that they had exclusive rights because of their Aboriginality. Following a series of missions by the Anglican Church, pressure from Canon Marcus Brownrigg, who sought to increase Anglican influence on the Island, and a campaign by the Islanders, the government set aside 2500 hectares for the Islanders. It became known as 'the reserve'.

For the first 20 years 'the reserve' was jointly run and funded by the government and the Anglican Church. However, it did not have a residential mission and the missionary/school teacher had few powers because in Tasmania there was no Aboriginal protection legislation. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church's role declined significantly.

The *Cape Barren Island Reserve Act* of 1912 provided for the subdivision of the Cape Barren Island Reserve into homesteads and agricultural blocks specifically for the use of the descendants of Aboriginal women and white sealers living in the Furneaux Group of islands. The purpose of the Act was to force the Cape Barren Islanders to become self sufficient agriculturalists. The state government wanted to encourage Islanders to move to the mainland so they made it possible for them to obtain a license to lease Crown land elsewhere in Tasmania. The Act provided for regulations to be made to control the residents.

In the 1920s, the mutton bird industry, and therefore the Islander economy, began to decline. In 1928, AW Burbury of the Fauna Board visited Cape Barren Island. He recommended that the children should be removed as soon as they left school and put to work as domestic servants or in trades on mainland Tasmania. The government did not act. However, from 1928 to 1980, the head teacher at the school was appointed special constable. This enabled him to use the existing child welfare legislation to arrest children for neglect so that they could become wards of state. He sometimes used a shed at the back of the school to lock them up. No specific legislation was ever passed in Tasmania to remove Aboriginal children.

According to the *Bringing them home* report, poverty, alcoholism, and the refusal to become the agriculturalists envisaged in the *Cape Barren Island Act*, meant that the Islanders risked losing their children. Another issue was that the Islanders relied on each other to help out with their children. Authorities saw this, not as a strength, but an indication of neglect. Poverty and fear of losing their children led the Islanders to move to Invermay in

Launceston or to mainland Australia. By 1944, there were only 106 left on the island.

In 1945, a new *Cape Barren Island Reserve Act* made it even more difficult for the Islanders to obtain a land grant. The idea was to force them to become self-sufficient agriculturalists or to leave the island. These policies appear to have specifically targeted the Islanders as Aboriginals. In addition, socially and culturally, white Tasmanians recognised them as such. Yet the government did not and continued to deny their Aboriginality.

By 1951, only one lessee was eligible for the land grant. The reserve closed. The government refused to help the Islanders, telling them that instead they must move to the mainland. Officials continued their efforts to remove Islander children from their families using the *Infant Welfare Act* of 1935 and later, the *Child Welfare Act* of 1960. In theory, parents could go to court to argue against a charge of neglect against their child but in practice it was difficult for them to get to Launceston where the cases were heard. Parents could also be imprisoned for the neglect of one child which meant that the rest of the children would then be made wards of state as well.

The *Bringing them home inquiry* heard the following account of a boy's removal from Cape Barren island:

The circumstances of my being taken, as I recollect, were that I went off to school in the morning and I was sitting in the classroom and there was only one room where all the children assembled and there was a knock at the door, which the schoolmaster answered. After a conversation he had with somebody at the door, he came to get me. He took me by the hand and took me to the door. I was physically grabbed by a male person at the door. I was taken to a motor bike and held by the officer and driven to the airstrip and flown off the island. I was taken from Cape Barren Island in October 1959 [aged twelve].

I had no knowledge [I was going to be taken], I was not even able to see my grandmother [and I had] just the clothes I had on my back, such as they were. I never saw Mum again.

More info

Related Entries

Related Legislation

- [Infants' Welfare Act 1935, Tasmania \(1935 - 1961\)](#)
Children from Cape Barren Island were committed to the 'care' of the state as neglected under the *Infant Welfare Act*.
- [Child Welfare Act 1960, Tasmania \(1960 - 2003\)](#)
Children from Cape Barren Island were committed to the 'care' of the state as neglected under the *Child Welfare Act*.
- [The Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1912, Tasmania \(1912 - 1945\)](#)
- [The Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1945, Tasmania \(1945 - 1951\)](#)
- [The Children of the State Act 1918, Tasmania \(1918 - 1936\)](#)
Children from Cape Barren Island were committed to the 'care' of the state as neglected under the *Children of the State Act*.

Related Organisations

- [Launceston Girls' Home \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
Launceston Girls' Home probably received children from Cape Barren Island Reserve.
- [Anglican Diocese of Tasmania \(1842 - 1981\)](#)
In conjunction with the state government, The Church of England In Australia and Tasmania ran the Cape Barren Island Reserve.
- [Children of the State Department, State of Tasmania \(1918 - 1934\)](#)
Some children from Cape Barren Island Reserve became wards of the Children of the State Department.

- [Social Services Department, State of Tasmania \(1934 - 1961\)](#)
Some children from Cape Barren Island Reserve became wards of the Social Services Department.
- [Northern Tasmanian Home for Boys \(1921 - 1973\)](#)
The Northern Tasmanian Home for Boys probably received children from Cape Barren Island Reserve.
- [Roland Boys' Home \(1951 - c. 1993\)](#)
Roland Boys' Home probably received children from Cape Barren Island Reserve.

Related Archival Series

- [Correspondence Files \(1919 - 1998\)](#)

Resources

- [Charles Saville interviewed by Lyn McLeavy in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\] \(2000\)](#), 13 June 2000
- [Dennis Daniels interviewed by Lyn McLeavy in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\] \(2000\)](#), 12 May 2000 - 25 June 2000
- [John Morris interviewed by Lyn McLeavy in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\] \(2000\)](#), 9 June 2000 - 13 June 2000
- Boyce, James, *God's own country?: the Anglican Church and Tasmanian Aborigines*, 2001

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