

# IN FOCUS

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Language researcher Rosetta Thomas and youth worker Daisy Allan with manuscripts. Picture: Adam Holmes



## DRAWING OUT A LANGUAGE

As extensive research continues into the earliest recordings and interpretations of Tasmanian Aboriginal language, a second palawa kani dictionary is being prepared for release, ADAM HOLMES reports.

**A**MONG the many words scrawled in George Augustus Robinson's journals from 1829 to 1834 was "pee-nick-er-ter", a word Aboriginal people at Cape Portland described to him to mean "make haste" or "go fast".

"pee-nick-er-ter" it could have been shouted, and like hundreds of other words, Robinson wrote down a meaning, spelling of how he heard it, the person he heard it from and other context.

Quaker missionary GW Walker also recorded the word - "py nick e tta", or "py nick e tteh" to mean "quickly", before Robinson again recorded the word - "pe-nick-er-tar" at Wybalenna.

There were nine recordings of the word from 1802 to 1910 with similar attempted spellings and meanings. A 1909 record "peenickta" came from Henry Beeton, a

brother of the Bass Strait Islands matriarch Lucy Beeton, and great-uncle to many Aboriginal families of today.

His version matches the earliest record of the word in 1826 from a French maritime traveller.

To gather these recordings, researchers at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre trawled dozens of journals and created comprehensive glossaries of Aboriginal words.

For "quickly", the various records were compared and contrasted, and then the spellings were transcribed into the international phonetics alphabet to determine as close as possible its original Aboriginal pronunciation: "pinkita".

Pinkita was one of the hundreds of words entered into the first palawa kani dictionary, published in 2013. And now, six years later, the TAC is preparing to release its second

edition with a further 300 words, including more place names.

It was the result of a strenuous process following international guidelines set in reconstructing extinct language.

When a word appears on a word list, like the individual listings of pinkita, a set criteria is followed to determine how credible it is. This includes the original recorder's language background, level of education and occupation, as well as their connection with the Aboriginal people such as the length of time they spent together and if they were named.

Co-ordinator Annie Reynolds said reviving palawa kani was more than just picking words out of a list based on one interpretation, and involved relying on all available historical sources.

"palawa kani combined words retrieved from as many of the original languages as possible, and that mirrors the way that the languages had been spoken at Wybalenna and Oyster Cove, which also mirrors the way that families of survivors of the invasion have since consolidated into one Tasmanian community," she said.

"palawa kani is authentic Tasmanian language retrieved from the original languages but it's not exactly the same as any of them."

George Augustus Robinson's role in Tasmanian history was perhaps one of the state's greatest ironies. From 1829 to 1834, he was given the task of "rounding up" Aboriginals for resettling at Wybalenna on Flinders Island.

Yet during his travels, he interacted extensively with the Aboriginal people - more so than any other historical figure - and kept comprehensive lists of the words he had described to him. His journals and vocabularies became the most important primary source for Tasmanian Aboriginal language.

His accounts were considered the most comprehensive before all Aboriginal people were brought together on the islands, where their languages mixed as they communicated with each other. Other English speakers then attempted to transcribe their languages.

But through displacement and suppression of language through the 19th and 20th centuries, the individual languages, which

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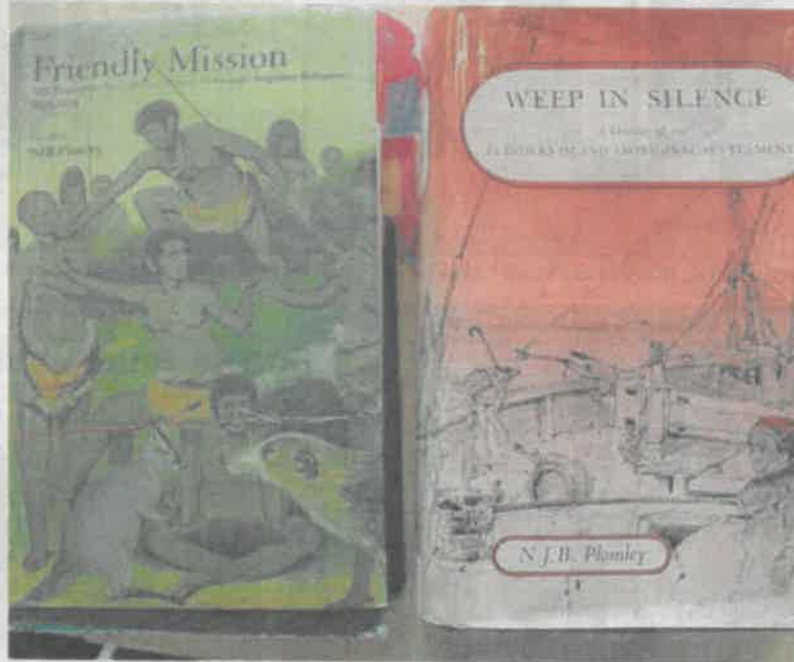
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**ABOVE:** Learning resources developed by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, including a draft of their new palawa kani dictionary.

**LEFT:** A photocopy of notes of Aboriginal words taken by George Augustus Robinson.

**BELOW:** Historical works based on the journals of George Augustus Robinson. **Pictures:** Adam Holmes



could have numbered between eight to 16, were robbed of their continuity.

"During that period, as the tribespeople were brought together from different parts of Tasmania and from different tribes, they had to start to talk more with people outside their own tribal group," Ms Reynolds said.

"A sort of lingo developed, which was a mix of words from the different original languages plus some Pidgin and English.

"That's where the language was at when it was last spoken fluently at Wybalenna, when it was starting even then to adapt to those historic circumstances."

Another difficulty researchers encountered was when English recorders would gather place names from Aboriginal people from entirely different regions, and attribute them to areas of which they were not familiar.

Joseph Milligan spent time with Aboriginal people at Wybalenna after Robinson had left, and recorded another 67 words.

By that time, languages had already been well-mixed and Milligan himself admitted he had limited knowledge of the individual Aborigines and their origin within Tasmania.

One of these words was "paranaple", which he recorded as the Mersey River with no further information about its provenance. Robinson also listed a word for Mersey River, but it was completely different: "tollumen-ergully", which he was told by two northern language-speaking Port Sorrell tribespeople at the river itself.

In the palawa kani alphabet, based on consistency of lettering and sounds, Robinson's word was "tulinakali", which shares similarities with "tulampanga", a northern language word for a significant ochre site.

Yet when an Aboriginal name was wanted for Devonport's new arts centre, the council went with "paranaple" - a word which was similar to another recording of Tamar River.

TAC language worker Daisy Allan said it was one of a number of examples in Tasmania in which a word was seemingly chosen at random from a word list - like Poatina from a south-eastern word for "cave" being used to name a Northern Midlands town.

The TAC has undertaken its work in retrieving and reviving Tasmanian Aboriginal language since 1993, funded by the federal government. The process has involved

initial support from linguistic experts, and follows a similar methodology to that used to bring back extinct Aboriginal languages on the mainland.

"Reconstruct' has got that connotation of making up something or creating something, but it's actually a linguistic term used worldwide in the recovery of languages that are sleeping or no longer spoken," Ms Allan said.

"It doesn't meant to construct or create in the sense of just making things up or randomly selecting European spellings from word lists."

The use of palawa kani has detractors, particularly from groups under the Tasmanian Regional Aboriginal Communities Alliance banner.

Co-chair Patsy Cameron said the process could result in the permanent loss of regionalised language and while they did not oppose palawa kani's development, they did not support it being used as a "singular" language for Tasmanian Aborigines.

"If the TAC wants to speak the reconstructed languages, they can. They can't put it in schools, it is false," she said.