

Peninsula, Isthmus, Island

Biopolitical Geographies in Colonial Van Diemen's Land

Megan J. Sheard

Proceedings of the Society of Architectural
Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)
Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland
and the Queensland University of Technology,
Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

Copyright of this volume belongs to SAHANZ;
authors retain the copyright of the content of their
individual papers. All efforts have been undertaken
to ensure authors have secured appropriate
permissions to reproduce the images illustrating
individual contributions. Interested parties may
contact the editors.

DOI: 10.55939/a5432pkil3

Citation:

Sheard, Megan J. "Peninsula, Isthmus, Island: Biopolitical
Geographies in Colonial Van Diemen's Land." In *Proceedings of
the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand:
40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 85-86.
Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural
Historians Australia
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

Peninsula, Isthmus, Island

Biopolitical Geographies in Colonial Van Diemen's Land

Megan J. Sheard. University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, USA

DOI: 10.55939/a5432pkil3

When Governor George Arthur wrote to the Colonial Office in London to make the case for his new penal enterprise at Port Arthur, he claimed that the Tasman Peninsula was “a Penitentiary formed by nature.”¹ Separated from the Forestier Peninsula and the Van Demonian mainland beyond by a narrow isthmus at teralina/Eaglehawk Neck, Port Arthur was the third penal settlement for male convicts established in the colony of Van Diemen's Land, and the first not to be located on an island. Its predecessors at langerraroune/Settlement Island in Macquarie Harbour and Maria Island off the east coast had both relied on a liquid perimeter as part of their confinement strategy, something which proved insufficient to prevent escapes. At Port Arthur, colonial experimentation in the use of strategic geographies for penal settlements would be refined based on experiences at the two island sites, in an attempt to reach a happy medium between separation and accessibility. The “naturally” carceral peninsula would be rendered a kind of island through a military settlement at teralina/Eaglehawk Neck while retaining the advantages of a land connection and relative proximity to Hobart Town.

The use of island and peninsula landscapes for carceral settlements in Van Diemen's Land and Australia generally is linked to broader patterns in which so-called “remote” geographies are transformed into confinement sites, patterns themselves embedded within global colonisation processes reliant on forms of unfree labour.² Recent work in island criminology makes explicit the simultaneous pursuit of “displacement, containment, seclusion, and colonization” by colonial powers at island sites at a global scale, as well as the frequent connection of such sites to extractive industry.³ In Van Diemen's Land, penal settlements were crucial to maintaining the colonial control over convict bodies that facilitated colony-building labour: timber-cutting, quarrying, and brickmaking were major activities at penal settlements, particularly Port Arthur, with outputs deployed to construct buildings and infrastructure for the early colony and beyond.

In this paper, I examine two sites linked to the penal system and located within island or peninsula geographies: the military settlement on the teralina/Eaglehawk Neck isthmus (1831–1870s) established to prevent convict escapes from Port Arthur, and the historically prior penal

1. TNA series: CO 206/61, “Miscellaneous. Precis and Memoranda, Convicts, etc.: New South Wales and Tasmania, 1810–1844,” Original Correspondence, Despatches 1810–1844 (AJCP ref: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1594921236>).

2. Clare Anderson, *Convicts: A Global History* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

3. John Geoffrey Scott and Zoe Staines, *Island Criminology* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023), 50.

station in Macquarie Harbour (1822–1833). Drawing on my own fieldwork as well as archival plans, sketches, and texts, I argue that penal settlements in Van Diemen’s Land enlisted water-bound landscapes into biopolitical experiments in controlling convict bodies. Despite relying heavily on surveillance, these experiments were open-ended and mutable, involving ongoing infrastructural and institutional improvisation to maintain their apparently natural remoteness. Critically, both sites demonstrate the imbrication of convict sites with genocidal strategies: teralina/Eaglehawk Neck was the planned destination of the 1830 “(Black) Line,” a military and civilian operation attempting to corral the entire Aboriginal population onto the Tasman Peninsula as part of a broader colonial war against Aboriginal resistance. The second site, the convict settlement in Macquarie Harbour (1822–1833),⁴ was used by George Augustus Robinson to incarcerate west coast Aboriginal people enroute to Flinders Island during his land clearances (1829–1834), and became a site of tragedy and death.⁵ While predominantly narrated as convict sites, I argue that the overlapping histories of violent control over convicts and Aboriginal people within these same spaces is not incidental.

Rather, it is the product of a biopolitics in which convict and Aboriginal bodies are differentially targeted for extractive control or elimination: in the latter case, with biopoliticised landscapes becoming necropolitical as they are used in colonial arbitration over life and death, and in the removal of survivors from Country.⁶

4.

The Macquarie Harbour site is often considered as synonymous with Settlement Island (more commonly called Sarah Island today). However, the formal settlement included a second, much smaller island known as Grummet Rock; other islands within the harbour were used for food cultivation, leisure, and navigation, meaning the settlement is better understood as a constellation of islands.

5.

Julie Gough, “Langerraroune (Sarah Island),” *The Companion to Tasmanian History*, The Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2006, https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/L/Langerraroune.htm; Lyndall

5.

Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019); Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016).