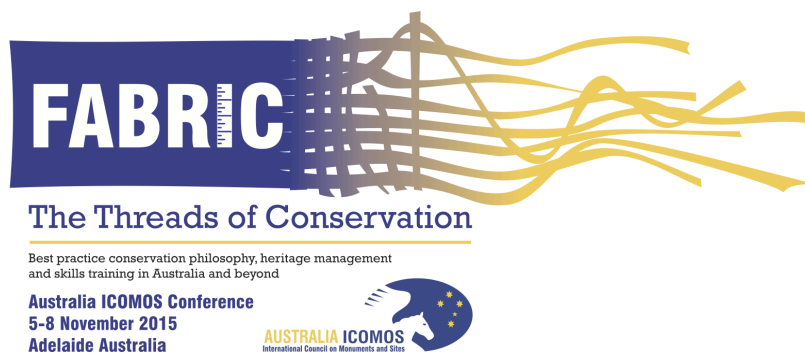


# **‘Prison and Playground: Reconciling The Conflicting Roles of a Coastal Island’**

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## **Prison and Playground: Reconciling the Conflicting Roles of a Coastal Island**

Western culture, argues Gillis (2004), has had ambivalent relationships with islands; a combination of attraction and repulsion. Their isolation has been exploited for use as prisons and quarantine stations, and as escape to destinations of paradise for continental tourists. (Jackson, 2008: 41)

Rottneest Island/Wadjemup, or 'Rotto' as it is most popularly known, lies in the Indian Ocean, approximately twenty kilometres west of the metropolitan coastline of Perth. It is recognised as one of Western Australia's iconic tourist destinations, but has a tenebrous past that is embodied in both the tangible and intangible attributes of the Island. This paper explores this difficult past and poses the question; is there a role for healing and reconciliation on Wadjemup and, if so, how can this be achieved. It draws on the work of myself and that of Bryn Coldrick as the authors of the 'Rottneest Island/Wadjemup Cultural Landscape Management Plan' prepared for the Rottneest Island Authority (RIA CLMP) in 2105.

The Cultural Landscape Management Plan (RIA, 2015) built on previous studies that had identified the heritage values of various elements of the Island, including geological markers of climate change, maritime exploration, colonial establishments and defence installations, but is distinguished, through the influential work of our colleague Dr Jane Lennon, by the consideration of the Island as an interacting and evolving whole. The cultural memory of the Nyungar people and the work of numerous artists and writers informed the identification and articulation of the Island's values and led to a series of principles to guide its future. (Note: Alternative spellings for Nyungar include Noongar, Nyoongar, Nyungah).

Rottnest Island/Wadjemup holds a strong emotional attachment for many Western Australians. It embodies the quintessential Australian holiday experience of the twentieth century that was neighbourly, practical and democratic. However, it has a particularly sad history as a purpose-built Aboriginal prison that operated for almost a hundred years from the earliest days of the Swan River Colony. It continues to hold a wellspring of grief for Aboriginal people all over Western Australia for its role in the removal, punishment and enforced labour of Aboriginal men and boys during the immediate Contact and post-Contact periods, many of whom died on the Island.

In comparison to Robben Island, South Africa, where proposals during the mid to late twentieth century to turn the Island into a recreation reserve were soundly defeated (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004; 1), the former prison cells on Rottnest Island/Wadjemup were converted for use as tourist accommodation with little, if any, recognition of the traumatic history associated with the Island.

Macdonald defines this dissonance as ‘difficult heritage’ and points out that increasingly around the world there is public concern with recognising a past that is meaningful but is also difficult to reconcile with a positive contemporary identity. (Macdonald 2009: 1). The Cultural Landscape Management Plan (RIA, 2015) sought to find a way to understand and reconcile the widely differing attachments and meanings of the Island with a view to a more positive future.

## THE ISLAND

Rottnest Island/Wadjemup is 11 kms long and 4.5 kms at its widest point, lying roughly perpendicular to the mainland approximately 20 kilometres from the port city of Fremantle in Western Australia. The land area of 1,900 hectares and associated seascape are included in an A-class reserve, which is the most protected type of

Crown (public) land in Western Australia. It is managed in accordance with the *Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987*, with the Minister for Tourism responsible for administering the Act. The Rottnest Island Authority Board is supported by the Rottnest Island Authority, which oversees the daily operations of the Island under the leadership of the Chief Executive Officer with a core staff of just over one hundred people.

The Nyungar name ‘Wadjemup’ is interpreted to mean ‘the place across the water where the spirits are’. While pre-colonial European maps record the Dutch name of ‘Rottenest’ and later the anglicised ‘Rottnest’, Wadjemup has not only been held in the long term cultural memory of the Nyungar people, it has been recorded as such on maps of the Island since the first colonial contact with the Aboriginal people of south-western Australia.

Rottnest Island/Wadjemup is the largest in a chain of islands and shoals on the continental shelf near Perth. It once formed part of the mainland until a rise in sea level 6,500 years ago. Nyungar cultural narratives about the creation of these offshore islands include a story, which describes a great fire that caused the ground to split asunder and the sea to rush in, cutting off the islands from the mainland. This story has been interpreted as an expression through cultural memory of the sea level rise. The Island is also associated with Nyungar beliefs concerning death and the Island is variously interpreted as a stop on the way to Kooranup (the home of the dead) or as being part of Kooranup (Bates 1992 and Wilson 1979).

While the continent of Australia was populated with a range of inhabitants who had not only lived here for many tens of thousands of years, but had cultural exchanges both within Australia and beyond, it wasn’t until the early 1600s that Europeans

began to refine a rather vague notion of what is now called Australia. Following the first authenticated European sighting of the Australian coastline in the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1606, Dutch exploration and surveying then occurred along the Western Australian coastline, with Rottnest Island/Wadjemup playing a key part in the European understanding of the Australian continent (Pearson 2005:51).

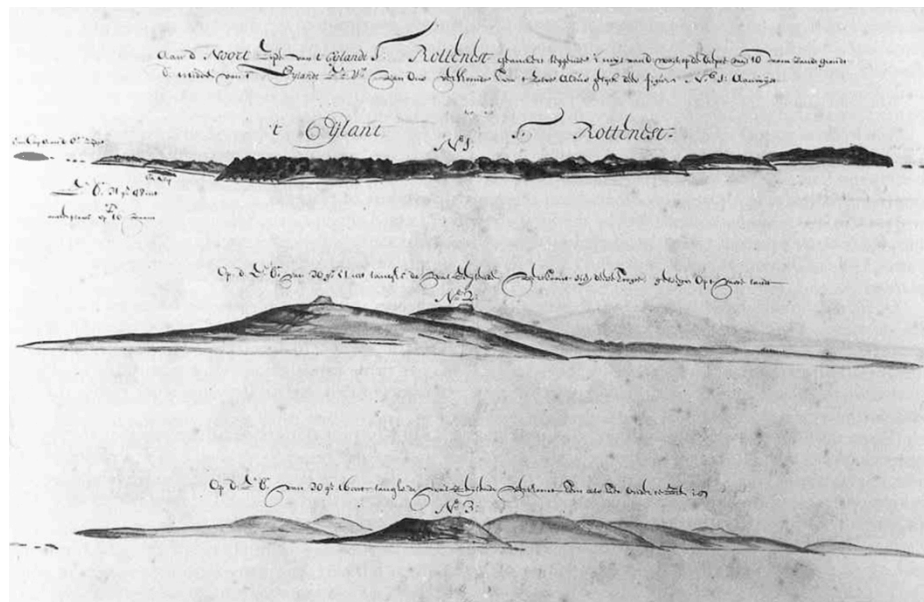


Figure 1: Rottnest Island ('t eyland Rottenest) coastal profile, Victor Victorszoon, 1697 (Maritiem Museum Prins Hendrik, Rotterdam, reproduced in Snell 1998)

In 1696 Willem de Vlamingh landed just north of the Swan River mouth and then careened at Thomson Bay to explore the Island. The name of the Island 'Rottnest', meaning 'rat's nest', dates from this time and is understood to refer to the marsupial quokkas (*Setonix brachyurus*), which abound on the Island. He wrote in his journal of 1696, 'I felt great pleasure in admiring this island which is a very pleasant place . . . which would appear to them a terrestrial paradise.' (WA Museum, 2007:2)

Sadly for the Aboriginal people of Western Australia, the Island was to become anything but a paradise. In 1829 Captain Charles Howe Fremantle arrived on the *HMS Challenger* setting the scene for the foundation of the Swan River Colony. In

1832, the colony was officially renamed Western Australia, when the colony's founding Lieutenant-Governor, Captain James Stirling, belatedly received his commission. Before long, conflict erupted between the colonials and the Nyungar population who were displaced from their traditional runs, hunting grounds and water sources. As is often the case, those who resisted were considered troublemakers and criminals and found themselves incarcerated and punished. Notable Nyungar leaders from this period include Midgegooroo and his son Yagan both of whom paid with their lives. Midgegooroo was summarily executed by firing squad in the centre of Perth (Collard and Jones 2007: 2).

## ISLAND PRISON

Rottneest Island/Wadjemup received its first six Aboriginal prisoners under a small party of soldiers on 17 August 1838. The prisoners' crimes ranged from stealing butter to murdering an Aboriginal woman in the streets of Perth. As no preparation had been made to accommodate them, the guards sheltered in a cave near Bathurst Point and at night the prisoners were chained to a tree (Watson 1939:15).

The historian Neville Green, who has undertaken extensive research on Rottneest Island/Wadjemup prison history with the assistance of Susan Moon and others, has identified three distinct phases in the history of the Island as an Aboriginal prison. The first from 1838–1849, was intended not merely to punish, but also to habituate the prisoners into colonial society. The second from 1855–1902, was a grim period of punishment when more than 3,000 prisoners arrived on the Island. In the final stage, 1902–1931, it became an annex of Fremantle Prison (Green and Moon 1997:14).

First and foremost, the Island prison it was designed from the start to be a deterrent against committing what the Protector of Natives, Charles Symmons, described as

‘acts of aggression’ against the settlers (Bathurst 1890: 4). By the end of the nineteenth century it had become ‘one of the most infamous penal hell-holes in Western Australia’ (Green and Moon 1997:14). As early as 1841, an early English settler, Edward Wilson Landor, observed ‘that nothing has tended so much to keep the Aborigines in good order as the establishment of this place of punishment’ (Landor 1847/1998:36).

In 1842, Henry Trigg, the engineer who supervised the building of the first lighthouse on the Island, observed weeping prisoners sitting along the beach. They were gazing across the sea at the mainland, watching the smoke rising from the campfires of their kinsfolk who were tortuously out of their reach. (Green and Moon 1997:22).

The Aboriginal men and boys who were sent to the Island initially came from the areas surrounding the Canning and Swan Rivers. As the Swan River colony expanded throughout the nineteenth century, and conflict between settlers and native populations spread, prisoners began to arrive from all over Western Australia including the South West, Goldfields, Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley regions. The offences for which these men were convicted and sentenced included murder (of settlers and other natives), assault, larceny, drunkenness, tribal spearings, stock stealing or killing, and absconding (Green and Moon 1997). ‘Absconders’ were Aboriginal people who either left or, who having been sent bush to fend for themselves, didn’t return to pastoral stations and accounted for about ten percent of prisoners on the Island. By far the most common offence was stock killing, a particularly foreign notion to people who had survived for tens of thousands of years by hunting the animals that roamed their traditional lands. Many of the sentences were found to be illegally harsh and lengthy and the result of ‘an over-zealous

prosecution of the law', with guilty pleas often secured 'at the muzzle of the rifle' (Green 2011:70–81).

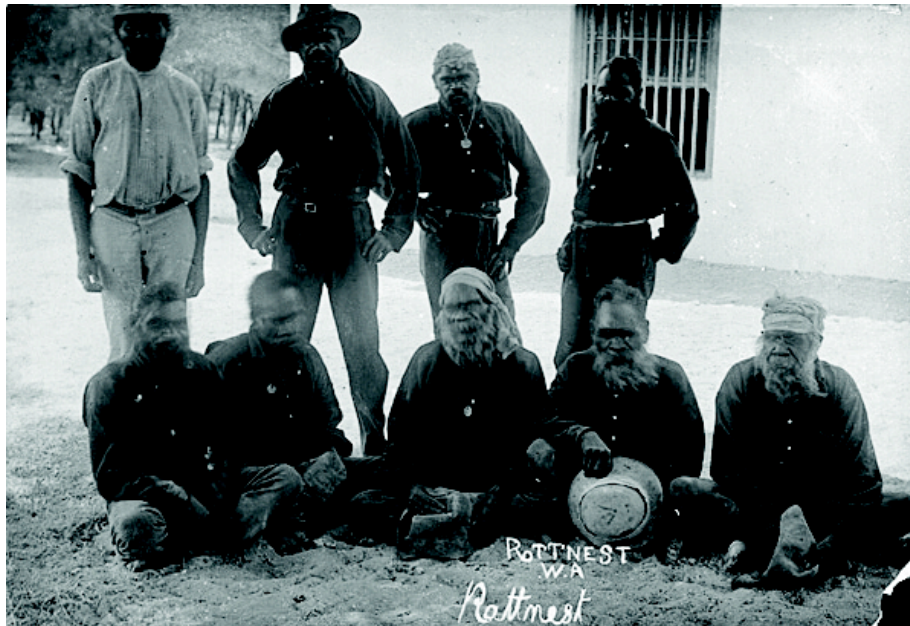


Figure 2: Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island/Wadjemup (State Library of WA, 007180d, undated)

Those who were taken from their traditional lands in the more remote parts of the State for transgressing colonial laws included traditional Lawmen (keepers of timeless cultural knowledge and social norms), warriors and leaders of their people. Many of the Aboriginal men sent to Rottnest Island/Wadjemup were significant people in their communities, including leaders who were the apical ancestors of native title holders today. Their names are largely forgotten in the wider community, but they are recorded in sources such as Green & Moon (1997) and Winder (1989) and, of course, are remembered by their descendants.

Aboriginal prisoners, supervised by Superintendent Henry Vincent, built almost all of the prison and other colonial limestone buildings, including the pilot station and the Governor's residence, as well as the sea wall. They also provided the labour for commercial operation of the salt works, the telegraph installations, cleared all the



roads across the Island and cut a quarry to supply limestone for the lighthouse construction (Considine and Griffiths & Richards 1999).



Figure 3: Photograph of the limestone chapel on the Island which has recently been restored with a lime wash finish (RIA, 2015)

Vincent, who served as Superintendent of the Penal Establishment from 1839–49 and again from 1855–67 is remembered to this day as a ‘devilishly cruel’ man with a violent and uncontrollable temper. His brutality towards the prisoners became infamous and he has been described as possibly the harshest gaoler in Australian history (Stasiuk 2013:104). Vincent’s severity did not pass unnoticed among all his colonial contemporaries, however, and ‘the name of Henry Vincent became a by-word in Perth and Fremantle for all that was brutal and cruel’ (Watson 1939:19).

Due to the high mortality rates suffered on the Island, through both ill-treatment and rampant disease, many were prisoners were in effect given death sentences or transportation for life for what we might now consider to be relatively minor offences. Even if they survived their sentences, there was no provision to repatriate ex-prisoners

to their homelands. They were simply returned to the mainland and left to fend for themselves and some are known to have died of exhaustion and starvation, far from home in foreign territory attempting to make their way back home to their own kin.

Between 1838, when the first prisoners arrived, and 1931 when the last prisoner left the Island, more than 3,700 Aboriginal men and boys from throughout the State were sent to the Island prison. It is estimated that as many as four hundred of these men and boys died there (Green and Moon 1997). Those who died are believed to mostly be buried in unmarked graves in the Aboriginal Burial Ground to the northwest of the Quod. These graves lay largely forgotten, particularly after a World War One internment camp and other structures were built over it and later a camping area was located there. Following much agitation by Aboriginal elders the camping area was removed in 2004. The burial ground and those men and boys who are buried there are still without any memorial other than some basic signage. In contrast, tombstones mark graves in the small European cemetery (Horton (ed.) 1994:956).

## ISLAND PLAYGROUND

In 1848, Governor Charles Fitzgerald expressed an interest in a summer residence on Rottnest. Governors and Governor Generals all over the British Empire looked to find the most pleasant area available within their purview to retreat from the summer heat found in the colonies (Moredoundt 2003:89). Western Australian Governors and their families usually spent up to two months each year on Rottnest Island/Wadjemup, bringing over their servants, various friends, hunting paraphernalia and even carriages. Governor George Weld wrote of one of his sojourns on the Island in 1872:

‘I have been staying lately at Rottnest, my country or rather island home, and have had Mr Howard a Lincolnshire person – one of the good old school –

staying with me. We were up every morning, and out with guns at 6am, and have some fair sport: a mixed bag of quail, pigeons and sand pipers. Later in the day we used to go out sea-fishing. In fact we had a jolly week.' (Lovat 1914:211)



Figure 4: Photograph of Governor and Lady Broome with guests and servants outside the Governor's Residence following a hunting party, c 1885. (RIA 2012.163)

By 1902, following the construction of regional prisons and the use of Fremantle Prison for Aboriginal prisoners, there were only 40 prisoners remaining on Rottnest Island/Wadjemup. The Colonial Secretary Frederick Illingworth recommended that the Island cease operating as a penal establishment and further added:

'If Rottnest is closed as a penal station I feel sure it would speedily become a satisfactory health resort; & possibly we might dispose of a good portion of the Island for residential purposes . . . ' (RIA 2012:2)

In that same year, ferries commenced carrying tourists to the Island on Sundays. During these times visitors and prisoners were kept well apart. However the future of the Island as a tourist resort was not settled. In 1905, the Colonial Secretary requested permission to subdivide the Island for private sale. This resulted in public protests and requests that the Government secure the entire Island for public use. William Somerville, who went on to become a member of both the Kings Park and Rottneest Island Boards, reflected much of the public sentiment when he wrote at the time:

‘The only result which will come from the proposal as it now stands will be to encourage snobocracy by establishing a little oasis where our local silvertails can retire, secure in the knowledge that they are safe from intrusion by the common herd.’ (Joske 1995: 191)

In 1907, a scheme for transforming the Island to a recreation and holiday island were drawn up by the Colonial Secretary’s Department. In 1917, Rottneest was made an A-Class Reserve for public recreation and a Board of Control was established under the *Parks and Reserves Act 1895*. More improvements for visitors followed with a large tearoom and store and several timber bungalows erected near the main jetty. The Governor’s Residence was converted into a hotel, the limestone cottages in the Settlement were divided into flats and let to tourists.

All the limestone buildings were progressively painted with an ochre coloured limewash, possibly to reduce the glare from the original limewash, although other accounts point to the limewash being bare and grim-looking and not suitable for tourist accommodation (RIA 2012:4). Much of the recreational infrastructure was constructed and maintained by prisoners, who continued to be quartered on the Island after the prison closure, particularly in the winter months.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Island provided the widest choice of holiday accommodation in the State. The health benefits of a holiday on Rottnest were extolled with the Island referred to in tourist marketing as ‘Westeralia’s Health Resort’. Along with fishing, swimming and boating, the curative properties of the salt lakes were extolled.



Figure 5: Booklet advertising 'Western Australia's Premier Holiday Resort', published by the Rottnest Board of Control, 1927-28 (National Library of Australia)

While the attractions of the Island as a holiday destination were strongly promoted at this time, the Island's history was also articulated in varying ways. An article in the West Australian newspaper (28 November 1936) waxes lyrical about the 'charm of Rottnest' and its ability to offer 'pleasure to all classes, whatever their tastes may be.' It goes on to reflect, 'a quaint mixture of old and new, Rottnest, even in its gayer moments, breathes an air of the past'. An earlier article in the Western Mail (21 July 1927) entitled 'Rottnest Revisited' recalls fishing expeditions in the late 1890s and

sheds some light on early 20<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards the Island's bleak penal history:

The old gaol has been converted into bedrooms for the hostel. How we thank God for this change! How poignantly memory recalls the spectacle of one hundred and fifty aboriginal prisoners, clad in rough serge jumpers and with coarse kilts that barely reached to their knees, turned out to work in the rye fields at seven on a winter's morning. How glad we are to think that many a morsel of bread, or meat from one's own breakfast was thrust hurriedly into some poor eagerly clutching black hand as the shivering cough-racked horde passed our door.

Under cypress trees near the prison the summer camper cooks his lunch where no tombstones name the underlying dead, but where over three hundred unfortunate exiles found their last resting place wrapped in the prison blankets in which they died.

The curse is lifted forever from this happy isle and we are thankful for the greater insight and understanding that has come to mankind with advancing knowledge.

## ISLAND HEALING

Rottnest Island/Wadjemup holds a special place in the hearts of the many Western Australians who holidayed there as children and continue to visit regularly. Australian author Robert Drewe, who grew up in Perth wrote:

Rottnest was legendary. Only thirteen miles from the coast, it could have been thirteen hundred miles away . . . It had a reputation as the most relaxed and

seductive place anywhere. People – well, girls – were supposed to do things which on the straitlaced mainland would give them a ‘bad name’. Regular visitors knew their Island lore and they could recite the name of every bay and inlet on the Island. There was a status in knowing these things, in being seen as an old ‘Rotto’ hand. (Drewe 2012:1)

Despite the many wonderful depictions and real life experiences of Rottnest as a holiday isle, its dark history is also evident to those such as Drewe who dig a little deeper, ‘(I)t was ironic that this place that had us in such a lather of sensual anticipation would turn out to have a tragic and brutal past’ (Drewe 2012:2). It remains a place of mourning for so many Aboriginal people and a tangible reminder of all that has been lost since colonisation.

While the Aboriginal prison was closed over a hundred years ago and the Island opened up for the public, with an equalitarian sense of Australian mateship that extended to all classes, this mateship did not in practice extend to the Aboriginal people of Western Australia. There are few stories of Aboriginal people holidaying on the Island and, with the last of the prisoners not leaving the Island until 1931, it is hardly surprising that many Aboriginal people view the Island with a sense of dread.



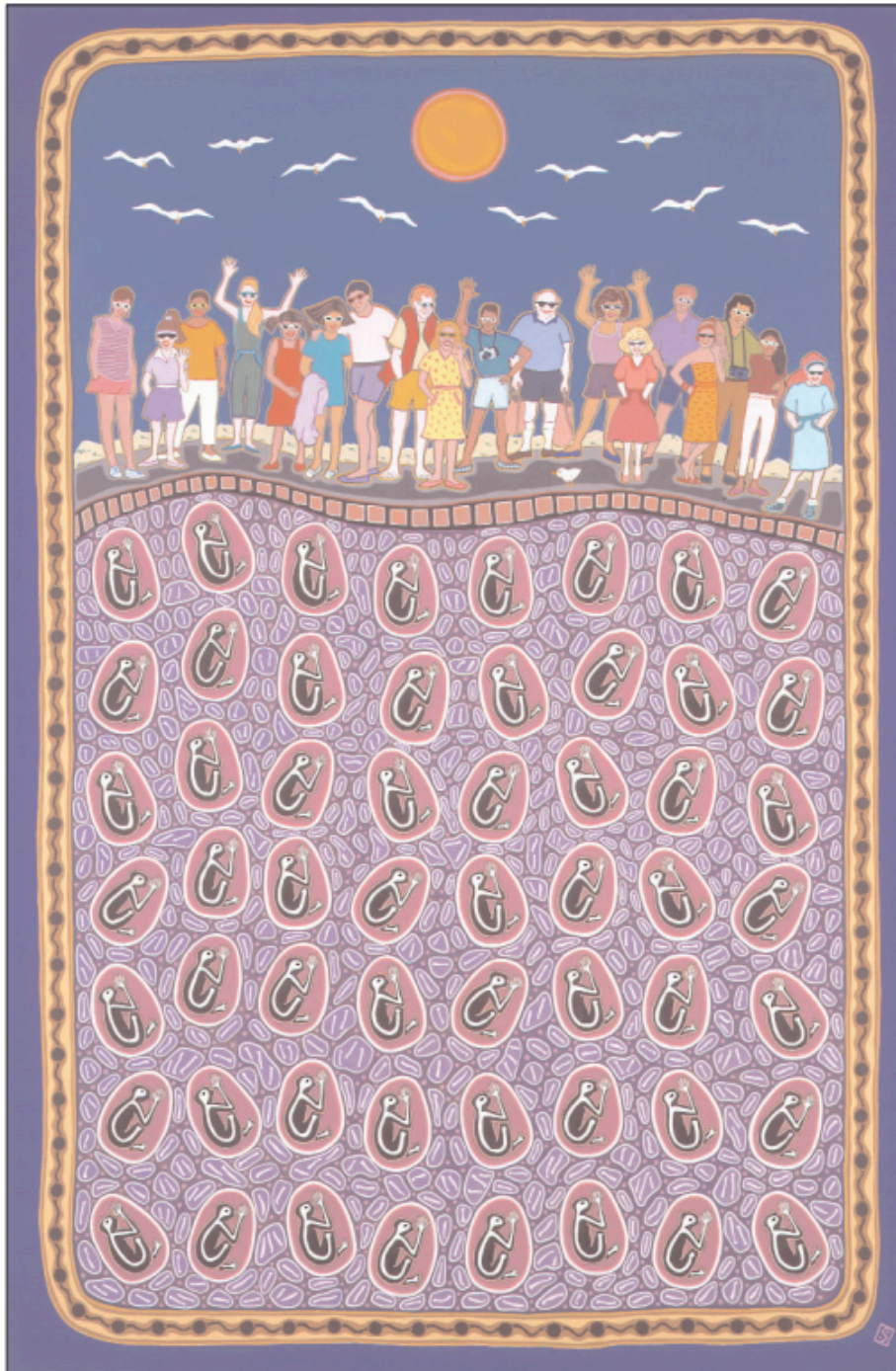


Figure 6: Painting by depicting the tourists on the Island enjoying its spoils, whilst just below their feet the deceased Aboriginal prisoners lie in abundant unmarked graves (Sally Morgan, Welcome To Rottnest, 1988 reproduced online by the Art Gallery of WA)

In the 21st century, the Rottnest Island Authority formally acknowledged the cultural significance and the deeply traumatic memories that the Island holds for Aboriginal people. In 2008, the Authority adopted its first Reconciliation Action Plan. The current plan recognises that 'Rottnest Island/Wadjemup has a unique role to play in



bringing about reconciliation with Aboriginal people, and particularly Western Australian Aboriginal communities' (RAP 2012:2).

During the course of the preparation of the Cultural Landscape Management Plan (RIA 2015) it was recognised that the plan itself had a significant role to play.

Originally conceived as a conservation management plan for disparate elements of heritage significance across the Island, it was transformed into one of the main strategic documents underpinning the ongoing vision for the Island. It outlines that Rottnest Island/Wadjemup has a high level of social and historic value attached to both its use as a penal establishment and its subsequent use as a place for recreation. These values are often articulated as being polar opposites, and in many ways they are, however recreation on the Island is intrinsically linked with its penal history through the tangible evidence of the Island's past. The plan reinforces not only the right of Aboriginal people to be involved in making decisions that affects their cultural heritage, but the necessity of building a strong partnership with Aboriginal people. As Stasiuk points out:

There are many people in the Aboriginal community who know that this is a painful, but shared past, which belongs not only to Aboriginal people, but to all the people of Western Australia and the nation as a whole, and who feel that Rottnest Island/Wadjemup has the potential to be a catalyst for genuine reconciliation and healing (Stasiuk 2013).

The next Reconciliation Action Plan for the Island will include steps towards the establishment of a Healing and Reconciliation Centre in the Quod, including the dignified recognition of the Aboriginal Burial Ground, that will recognise the role of the Island in the establishment of the Swan River Colony and its expansion into the

State of Western Australia, and the consequent suffering and devastation that resulted for Aboriginal people across the State.

The Cultural Landscape Management Plan (RIA 2015) found that because of its unique and significant history, Rottnest Island/ Wadjemup has the potential to become one of the most important focal points for reconciliation and healing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia. By embracing this particularly difficult past we can see a shared way forward for Rottnest Island/Wadjemup and the people who care so much about it.

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