

Ben Wyatt: Recognising Rottnest's tragic past to clear an awkward silence

Ben Wyatt

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Rottnest Island, Wadjemup, has long been a part of the story of West Australians.

Many WA families, including my own, enjoy the summer or winter breaks relaxing at our holiday island. Over the recent WA Day long weekend I took my family there.

Like most who holiday there, we chased herring, ate pies and rode bikes - it is truly a wonderful asset unique in its place in the minds of West Australians.

But the awkward silence that surrounds the "space" next to The Quod is one of the greatest gaps in our colonial memory.

Perhaps it was because I was there with my daughters and tried to explain to them the history of the burial site and why it still stands unacknowledged that it occurred to me that time is well past due.

Aboriginal people from all over WA want this resolved, Rottnest wants this resolved, we all want this resolved.

The first Aboriginal prisoners arrived at Rottnest just nine years after Stirling started the Swan River colony.

Under the supervision of Corporal Welch six prisoners were taken to Rottnest in July of 1838.

At this stage the "prison" amounted to canvas sheets for the soldiers to sleep under while the prisoners were sheltered in a cave near Bathurst Point.



The Quod area of Rottnest Lodge, once a jail in which more than 300 Aboriginal prisoners died

In a comprehensive study of the Aboriginal men who were sent to Rottnest, historians Neville Green and Susan Moon, in their book *Far From Home, Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottnest Island 1838-1931*, noted that over the next nearly 100 years, at least 3670 Aboriginal men were sent to Rottnest - aged anywhere from eight to men in their seventies.

More than 370 never left the island.

The story of the prisoners on Rottnest was very much a story of the settlement of Western Australia and during the early years of the Swan River colony, Rottnest held prisoners from the South West of Western Australia.

As the pastoral frontier expanded, so did the background of the Aborigines who found themselves at Rottnest with many coming from the Pilbara and Kimberley region.

Indeed, Lumbia, one of the last Aborigines in the Rottnest prison, was from country west of Wyndham.

As Green and Moon's book notes, those at Rottnest had links to some of the most infamous events in colonial history, including the Lagrange massacres south of Broome and the Goose Hill and Forrest River massacres near Wyndham.

Prisoners such as We-War (Weiwar or Weewar), whose trial in 1841 established in Western Australia that British law over-ruled tribal law, spent much time at Rottnest.

In an argument that must have been extraordinary in its day, Weewar's defence counsel, Edward Landor, argued that the Aborigine who had been murdered by Weewar had been done so in accordance with local Aboriginal law and, as England had acquired WA by settlement, not by conquest, and that the British law had not been adopted by the local Aboriginal people, the murder was not a matter for British law.

The court did not accept Landor's argument and Weewar was sentenced to death (commuted to life). Echoes of Landor's argument were the basis for the High Court's decision in Mabo.

The silence of the Aboriginal Burial Ground has always sat awkwardly with the holiday island.

In the far corner of the Rottnest village it sits, an unresolved reminder of our past, bypassed by families enjoying their time together but generally wondering when this will be resolved.

In December 2014 the Rottnest Island Authority released its Management Plan 2014-19.

It notes that the Wadjemup Burial Ground Concept Plan as an "initiative currently under construction or consideration". This Concept Plan is from 2005 and has stood unresolved since then.

In January 2015 there were some movements with The Quod to be handed back to the Rottnest Island Authority by the leaseholders, Karma Royal Group.

This will now allow the government to hopefully develop a co-ordinated plan with the burial site.

The Wadjemup Burial Site and the history of Rottnest is a place of great distress for Aboriginal people and must be resolved before Rottnest can truly take its place as one of our pre-eminent tourist attractions.



Rottnest is known as one of WA's finest holiday islands, but it has a dark past

There is no longer any excuse for delay, indeed, the resolution of native title between the WA Government and the Noongar people should also provide our State with an opportunity to resolve the awkward silence of Rottnest's penal history.

Both The Quod and the adjacent unrecognised Aboriginal cemetery stand as a testimony to not just Rottnest's unrecognised history but the unrecognised history of much of Western Australia.

The historical grandeur of the buildings we admire along Thompson Bay, the old residences, and the Quokka Arms at which many have stayed or been entertained, were built by Aboriginal prisoners.

But what is not generally appreciated is that Rottnest Island served as a critical repository for much needed labour in the expansion of European occupation of Western Australia throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the past century.

When Alan Bond's Dallhold Investments acquired The Quod in the late 1980s and started to refurbish the building to turn it into an upmarket tourist resort there was an uproar from many in the Aboriginal community.

Precious artefacts were found under the floor boards.

Such a place of historical and cultural significance prompted a rare intervention by the Commonwealth under its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. Conditions were placed on the refurbishment of The Quod that protected its historical integrity.

The Quod has never made money. People don't like staying there because they know it has a dark and unrecognised history.

It is time to consider developing The Quod and the cemetery as a landmark site of recognition to the Aboriginal men who were imprisoned on Rottnest and their families and communities throughout WA who were affected by the Rottnest prison.

Such a development, involving the engagement of Aboriginal people all over WA, would be a historic and profound act of reconciliation for our state and would enhance Rottnest Island as a place to visit and enjoy.

In 1988 the artist, Sally Morgan, painted one of her characteristically bold, colourful paintings titled Greetings from Rottnest.

At first glance it is a picture of joy and fun, of people celebrating our unique lifestyle at Rottnest.

Yet, a closer examination highlights the many Aboriginal bodies, in foetal positions, under the ground on which this joy and fun is being celebrated.

The Wadjemup Burial Site has sat under consideration long enough. It is time to truly open up the opportunity of Rottnest and resolve this great holiday awkwardness.

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