DANCING WITH DEVILS:
The Relationship Between the Aboriginal Women and the Sealers of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island in the Early 19th Century.

The discovery of vast numbers of the highly prized fur seal in Bass Strait in 1797 attracted many ships into the area. Sealing became a highly profitable enterprise and Australia’s first staple export commodity. The islands of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island had been unoccupied for thousands of years, were yet to be explored and mapped, and were beyond the jurisdiction of the colonial administration in Sydney. Soon, local and international vessels dumped sealing gangs, small dinghies, makeshift shelters and meagre rations onto many of the islands but, within a decade, the population of seals had declined significantly and it became uneconomical for the entrepreneurs to maintain operations on such a large scale. It remained profitable, however, in the second phase, from 1810-1830, for the sealers to work as individuals, exchanging both seal and kangaroo skins for provisions from passing ships.

Initially, the services of Tasmanian Aboriginal women were bartered for hunting dogs, seal carcasses, flour, potato and blankets, on a seasonal basis, but they had become indispensable to the sealers. Countless Tasmanian – and, later, mainland women – were kidnapped as slaves and concubines by the sealers, most of whom lived an unbridled existence, pillaging, raping and murdering, unchecked, for more than three decades.

Using, primarily, the journals of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Protector, George Augustus Robinson who, in the early 1830s, meticulously recorded the experiences, stories, folklore and songs, of the Tasmanian Aborigines in his charge, including the famous ‘Devil Dance’ (a great favourite of the sealing women) the purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the sealers and the Aboriginal women.