

Gilbert Robertson (1794-1851) – The Vandemonian Radical journalist derided by colonial administrators and historians alike (Leon Atkinson-MacEwen)

Abstract

Gilbert Robertson, a Scottish agriculturalist turned journalist, spoke truth to power for over a decade in colonial Tasmania. A man of dual West Indian and Scottish parentage, he was prosecuted, persecuted, and dismissed by the colonial establishment in Hobart and London. While the range of campaigns to which he devoted his editorial energies were varied, he consistently used the discourses of Scottish and English Radicalism to frame his critiques of successive colonial administrations. He condemned abuses of power by colonial officials, criticised the administration of the law, was active in support of representative government and trial by jury, and was an impassioned opponent of the claims of the Church of England to be the established church of Tasmania. In particular, he defended the rights of the Tasmanian aboriginal people and condemned their exile and near extinction on Flinders Island.

He has been rejected as a primary source of historical truth by historians of the period who have, almost uncritically, adopted the false narrative about him created by the targets of his criticism. As a result, more attention has been paid to the ferocity of his attacks on his enemies than on the substance or context of his critique of power, and his Radicalism has gone unrecognised. Using a combination of historical and discourse analysis, this paper demonstrates the commonalities between Robertson and his contemporaries in the Radical press in Scotland and England, and rescues his journalism from obscurity.

Bio

Dr Leon Atkinson-MacEwen is an early career researcher in the history of the colonial press in Tasmania, focussed on re-orientating Australian journalism history from its metropolitan and chronological preferences. A central part of his discursive/historiographic approach is rescuing the press as a source for the history of political activism within colonial power structures.