

James Sprent and the Trigonometric Survey of Tasmania

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SUMMARY:

The British established a settlement in Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) in September 1803. Land was surveyed for sale as the colonial authorities extended the settlement around the colony. By the 1820's there were increasing disputes between landholders partly due to the piecemeal way that land had been measured. A trigonometric survey for the production of a general map of the whole island with all natural features and artificial boundaries precisely located was considered to be a solution. James Sprent arrived in Hobart Town in 1830 and later became an Assistant Surveyor, taking a dominant role in the survey.

Field operations began in late 1832 amid scepticism about the survey's practicality. Years of controversy about the survey and the survey department followed.

Sprent laboured under two Surveyor Generals who showed limited capacity to meet their responsibilities of office and were subsequently removed. Nevertheless an interim chart had been drafted by 1837 when work was suspended. It was eventually resumed in 1847 and Sprent took up his earlier role. Responsibilities in the survey department changed in 1855 when a parliamentary select committee recommended the replacement of military surveyors with civilian surveyors and Sprent was appointed Deputy Surveyor General. He continued with the trigonometric survey until mid 1857 when he became Surveyor General.

By the end of 1857 he found himself giving evidence before a select committee inquiring into the state of the trigonometric survey. The inquiry produced no clear recommendation about future field operations however the way was left open for the publication of a general map of the colony. The map was based on the trigonometric survey and published in 1859 just before Sprent retired.

CONTACTS

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