

Winston Churchill McNeish Fellowship Report

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Background

As the Winston Churchill McNeish Fellow 2025, I undertook a three-week journey to Lutruwita Tasmania, the home of my ancestral grandmother Fanny Cochrane Smith (1834 – 1905). A survivor of the extreme colonial violence enacted on the island, Fanny was the self-declared ‘last of the Tasmanians’ and a fluent speaker of two Aboriginal dialects recorded on wax cylinder at the end of the last century.



Fanny Cochrane Smith

With the aim of writing creative non-fiction about my time in Tasmania, I wanted to connect with as many aspects of a culture that had been lost to me over the generations.

What I learnt

Finding a way in to Palawa culture proved difficult. After years of oppression, some contacts I wrote to brushed me off, others were sceptical, or did not want to open up to an outsider. It made planning my trip to Tasmania difficult. What I could organise in advance, I did – visits to museums, a Palawa-led bush tucker tour, and an itinerary that followed in Fanny’s footsteps, taking me from the seaside city of Hobart to a remote island in the Furneaux Group - Flinders Island, where she was born in an internment facility at the Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment. The real challenge of the trip lay in finding a way in to the culture. This was something I could only do by actually being there, and meeting people in person.

I was very fortunate to meet up with a distant cousin Clinton who drove with me to the settlement of Nicholls Rivulet, where Fanny raised her family of 11 children. Having grown up in the area, Clinton housed an extensive oral history of the family and painted a vivid picture of the life and times of our shared ancestor. Together we visited Putalina, Oyster Cove, where Fanny, Truganini and what remained of their people were housed after their horrific internment at Wybalenna. I was grateful to have him by my side in such a place.

On my second trip from Hobart to Nicholls Rivulet, I got to go inside the Methodist church Fanny fundraised for and had built in 1901, after finally tracking down Aboriginal elder Auntie Bobbie, who offered to show me around the place. Bobbie was a force of nature and she quickly took me under her wing, picking me up the following day at 7am in her ute to drive me across the channel on a ferry to Bruny Island. We visited the recently repatriated First Nations settlements and Bobbie proudly introduced me to the work being done to foster Palawa culture now, and into the future.



Left: Fanny's Methodist Church at Nicholls Rivulet. Right: Putalina, the site of a former Aboriginal internment camp has been reclaimed.

Whether it be in the realm of language reclamation, environmental activism, tourism or the arts, a significant part of the work being done in Lutruwita by Palawa is about reasserting the presence of a culture falsely believed to have been extinguished.

It was when I was traversing the South-East coastline of Tasmania on the Wukalina Walk, a four day experience led by knowledgeable Palawa guides, that I truly felt the depth and warmth of the culture ignite within me, both alive and sacred. Our guide Nathan wove Palawa history, culture and stories into every footstep of the journey. Back at camp, cook and guide Carleeta prepared local seafood, roasted muttonbird, and gathered herbs for our meals. This is a land lived on by Palawa for millennia, and spending those four days immersed in the beauty and pace of the culture, was a truly life-changing experience.



Left: The walk began with a smoking ceremony. Right: At camp, food was cooked outside on the open fire.

I wasn't long back in Aotearoa before embarking on a trip to visit family in Germany. It was there I got to hold one of Fanny's handwoven baskets in the aptly named 'Care Room' at the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig. Curator and ethnologist Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider even came in to the museum to show me the basket, although she was on holiday, and said (with tears in her eyes), that it captured "the spirit of the maker in every carefully placed twine."



Holding the basket woven by my ancestral grandmother Fanny Cochrane Smith at the GRASSI Museum, Leipzig.

In conclusion

As I continue to think and write about these incredible experiences for an evolving essay and short story collection, I'm aware that re-connecting with a culture is about more than this one trip; it's the work of a lifetime. I hope to return to Tasmania and deepen my understanding of this very special place, and I feel privileged to have started this journey as a Winston Churchill McNeish Fellow.

Ngā mihi nui.