

WOMEN TRANSPORTED – MYTH AND REALITY
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The Female Factory Womenwhy the fascination why are so many now still passionate in the lives we know so little about?

For me they are a part of our bloodlines, our lifelines, storylines, myth cycles. We are them and they are us.

Within this fascination we try to sort the myth from the reality in the quest to find out who they really are.

When we look at myth the meaning now is twofold. Myth can be a distillation of social or experienced truth, a hero or heroine's journey, a guide to our living. It can also mean a spurious idea, an idea with no foundation in reality.

This brings us to the next part of our focus – what is it that we call reality. Is it our perceptions of the world, others perceptions and experience of us? Or is it the propaganda, fodder fed to us now about what is good in life.... Success, money, leadership, the experience and views of the rich and powerful or is the lives of the many whose lives are the daily work, love and survival? Is reality the minutes between the moment of birth and death or the picked bones of our lives a hundred years from now?

Which ever of these or other ideas we adopt our quest for the past is intimately linked to our quest to understand ourselves and life in its messy, chaotic entirety. To see clearly, find our own answers to this quest we need to connect truthfully to our own experiences and understand our contemporary biases. We all enter this quest with our own personal stories and reflections. Authenticity is our key, our touchstone as is the understanding that not one of us has all the knowledge and all the information or all the 'facts'. We would have to be standing in the very shoes of each of the female factory women to do that.

Convict Female Factory Women were *women transported* - transported from one place to another, one life to another, one world to another. Their stories range from those of machine breakers and displaced farm workers to petty thieves and family women just trying to survive. There were at least 24,960 convict women transported to Australia¹. Over 9,000 convict women were in at least one of 12 convict female factories. In the Colony of New South Wales these were: Parramatta (2 factories), Newcastle, Bathurst, Port Macquarie, and Moreton Bay (2 factories). In the colony of Van Diemen's Land these were Hobart Town, Cascades, Launceston, Ross and Georgetown.

From where we stand now the beginnings of Australia, as a colony, seem like a whirlpool of ideas and experiences. The colonial convict women coming to Australia would have been experiencing and witnessing the full effects and meaning of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. They may have shared some sentiments with the French. Some certainly participated in and witnessed the breaking of the looms in England's north. The Irish in some cases would have been reacting to the hundreds of years of British 'colonising'. Some would have committed crime just for survival and some were old hands at the criminal game.

For many this would have been travelling to a 'new world', new possibilities, and new 'utopias'. The climate was different, the surrounding environment unfamiliar, the plants and animals and even the light seemed different - over the oceans to a land of myth, the unknown.

Why were convict women sent to Australia? From a practical perspective it was to clear the overcrowded jails, to populate the country. According to the 1812 British Select Committee on Transportation:

It has been customary to send, without any exception all [females] whose state of health will admit of it, and of whose age does not exceed 45 yearsⁱⁱ

The women were selected if they had good chance of survival. Whether stated intention or not, about 2/3rds of the women transported were unmarriedⁱⁱⁱ. The ratio was 1 to 5.3 women to men (132,308 men transported).^{iv} The women brought over 200 trades with them so they were also an economic value to the Colony.

Why The Convict Female Factories? This is a question without one definitive answer. Some aspects of the answer lay in the intersections of history and personalities as well as the idea of social benefit and reform. This was matched with Colonial desire for economic power and practical needs, defined by the historical and political climate in which Britain existed.

Part of the answer can also be found in the practical need to solve the problem of what to do with the convict women once they arrive in the colony. Some of the female and male convicts would have had spinning and weaving related skills (although there is no evidence at this point that women were transported for these skills).

At this time Britain was a maritime power and was at war with the French. When flax was discovered in the Colony thoughts of the supply of flax for maritime purposes was a consideration for Britain. Governor Phillip noted the advantages of the flax plants near the 'settlement' (Sydney Cove).

What were these women like? To discover this it is necessary to wade through contemporary perceptions and compare to authentic documentation material as well as follow the storylines and decisions these women made with their lives.

They are not trusted by certain authorities. They did not fit their moral codes and a sense of exclusion because they do not meet the code that has been set by a power group beyond their usual origins of poverty. The dilemma is expressed in the Molesworth Committee final report:

...that society had fixed the standard of the average moral excellence required of women much higher than that which it had erected for men, and that crime was regarded with less allowance when committed by a woman than if perpetrated by a man, not because the absolute amount of guilt was supposed to be greater in the one case than the other, but because the offender was deemed to have receded further from the average proprieties of her sex... a higher degree of reformation is required in the case of a female, before society will concede to her that she has reformed at all...^v

The treatment and perceptions concerning convict female factory women (convict women in certain locations subject to certain experiences) were informed by the notions existing in early Colonial times as interpreted by government bodies with power, and individuals who had opportunity and or power to influence and inform action which became the environments within which these women lived.

Convict women are imbued with the power of sexuality and the criminal capability of doing anything by others, usually those in power with the ability to record and affect others. This is a closer reflection on the writers than the women. Marsden with his fundamentalist approach saw any variation from his views as full of vice and corruption. Although he fought for improvements to the factory he speaks of the female factory as:

a grand source of moral corruption, insubordination and disease, and spreads its pestilential influence through the most remote part of the colony^{vi}

and the activities of the convicts, particularly the women as:

...destructive of all religion, morality and good order, and destroys at once the most distant hope of any reformation being produced in either. Nothing can be more distressing to the serious, reflecting mind, than to see the vices and miseries of these abandoned females.^{vii}

This intolerance of difference was not confined to the powerful middle class men. Mrs Charles Meredith said:

Their inherent propensities to do evil, every shape of vice and depravity seeming as familiar to them as the air they breathe...^{viii}

In contrast to these views, Mary Lethbridge and Thomas Reid describe the women as essentially good. Mary Lethbridge wrote to her mother Anna Josepha King about factory women in her household;

I have a very nice nurse for him, from the Factory, indeed I have been lucky in the three women, they go on very steady, they are all Irish. I cannot do without 3 women at present, on account of all the washing. We wash everything at home and what with the dairy, poultry, baking, making candles and so on, we find plenty to do.^{ix}

Thomas Reid while Surgeon on the ship Morley comments on occasion how the women *all appeared orderly, attentive and respectful* responds to the convict women who are destined for the Female Factories in Hobart Town and Parramatta:

I cannot hesitate but to declare my conviction, that if duly protected, and not exposed to more than common temptation, they will realize the most favourable expectations, and even forever set, an example of propriety to others in their situation.

Reid doesn't see the women as inherently bad. Instead he says, *Should it be attributed to the lower class as a crime that their parents were too poor or profligate to secure for them the benefits of education?*

The life in the colony that the women were presented with elicited a range of responses. Some just couldn't cope with life after total dislocation and sense of powerlessness. Others went on to make a life for themselves, have families and contribute to society and in such a way that we have to really search to uncover their lives as convict women and female factory inmates. The women were neither angels nor demons.

33.8% of convict women came from England, 56.3% from Ireland, 5.1% from Scotland, 1.5% from Wales, 1.4% from outside England and 1.9% unknown^x. The significant difference in proportion of Irish born women convicted to the others indicates the approach of the British Government at the time to the Irish. It also represents migration as a result of the difficult social and political conditions in Ireland. 8% of the Irish were convicted in England.

The general profile of the women transported doesn't match the common stereotype at the time, of genetically degenerate, without hope of redemption or unskilled and illiterate.

A comparison of crimes and literacy can also give some insight into the reality. Of the women 65.3% had no prior convictions, 28% had one prior conviction. The remaining 7.9% had multiple convictions. This suggested that the majority were not of a 'crime class'.

Of women convicts from England 75% had some level of literacy (could read only or read and write). English immigrants to Australia had a 78% level of literacy (could read only or read and write). This shows there was not a marked difference between convicts and the general population, not sufficient to condemn them with being an almost different genus of human.

In Ireland convict literacy was 46.6 (could read only or read and write) compared to Irish Immigrants literacy 47.4% (can read only or can read and write) so again there was no significant difference between the convict women and the general population.

In terms of skills the convict women brought over 180 trades with them which suggests that laziness was not an inherent trait as some commentators would suggest.

Of the women Transported 52.8% were aged from 17 to 29 and 64.7% if you include up to 34 years of age. Whether written government policy or not the majority were child bearing age and often came with young children (13 or over not allowed).

Another useful set of statistics for identifying who these women were are the actual crimes that elicited transportation. Of the crimes those related directly to theft are 91.2%, the remaining being breaking 2.5%, vagrancy 2.3% and violent crimes 1.8%. Of theft 36.6% were clothing, 21.3% money, 11% fabric, 10% household items, 9.3% food or animals, 8.2% jewellery and 3.7% other.^{xi} This also suggests that the convict women seldom committed violent crime. Theft was not mainly of food but as theft largely related to common opportunities and items; they could easily be exchanged for money. This therefore doesn't contradict the idea of theft for basic survival, in the absence of regular income.

These facts present quite a different picture to the descriptions of 'damned whores', degenerate women with little chance of reform.

The significance of convict female factory women today is somewhere in the spaces between myth and reality. At some time in all our lives there are journeys not chosen? It is easy to identify with characters who faced the 'journey not chosen', like so many of these women did.

The mythic attributes and meaning in contemporary times has little to do with the misconceptions concerning them by the middle class of the early 1800s, however, some aspects of these kind of these misconceptions are alive and thriving, particularly concerning contemporary convict women and they are just as divisive today. The early concept of a crime class that inherited traits has remarkably similar possibilities of prejudice, as current theories that assign traits to genetics.

Are the factory women's responses to experiences so different to ours? Was their life within the family so different to today? Blended families with a number of different husbands, parts of families left in the country of origin (as refugees in Australia experience). Women alone, making their way in life; a number of children with different fathers, nuclear families are all experiences that resonate today. The easy connections, attachments and cohabitation brought about by love or desire for a comfortable life or a sense of freedom to choose relationships without protocols interfering, are not only a sign of these women's lives but contemporary life.

What of our convict female factory women's heritage? In Australian culture, how much have these women's way of being filtered into current perceptions of Australian women. Is the sense of the 'victim's victim' as described in *The Real Matilda*^{xii} carried through? Has the sense of strong spirit and we can survive anything, do anything come from these women? What of the mateship, nose-thumbing and ability to 'take the micky' out of things. These are a part of the Australian character. Many of us can identify with all these aspects but few would source the nature of the Australian character in any degree to these women.

Why are we so interested in the stories of these women? Is it a sense of impotence of our effect, our power to act in the world in a meaningful way? Is it the numbing corporatisation of our lives and have corporatized beliefs become the new religion? Are these women's stories a life affirmation to counteract the existential abyss that can sometimes fill our horizons in our times? These women's stories provide the paper on which we can mythologize, construct stories of ourselves and our lives. We can rewrite our desires to act with strength against adversity and 'survive' with a sense of empowerment.

Women can be seen as victims. At some time we all experience a moment of being victims. However the women also acted. Some conformed, some escaped, some absconded, others rioted and many went on to have fulfilling lives.

What happens when a majority significant proportion of a society shares similar experiences? War experiences changes a whole generation of people and changes social frameworks significantly, as witnessed by the movements in the 1920s after WW1 and the 1960s after WW2. Surely the Colonial transportation on the massive scale and convict women's experiences changed 2 whole generations of perception and action and thereby social structure in Contemporary Australia's formative period.

The women made a life with the opportunities they had and 'disappeared' into the fabric that is Australian society. As we do of any unknown, we construct myths to help us understand life. We construct them with what we desire to be or what we most fear. There are pantheons of gods to illustrate this. If we don't know or understand something it becomes a palette for our imagination to paint as we desire.

Retelling these stories, these forgotten histories, doesn't reduce our mythologizing but it returns a certain power to the community. This can be found in some of the oral history responses concerning the women. Dorothy Mc Hardy notes:

I think many of them were products of their tough times who had very little, if any, advantages. Given a chance in a new country many became good citizens who were prepared to work hard to raise a families and give them better lives and I think the Australian way of getting on with life owes a lot to our ancestors as does our habit of lacking a great deal of respect for authority^{xiii}

Isabel Dale Tooley says:

Courageous. She left 2 sons behind in Ireland. I am proud of her stamina to go through the emotions she must have experienced. I hold her in great awe. What hardships! Not all were criminals and the courage to start anew, live in a strange country. It helps me understand the new migrants. Her relevance to the Australian character is strength of purpose enduring pain and loss and all character building. Don't be ashamed of convict ancestry, be proud.^{xiv}

Shirley Moore describes:

She is a part of who I am and I am proud to say I am of convict stock... her death notice read 'respected by all who knew her'. These women made in conjunction with others, this country what it is today despite their overwhelming hardships.^{xv}

Responses to these women are a mix of desire and admiration a melding of the myth and reality. Given an estimated 1 in 5 Australian's are related to these women it is easy to mythologize about them, identify with them and connect with the thought that any one of us could be a descendent or know someone who is descendant of one of these women. This gives an almost tangible connection by each of us with the myth, with these women. These women are you and I on the deepest level.

Reading their journeys we are taken on a mystery tour much like with reading myths and following the hero stories. We see the hope, misery, joy, their heartlines and many other things. We sense that they and we are connected in this mythic way. Reading their lives can put our lives in perspective. As Kate Grenville says in *Joan makes History*:

They planned great things, and better worlds, and went on sowing, full of hope. Centuries passed, generations of babies grew old and died, and now it is my turn.....

I thought my story was one the world had never heard before. I loved and was bored, I betrayed and was forgiven, I ran away and returned, and all these things appeared to be personal and highly significant history. Oh Joan, what bogus grandeur! There was not a single joy I could feel that countless Joans had not already felt, not a single mistake I could make that had not been made by some Joan before me..... and although you may not think so to look at me, I am the entire history of the globe walking down the street.....and like them all I, Joan, have made history^{xvi}.

ⁱ Oxley, Deborah *Convict Maids – the Forced Migration of Women to Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.3

ⁱⁱ Dixon, Miriam *The Real Matilda – Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present* UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999, p119

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniels, Kay *Convict Women* Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 1998, p.53

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- ^{iv} Oxley, Deborah *Convict Maids – the Forced Migration of Women to Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.3
- ^v Daniels, Kay *Convict Women* Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 1998, p.81
- ^{vi} Dixon, Miriam *The Real Matilda – Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present* UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999, p.130
- ^{vii} Marsden, Samuel Letter from Rev. Samuel Marsden to Governor Macquarie 19th July 1815
- ^{viii} Meredith Mrs C. *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales During a Residence in that Colony from 1839 to 1844*, pp. 162-3
- ^{ix} Heney, Helen *Dear Fanny- Women's Letters to and from New South Wales, 1788-1857* Australian National University Press Rushcutters Bay, 1985, p.104
- ^x Oxley, Deborah *Convict Maids – the Forced Migration of Women to Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.255
- ^{xi} Oxley, Deborah *Convict Maids – the Forced Migration of Women to Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.3
- ^{xii} Dixon, Miriam *The Real Matilda – Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present* UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999,
- ^{xiii} Mc Hardy, Dorothy *Oral History Response*, June, 2008
- ^{xiv} Dale Tooley, Isabel *Oral History Response*, June, 2008
- ^{xv} Moore, Shirley *Oral History Response*, June, 2008
- ^{xvi} Genville, Kate *Joan Makes History* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 1998, pp.278-279