Abandoned Women by Lucy Frost is the richly evocative story of 78 Scottish women convicts transported to Van Diemen’s Land on the Atwick.

Released at the beginning of February 2012, and published by Allen & Unwin, the book follows the fate of these abandoned women from the gaols and tollbooths of Aberdeen, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paisley, Perth, Stirling and Stonehaven. Living in dreadful squalor, poverty, homelessness and hopelessness led to their criminal activities and their consequent trial and sentence in the courts of Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Some were undoubtedly criminals, others the victim of their circumstances. All shared the same fate – to be transported beyond seas – which came to reality when the Atwick with its human cargo set sail from the Thames on 30 September 1837.

The author describes in detail the daily routine of shipboard life. My thought was that the four-month non-stop voyage was probably a respite that the women did not appreciate. Surely for many that period of being fed, clothed and housed was a change from the daily struggle to subsist.

Only one convict died on the voyage and less than 3 weeks after sailing. Fourteen children accompanied their Scottish mothers – yet 37 offspring were left behind – what did life mete out to them?

Arriving in Hobart on 23 January 1838, a week later they disembarked and followed Macquarie Street into the shadow of Mount Wellington and behind the walls of the Female House of Correction – commonly known as the Female Factory. The children were separated into the nursery and its dubious care; the older children some weeks later being moved to the Orphan Schools at New Town.
Lucy Frost describes the process by which the women were then assigned as servants – some to important men in the town, others to shopkeepers, farmers, some in Hobart, others to villages elsewhere on the island.

Not unexpectedly many of these convict women soon found themselves back behind the walls of the Female Factory. Insubordination, absent without leave, insolence, misconduct – followed by sentences of solitary confinement, bread and water, a term at the wash tub, and in some instances sentences were extended by 6 or 12 months.

Yet some women did make the most of their situation. They married and settled down to a ‘normal’ life. One Elizabeth Williamson, as a wealthy widow, sailed for England 23 years after her arrival on the Atwick.

Others continued to be assigned to new masters only to reoffend time and time again. Constant re offenders were in some cases sent north to the Launceston Female Factory – not that their behaviour moderated!

Two chapters are devoted to the fate of the children who arrived in Van Diemen’s Land with their mothers. Sad stories which linger in my consciousness.

Inevitably babies were born to the convict women. A pregnant woman was no use to a master and the walls of the Female Factory again closed around them. At weaning of their child (9 months of age) the baby was left in the nursery while its mother returned to work. The conditions and overcrowding in the nursery were not conducive to a high survival rate!

Equally inevitable as the years passed Tickets of Leave were granted and ultimately Certificates of Freedom as the 7- and 14-year sentences expired.

Freedom brought new issues – how to find employment, a place to live. For some, marriage and families; a new start in a new town, a new State, under a different name.

Some reached old age with large families to follow, possibly unaware of their mother’s convict past.
Lucy Frost has given us a wonderfully researched and written insight into the lives of these 78 unfortunate Scottish women who came to be part of the experiment in colonisation that was transportation and which was the basis of the Australia we know today.

For anyone interested in Australian history, particularly those with convict forebears Abandoned Women is a must read and a worthwhile addition to our bookshelves.

Lucy Frost is well known for her other works including *No Place for a Nervous Lady* and *A Face In the Glass*, both stories of women in Australia in the nineteenth century.

Barbara Wilson