‘The year 1849 saw the largest number of female convicts to that date transported from Ireland to Van Diemen’s Land’, as the opening sentence of this book states: 606 of them. Fleming claims that most were forced by their desperate situation to commit a crime in order to survive. By telling the stories of the convicts from Kildare, she says, she aims to ‘humanize and personalize the problem of transportation and its effect on women’.

For me, the most interesting part of the book was the first chapter, ‘Kildare during the Famine’. Fleming shows that during Ireland’s Great Famine of 1845–9, men’s situation was difficult but women’s even worse, as their economic power drastically decreased, with ‘employment, marriage and a decent life’ hard to come by.

Before the Famine, an unmarried woman of 20 was rare in Kildare, a mainly agricultural county with some small industries. Women earned in domestic industry, sold eggs and helped with farm work, and their contribution was vital to the family’s survival. But there were many destitute or unemployed people, even before the Famine. Kildare is considered not to have suffered as much as some other places during the Famine, but conditions were still terrible, with unemployment, potato blight and despair. Fever was rife. Relief work was only for men, and if women did find work, their wages were much lower than men’s, while their cottage industries were being replaced by mechanised industry, and a move from tillage to livestock meant women’s labour was less needed on farms. Workhouses did provide some relief, but conditions were harsh and families were separated. Many women, concludes Fleming, were driven to petty offences out of desperation, either to find food or to be arrested and put in gaol, where at least they were fed. To an Australian historian unfamiliar with the Irish picture, this chapter makes very interesting reading.

The second chapter, ‘Crimes and convictions’, states that during the Famine, crime increased in Kildare by 668 per cent. It was mostly petty larceny, dictated by starvation. Lawbreaking was seen as worse for women than for men, counter to female characteristics and a great stain on the
character. However, during the Famine survival was more important than social mores, and women committed more crime, notably arson. Women often committed this crime on purpose, to be transported, and Kildare had the fourth highest figure for all Irish counties. Fleming does not refer to the excellent work of our own Dianne Snowden on this topic. However, her description of the Irish trial system of petty sessions, quarter sessions and assizes is valuable, especially for an Australian historian, as is the section on Irish prisons.

The third chapter, ‘The journey and life in the colony’, demonstrates the difficulty of writing about a new and distant topic. How does a historian in Ireland evaluate Tasmanian sources, so she can tell the difference between reliable and unreliable, outdated and up-to-date? This is perhaps a warning to us to be careful when writing about Ireland.

In the late 1840s, more women were sent to Van Diemen’s Land from Ireland than from England. The lack of food and employment caused more to turn to crime to survive, and many deliberately sought transportation. However, Fleming described the journey to Australia as horrific, ignoring recent works which analyse the journey using statistics and show that it had its positive aspects (better food, accommodation and medical care than in Ireland during the Famine). In the colony, Fleming uses convicts transported on the Australasia in 1849 to illustrate the fate of convicts. Trudy Cowley has covered this extremely thoroughly in A Drift of ‘Derwent Ducks’, but though Trudy was in contact with Catherine Fleming, the latter does not mention Trudy’s work in the footnotes. Like most historians, she concludes that transportation provided both opportunities and problems for women.

Unfortunately, Fleming is confused about the Australian situation. At different times she talks about convicts sent to New South Wales; convicts sent to Van Diemen’s Land; all women convicts; all Irish women convicts; women convicts from Kildare; and women convicts from Kildare in 1849 – though rarely, despite the book’s title, and only by telling stories of four women from Kildare rather than any analysis. As an example of her slip-ups, she uses a drawing of New South Wales convicts in the 1790s to illustrate Van Diemen’s Land convicts. Some terminology is incorrect. This is perhaps to be expected when a historian is writing of an area about which she has little
background knowledge, but it is disappointing. As Trudy Cowley said when I was discussing this book with her, ‘It just goes to show how difficult it is to do research based in another country/county/state from a distance’. However, the Irish section is very valuable.

It is difficult to obtain this book in Tasmania, but members who are interested can refer to the copy in our library at the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site.