

Marriage: women's most popular means of coping with transportation

When convicts arrived in Australia, they had been cut off from their family, friends, and usual way of life in England. While they were under sentence the government fed and clothed them, but once they were free they were on their own, away from the networks of survival they had in England. How did they make new lives for themselves, manage to support themselves, cope with a different environment? These are the questions we are exploring in this seminar today.

Women had a major disadvantage when they had to support themselves. Their main employment was domestic service, which was poorly paid with hard conditions. Other work was rare, and it was difficult to set up a business, although there were a few dressmakers.

However, women also had two major advantages. First: they could marry. In theory, marriage provided a woman with a husband who would support her and look after her, provide her with a home and income and the possibility of children. The second advantage was that in Van Diemen's Land marriage was easy, with wives in demand. Because far more male convicts were transported than women – 60,000 opposed to 13,685, a ratio of almost 5:1 – there were always far more men than women in the colony. Marriage brought men great advantages, not just sex but, ideally, someone to do the housework, cook meals, make home comfortable, sympathise in trouble and provide children, not just as hope for the future but as assistants in the family enterprise and support in old age. Many men wanted to marry, and almost any woman could marry if she wanted. Louisa Ann Meredith wrote of female convicts, '*All are certain of marrying, if they please; proposals are plentiful*'.¹

Certainly some women in my sample sound unprepossessing: 'strongly marked with small pox in very large scars' (Ann Williams); 'cripple, an affection of the right side, strong pockpitted' (Emma Beaumont); 'a very useless woman, sluggish, dirty and idle' who committed 10 offences in the colony (Nancy Mackenzie). All these women married. However, the men they were married were very likely no more attractive.

Marriage was popular with almost everyone. The authorities were only too relieved when female convicts married. They believed that marriage settled people down – and family histories show it often did – and when a female convict married, they could assign her to her husband and take her off their own books. Unless she committed an offence, they did not have to worry about her. Meredith continued that servants marrying was inconvenient for employers who had to find new servants,

But a suitable marriage is so probable and legitimate a means of reformation, that we never place obstacles in the way of such good intentions. Those prisoner-women who settle in the country, with few exceptions, behave well and industriously.

Drink was the main temptation, she added; if women avoided that, all was well.²

Society generally expected women to marry. There was no other career path for women, and this was the way society functioned: men ran it and did the public work, and women ran the home and produced the families that kept society going.

¹ Louisa Ann Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, vol 2, John Murray, London, 1852, p. 209.

² Meredith, pp. 209–01.

Women themselves mostly expected to marry; the alternative was becoming a despised ‘old maid’. In British communities, tradition, philosophy and practicalities all encouraged women to marry, and in convict colonies it was easy for them.

Of the 13,685 female convicts listed on our database, records of marital status in Britain show that just over half were single (54 percent), a third were married, and 16 percent, were widowed, which means single for practical purposes in the colony. So 70 percent could marry in Van Diemen’s Land – though in fact, most could, since no one worried too much about bigamy, as long as everyone kept quiet about it. The authorities must have known that many women were committing bigamy, but presumably their desire for the women to settle down and get off their books was so strong that they did not worry overmuch about the legal aspect.

To find more detail about women and marriage I analysed 229 women’s details from three ships: *Lady of the Lake* which arrived in 1829 from England, and two 1850 arrivals, *St Vincent* from England, and *Earl Grey* from Ireland.³ I omitted the 4 percent who died at sea or in their first two years in the colony. My 229 women included fewer English and more Irish, Scottish and Welsh than the overall number, but the purpose of the paper is just to give an indication:

	My sample percentage	Overall percentage ⁴
English	53.3	65
Irish	23	17
Scottish	20	15
Welsh	3.5	1

As usual, the vast majority, 92 percent, were transported for non-violent theft of some sort, which could be as minor as stealing bread and cheese (Mary Ann Brodie). Only four per cent of crimes involved violence, including a handful of cases of arson. Two unfortunates were transported for vagrancy.

Most women, 82 percent, had a prior conviction, usually only one. The majority, 60 percent, had a seven-year sentence. At the other end of the spectrum, 9 percent had a life sentence. Two-thirds of the women were single (68 percent) and 9 percent widowed, so over three-quarters were free to marry in the colony. In my sample, more Scottish and Irish women (30 and 27 percent) were married than English (18 percent), and Ireland had far more widows. More were married (27 percent) on the 1829 ship than on the 1850 ones (19 percent).

The average age was 27, slightly higher than the overall average of 26, with the Irish oldest at 30 – probably explaining why more were married. Ages ranged from 15 to 51. A third, 35 percent, had children, up to seven. Half of these were allowed to take some children with them to the colony.

A quarter were Catholics and three-quarters Protestant. Literacy reports for two later ships indicate that nearly half, 41 percent, could read and write, and only a third were illiterate. The Irish were far less literate than the others; only 4 percent could read and write.

³ The 229 women’s details were taken from the Female Convicts Research Group database, and chosen at random (but so that they had the same spread of nationalities as the larger sample in *Tasmania’s Convicts*).

⁴ Alison Alexander, *Tasmania’s Convicts*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2010, p. 23

The women's experience of family life varied. Those who brought children with them across the world were surely devoted mothers. Some had family members tried or transported with them, or at other times, which I suppose shows common interest and a possibility of reunion in the colony. In *A drift of Derwent Ducks*, Trudy Cowley showed that a quarter of the women transported on the *Australasia* were transported with a family member, so that not all family ties were broken with transportation.⁵ But many records show dysfunctional families. Several women reported that their husbands were in America, presumably having deserted them; one woman's crime was stealing plate from her mother; Ellen Heath laced her husband's dinner with arsenic, and Elizabeth Macdonald was transported after her husband prosecuted her for stabbing him. She had already been half a dozen times in custody for quarrelling with him. However, not enough details are given to be able to give a general analysis.

When the women arrived in Van Diemen's Land, they were asked their occupation. 86 percent said they were servants, and a further 5 percent did some specific form of domestic work, cook or laundress. Only 8 percent had been in work other than domestic service: 2 dairy woman, 2 dressmakers, 11 industrial workers (cotton carder, factory girl, stocking weaver, fancy knitter), one vaguely professional (hospital nurse), and others described themselves as 'Fortune teller', 'keeping an apple stall' and, an intriguing mixture, 'Kept a loose house, Tambour worker, never in service'. One said she was a 'Nailer. Never been brought up to house work', and two were described as useless as servants. But whatever they did in Britain, domestic service was their destiny in the colony.

The authorities did not count prostitution as an occupation (except for the woman who kept a loose house), but 17 percent acknowledged that they had been on the town. More English women were prostitutes (19 percent) than Irish or Scottish (13 percent, 15 percent).

Women spent time in a British gaol before being transported, and gaol reports existed for 103 cases. Categorized on a scale of 1 to 5 (very bad, bad, middling, good, very good), they averaged 2.6, between bad and middling. The next report was by the ships' surgeons, and theirs are much more positive, with an average of 4, good – so surgeons, basing their reports on the behaviour they saw, judged much more favourably than gaolers at home, who judged on reputation and expectations. This is only an indication of the women's behaviour – the two groups of reports do not necessarily cover the same women – but the usually petty crimes and the good surgeons' reports indicate that most of these women are not rebellious, not serious criminals.

In the colony, these convicts committed an average of 4 offences. When 11 atypical rebels with over 20 offences are omitted, the rest average 3, not very many in their years of servitude – especially when offences could be as trivial as walking the street of Hobart during the time of divine service (Elizabeth Morgan). The Irish average of 2.7 was slightly better, the Scottish average of 4.7 significantly worse – but this is still not bad over five or more years. Most female convicts were not too badly behaved, not too rebellious, and their convict experience had not alienated them from the general community. Then, working as servants in Van Diemen's Land instead of being shut up in prison, they were part of the community, their experience under sentence easing them back into the community.

⁵ Trudy Cowley, *A drift of Derwent Ducks*, Research Tasmania, Hobart, 2005, p. 236.

Marriage

Out of the 229 women, 174 married after they arrived, 76 percent. This is a minimal figure, as there are almost certainly more marriages which we have not yet discovered. In *A Drift of Derwent Ducks*, completed after extremely thorough research, Cowley found that 90 percent of her boatload married in the colony.⁶

Why did some women marry?

Some factors made little difference. Nationality: Scottish women (69 percent) and the early contingent (67 percent) married slightly less often, Catholics married slightly more often, while length of sentence and the number of offences committed in the colony made little difference, though the few who committed over ten offences married slightly less often. Even so, 68 percent of the worst-behaved group married.

Some factors were more significant. More single women and younger women married – though half the women in their fifties married. There were also some unusual groups. Prostitutes had a very high marriage rate, 88 percent. Literate women came second with, 82 percent.

Factors not included in the records could have come into play. Marriage meant leaving the convict system and its restrictions and punishments, a huge bonus. As well, women convicts' work in the colony was going to be domestic. How much better to do your own work at home, instead of having to obey a mistress in her home, with its long hours and hard work. The facts about the women given above indicate that most would have been happy to return to the general community, on its terms. They might even want society's approval, which was gained by marriage, doing what people expected of you. The authorities would look more favourably on a married woman, doing what women were meant to do.

The women in the 1829 ship tended to marry after a longer period in the colony, an average of 5 years after their arrival. The women who arrived in 1850 married an average of 3 years after their arrival, some even marrying in the year they arrived. However, this was due to policy, not choice by the women. In the earlier period, marriage was seen as a reward to be earned by good behaviour, and women had to serve some years of their sentence before permission to marry was granted. By 1850, swamped with the huge number of convicts arriving, the authorities seemed only too glad for women to marry at any time in their sentences. For example, Mary Ann Morrison, an eighteen-year-old single literate Protestant servant transported for 15 years for uttering, 'middling' according to the surgeon, arrived in April 1850. She married later that year, had four children and died at the age of 53.

Ellen Heath served even less of her sentence. She was transported for life for attempting to poison her husband by putting arsenic in the rasher pudding she cooked him, the reason being 'another young man'. She put up no defence and it was amazing that she escaped the death penalty, but she was transported for life, bringing a stepchild with her.⁷ Her behaviour was good, she married the year after her arrival to some brave or perhaps ignorant or desperate man. They had two children, and Ellen died in her eighties in 1908.

Why did some women not marry?

⁶ Cowley, p. 255.

⁷ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 10 March 1849.

There are some slightly more common characteristics of the 52 who did not marry. They were more likely to be English, to have been married before (almost half), to be older (average age on arrival was 31), to have had children (half again). Perhaps some did not want to commit bigamy, or were faithful to the memory of their husbands; perhaps some did not want to marry again (like my grandmother, widowed relatively early, who said she did not want to wash another man's underpants – handwashing, remember). Marriage could have disadvantages such as domestic violence, or dying in childbirth. The calibre of husband on offer in Van Diemen's Land, almost all ex-convicts, might not have appealed.

However, single women had the problem of supporting themselves in the colony. Eleven brought children with them so perhaps lived with family in old age, one was a dressmaker, but apart from domestic service there was no other obvious way for them to earn a living. Even those with a skill in Britain, such as the lathe turner and the stocking weaver, could not find factories in Van Diemen's Land where they could use their training.

It is possible that even in Van Diemen's Land with its dearth of women, some women did not receive a marriage proposal. Elizabeth Macdonald, transported for stabbing her husband, in her forties with a violent disposition, did not marry in the colony. However, both women transported for cutting and wounding found husbands in Van Diemen's Land.

Children

75 of my sample had children in Van Diemen's Land, 33 percent. However, the true number is probably higher: Cowley found that 128 women out of 200 on the *Australasia* had children in the colony, 64 percent. Still, Louisa Ann Meredith commented that many of the convict women who married had no family. Perhaps the trauma of being convicted led to periods stopping? Of the 41 prostitutes, 33 married but only 11 had children, so perhaps venereal disease produced infertility.

Was marrying successful?

From the authorities' point of view, marriage certainly did reform some women. 'Hellish Meg' is not a promising nickname for a convict: Margaret Kidston of Scotland, on the town, already married. In Hobart she committed 31 offences including being found in a disorderly house in bed with a man, but two men applied to marry her, and she married in 1845. She died, presumably at home, at Ralph's Bay in 1880, aged 70, apparently having committed no further offences.

Mary Anne Whitfield, transported for life for stealing a cloak, was described as a having a bad character and connexions and convicted twice before. In England she was married with three children. In Hobart, her four offences included keeping a disorderly house and being found in a house drunk. Her ticket of leave was revoked for using improper language to the chief constable and throwing a stick at him. She married four years after her arrival. Thirteen years later, noted on her record was: 'Having generally conducted herself with propriety since her transportation, and her demeanour for some years past having been such as to prove that she has thoroughly reformed'.

Ann Oliver was transported for life for stealing, was on the town, and the gaol report described her character, connexions and former life as very bad. She married two years after her arrival, and her recommendation for a pardon noted that she had been charged with only one trivial offence in over nine years, was married to a respectable man and could produce two certificates of good character.

There were plenty of other instances however, of women continuing to commit offences, mainly being drunk and disorderly, after they married. All one can say is that some women did reform, some did not.

It is also impossible to give figures for whether women found in marriage the support and comfort they were seeking. As always, marriages had a range of outcomes. Some women were able to establish a settled family life; they bore children, and in old age these children cared for them, seen when they died at the homes of sons or daughters. Women described in family histories are often shown as having a stable life among family members. One of the two women transported for vagrancy found security: Catherine Donovan of Ireland, a single 24-year-old, on the town for six years and with ten convictions for drunkenness, married two years after she arrived in Van Diemen's Land, bore one child and died aged 70, the beloved wife of Robert Cadman, farmer at Fingal.⁸

Other women did not find security in marriage. Ally Dorean, married with no children, died as a gardener's wife in very poor circumstances. Others married but died in institutions: the New Town charitable institution, the New Norfolk asylum. Mary Ann Brodie married but died shortly afterwards in childbirth. Emma Carter married and had a baby, but her husband died when the child was 16 months old. A second Catherine Donovan married seven years after her arrival in Hobart, but was brutally murdered by her husband later that year.

I'd like to finish with a story of the most resilient woman I found in my sample, resilient all the way through her life: Sarah Davies. She was English, a 46-year-old widow with six children, and said that her job was a cotton reeler – operating machinery that wound yarn on to bobbins in a cotton mill – and she could cook a plain dinner, wash and iron. However, she had other ways of providing for her children. Her gaol report noted that she was a notorious receiver whose character, connexions and former course of life were bad. In 1829 she was convicted of receiving property stolen by her son. Both were sentenced to transportation.

Sarah arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1829. In the colony, she committed only one offence, being found with her master's property in her possession under suspicious circumstances. She received a ticket of leave in 1834, and in 1837 was recommended for a conditional pardon, as she was respectably married and highly recommended. Sarah could cope with whatever life threw at her. However, not all convict women could do so.

⁸ *Examiner*, 27 September 1894.