

## CONVICT WOMEN AT THEIR NEEDLE IN MORETON BAY

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### 'What the Convict Women Brought With Them — And What They Left Behind'

Female Convict Research Centre Seminar  
Hobart - November 2015

This paper examines the lives of female convicts through the lens of the skills and trades they brought with them to New South Wales (NSW), with a particular focus on needlewomen and dressmakers who served sentences of secondary punishment at Moreton Bay between 1824 and 1839, or who lived in Queensland after it had been opened up to free settlement in 1842.

In her 1994 article, 'Packing her (economic) bags: Convict women workers', Deborah Oxley wrote that despite contemporary descriptions of female convicts as abandoned, worthless, illiterate and lacking in any skills — not to mention those dismissing all female convicts as prostitutes — the convict indents reveal a different picture.<sup>1</sup> Oxley examined the records of nearly 7,000 convict women transported to NSW between 1826 and 1840, representing nearly half of the women transported to NSW and one-quarter of the 25,000 women transported to the Australian colonies (the remainder having been transported to Van Diemen's Land).<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of Oxley's 7,000 women worked in domestic or farm service as maids, servants, laundresses, cooks or doing 'allwork'.<sup>3</sup> Outside of domestic work, the most common occupations were needlewoman, dressmaker, nurse, barmaid, milliner, straw bonnet maker, baker and factory labourer.<sup>4</sup> Sewing trades were the most common non-domestic skills that women possessed, with 470 needlewomen and another 180 women working as dressmakers, mantua makers, tailoresses and embroiderers. (Mantua maker is an old-fashioned term for dressmaker.) A much smaller number worked in the hat-making trades, including milliners and bonnet makers.

Needlework, in particular, came to be known as a 'sweated labour', defined in 1890 by a House of Lords select committee as: long hours, unsanitary working conditions and wages 'barely sufficient to sustain existence'.<sup>5</sup> For many women, needlework was the only work they could find and the competition was so fierce

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<sup>1</sup> Oxley, Deborah, 'Packing her (economic) bags: Convict women workers', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 102, 1994, pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated from the table of occupations in Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', pp. 75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Blackburn, Sheila, "'To be poor and to be honest...is the hardest struggle of all": Sweated needlewomen and campaigns for protection legislation 1840-1914', in Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, Vermont, 2005, p. 243.

and the pay so poor that some resorted to prostitution to supplement their earnings.<sup>6</sup>

In total, 10% of Oxley's sample were employed in sewing or hat-making trades, 1% were nurses or midwives, and 2% performed a multitude of jobs, many of which were skilled, including artificial flower maker, chair carver, distiller, fishing net maker, glass polisher, governess, lace maker, ladies' hairdresser, ostrich feather dresser and upholsterer – to name but a few. The remaining 87% were domestics of some kind.<sup>7</sup>

Oxley writes that we should not dismiss women working as domestics as unskilled just because they did not complete formal apprenticeships. Kitchenmaids, for instance, spent years in an informal apprenticeship to become cooks.<sup>8</sup> And while women who did 'allwork' are generally considered unskilled, Oxley says that an argument could be made that they were the *most* skilled as they performed all jobs in a household.<sup>9</sup>

Oxley also famously said that the reason many historians have 'undervalued convict women' and dismissed them as unskilled is 'because they undervalue women's work'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, she says:

Convict women were economically well-equipped, and could have played a pivotal role. The challenge now is to examine the actual roles women played in promoting the colonial economy.<sup>11</sup>

A challenge indeed! Especially when considering the small number of women sent to serve sentences of secondary punishment at Moreton Bay between 1824 and 1839, and the equally small number known to have lived in Queensland after free settlement began in 1842 — in all, about 300 women. Unfortunately it is very difficult to trace most of these women, especially if they married and changed their surname or never reoffended. For this reason, several of the women I have traced for this paper were found in gaol records, however I do not want to give the impression that a large proportion of the female convicts linked with Queensland ended up in gaol or in trouble with the authorities – it is just that they are often the easiest to track down.

Reflecting Oxley's results, most of the 150 female convicts sent to Moreton Bay between 1824 and 1839 were in some type of domestic service, however the list of skilled and semi-skilled occupations held by the remaining women includes several sewing trades: needlewoman, mantua maker apprentice, sempstress, dressmaker, tailoress and embroiderer. Other occupations listed include shoe

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<sup>6</sup> Blackburn, "To be poor and to be honest...", p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Oxley, 'Packing her (economic) bags', p. 73.

binder, fringemaker, weaver, silk weaver, flax spinner, schoolmistress, shopkeeper and confectioner.<sup>12</sup>

The female prisoners' quarters at Moreton Bay, originally located on what is now Queen Street in the city, were moved to Eagle Farm, several kilometres from the main penal settlement to stop fraternisation between the sexes. The female quarters included six cells, a school, a hospital and a 'needle room' for sewing. Convict women were assigned tasks including cooking, doing laundry, husking corn, farm work and making convict clothing from cloth woven by women at the Parramatta Female Factory.<sup>13</sup>

There are only small traces of evidence indicating that some women may have used their skills with the needle at Moreton Bay or after they returned to Sydney. In 1839 the Colonial Secretary's correspondence records that three needlewomen, Charlotte Bramwell, Mary Sullivan and Bridget O'Donnell, 'late of Moreton Bay whose original sentences have expired' and whose conduct had been 'extremely good' since arriving in Sydney were judged 'able to obtain a living by industry', though perhaps the convict authorities simply meant that the women were employable as servants.

Mary Burke and Catherine Byrne were mantua maker apprentices. Mary received her certificate of freedom 18 years after arriving in NSW and Catherine received hers six years after arriving; in both cases the certificates described them as mantua makers rather than mantua maker apprentices. Does this indicate that they worked as dressmakers well after their arrival in NSW? Unfortunately there is no evidence of this as a search of Trove failed to find any mention of Catherine or Mary.

Mary Ann Reid, a 19-year-old needlewoman and shoebinder, was transported to NSW on the *Roslin Castle* in 1830. After serving a term of secondary punishment at Moreton Bay she was returned to NSW, but there is no evidence that she worked in either of her trades. Instead, she was described as a servant when she was admitted to the Parramatta Gaol in 1842.

Ann Unwin, a tailoress born on Guernsey in the Channel Islands, was transported on the *Midas* in 1825. She was granted a certificate of freedom in October 1834 but two weeks later she was convicted of 'Stealing in a dwelling' and transported to Moreton Bay where she was one of several women working as assigned servants to married officers. In 1839 Ann was returned to Sydney and received a ticket of leave. In 1846 she was described as a needlewoman when she was

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<sup>12</sup> Queensland State Archives (QSA), Chronological Register of Moreton Bay, Parts 1 and 3. For discussion of the Irish female convicts at Moreton Bay 1824-1839, see Jennifer Harrison, "'The very worst class': Irish women convicts at Moreton Bay", in Bob Reece (ed.), *Irish Convict Lives*, Crossing Press, Darlinghurst, NSW, 1993, pp. 178-198.

<sup>13</sup> J. G. Steele, *Brisbane Town in Convict Days 1824-1842*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, 1975, pp. 211, 220; Mamie O'Keefe, *Convicts at Moreton Bay, 1824-1859*, Royal Historical Society of Queensland, Brisbane, 2001, pp. 14-15; and, Gay Hendriksen, Trudy Cowley, Carol Liston, Parramatta Heritage Centre and University of Western Sydney, *Women Transported: Life in Australia's Convict Female Factories*, Parramatta City Council Heritage Centre, Parramatta, NSW, pp. 9, 51.

admitted to the Darlinghurst Gaol, but when she was admitted again in 1852 to serve four months' hard labour for stealing a pair of slippers, she was listed as a servant.

Hannah Rigby, an embroiderer from Liverpool, arrived in NSW on the *Lord Sidmouth* in 1823. In the 1828 NSW census, Hannah was free by servitude and described as a 'sempstress', however her 1828 certificate of freedom describes her as a servant. In February 1830 Hannah was convicted of stealing thirty yards of ribbon with 'force and arms' and sent to Moreton Bay, where her husband was already serving a sentence of secondary punishment. After her sentence expired in 1837 she returned to Sydney but less than three months later she stole two hats and was sent back to Moreton Bay.

In May 1839, when the penal settlement closed Hannah remained at Moreton Bay as the assigned servant of the assistant colonial surgeon David Ballow. In July 1840 Ballow petitioned for a remission of Hannah's sentence, indicating that her conduct had been exemplary and she had never given him any cause for distrust or complaint. Hannah remained in Brisbane until she died in her home near Queen Street in 1853. There is no evidence that she worked as an embroiderer in Brisbane.

The Moreton Bay Book of Trials records that in September 1841, a convict woman named Catherine Carmondy, assigned to Mr Warner, was charged with 'Disobedience of orders in absenting herself without leave'. Carmondy said that she went to 'speak to a woman that she wanted to make a few Caps and a little Frock and that she was not two minutes absent' but she was sentenced to six days in solitary confinement on bread and water.

The population of Moreton Bay in 1841 was 200 persons. There were only 16 adult females, of which 13 were free, one was an ex-convict and two were assigned servants. The ex-convict was Hannah Rigby and one of the assigned servants was likely Catherine Carmondy. The other assigned servant may have been Jane Appleyard, transported to NSW on the *Mary* in 1835. She was a 19-year-old mantua maker from York. Like Catherine Carmondy, she did not serve a sentence of secondary punishment at Moreton Bay. Instead, she was sent north as an assigned servant to the Clerk of Works, Andrew Petrie. Jane is possibly the woman that Catherine went to see about making some caps and a frock.

On 28 February 1842, three weeks after the district was opened to free settlement, Jane Appleyard was charged with 'being drunk & disorderly at Mr. Petrie's house'. She was found guilty and sent to the Female Factory at Parramatta. Jane remained in NSW and in 1843 she was granted a certificate of freedom which described her as a servant. Jane married a ticket-of-leave man, John Kay, in 1848 and they raised a family at Pretty Plains in NSW.

Once Moreton Bay opened up to free settlement, convict women with tickets of leave or who had already obtained their freedom began to arrive. Mary Ann Young, a 28-year-old needlewoman, arrived in NSW on the *Whitby* in 1839. When she was admitted to the Bathurst Gaol in 1846 and the Brisbane Gaol in

1853 she described herself as a needlewoman but in 1863 the Bathurst Gaol register describes her as a 'House Servant'. Agnes Connor also arrived on the *Whitby* in 1839. The indent recorded her trade as country servant, however she was admitted to the Brisbane Gaol multiple times between 1850 and 1861 and on five of these occasions Agnes was described as a needlewoman.

By 1851, the NSW census showed that 107 female convicts and ex-convicts were living in the 'Northern District' of Moreton Bay and the Darling Downs, and others continued to arrive throughout the 1850s and 1860s. One of these women was Sophia Grantham, a bonnet maker, who was transported to Van Diemen's Land on the *Rajah* in 1841.

On their journey to Australia, the women on board the *Rajah* sewed a beautiful quilt which was presented to the Lieutenant-Governor's wife, Lady Jane Franklin, and is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>14</sup> As a bonnet maker with sewing skills, Sophia would almost certainly have made a contribution, if not a significant contribution, to the quilt. Sophia married John Tregilgus in Hobart in 1845, however the family moved north during the late 1850s and their names regularly appear in Queensland newspapers as proprietors of various hotels in the Rockhampton area from 1860 onwards. There is no mention, however, of Sophia working as a bonnet maker.

The earliest advertisements for a dressmaker or needlewoman that I have been able to locate in the *Moreton Bay Courier* are dated July 1846.<sup>15</sup> After this there were regular advertisements for dressmakers and milliners, but so far they all appear to be emigrant women. So in many ways I feel that I have failed in my search for convict women working as needlewomen and dressmakers in Moreton Bay and Queensland, but on the other hand I think the lack of evidence speaks to three important factors:

Firstly, that convict women may have been needlewomen working punishing hours for pitiful wages in the British Isles, but in Australia they started out as assigned servants using a whole variety of skills, including sewing. Many married quickly and raised large families, again mostly likely regularly using their needlework skills.

Secondly, female ex-convicts who worked as needlewomen in the colonies would have done sewing from home and advertised in their local neighbourhood by word of mouth, so the fact that they are invisible in the newspapers does not mean that they did not carry out their trade.

And thirdly, convict women faced intense competition from the large numbers of needlewomen, dressmakers and milliners who were arriving as free emigrants from the British Isles, France and elsewhere in Europe.<sup>16</sup> In 1839, the *Sydney*

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Bell, 'The Rajah quilt 1841', National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, last updated [n.d.], <<http://nga.gov.au/rajahquilt/>>.

<sup>15</sup> 'Mrs. Costin' [advertisements], *Moreton Bay Courier*, 4 and 11 July 1846, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, see 'Ship news', *Sydney Gazette*, 7 May 1842, p. 3.

*Herald*, clearly unimpressed with the government's plans for convict women to make dresses and clothing for sale, wrote:

As to the plan lately sanctioned by the Executive Council of a Government Mantua-making Establishment, so far from approving of the measure, we very much object to it, because the amount of work done in the Factory is so much capital (if we may so speak) abstracted from the pockets, of a rather numerous class of free women who are endeavouring to maintain themselves and families by the use of their needles. It would be perfectly fair for the Government to employ female prisoners to do whatever needle work may be required to be done for the public service. And in making the male convicts' dresses and so forth, but we have no notion of the Government entering into competition with the free sempstresses of the Colony.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, I think there is a wealth of fascinating and important research still to be done and I will certainly keep looking for evidence that convict and ex-convict women worked as needlewomen, dressmakers, milliners and in other skilled occupations during their lives in Queensland.

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## NOTES

1. For further information regarding Hannah Rigby, Jane Appleyard, Mary Ann Young, Agnes Connor and Sophia Grantham, please see:

Jan Richardson, 'Invisible stories: The presence of female convicts in Queensland following the closure of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in 1842', *History in the Making*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter-Spring 2013, pp. 86-108. Published online at: <http://journal.historyitm.org/current-issue/volume-two-number-two/>

2. The 1841, 1846 and 1851 New South Wales census returns for Moreton Bay and areas which now form part of Queensland do not record the names of individuals. The 1851 census was the last to distinguish between those who arrived free, were born in the colony or who were currently or formerly 'bond' (convict). Census results for Moreton Bay and surrounding areas are reported in the *New South Wales Government Gazettes* of the time, and are also available in newspaper reports accessible on Trove. Please see 'Invisible stories' for further details.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Silk worms', *Sydney Herald*, 20 November 1839, p. 1S.