

Far from Jane Austen's world - the importance of marrying well.

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From 1811 until 1816, Jane Austen wrote her four most famous novels, all of which highlight the ways in which her main female protagonists depended on marriage to secure social standing and economic security.

This is a story about two women on the other side of the world and far down the social ladder, an Irish convict and her daughter, both of whom succeeded in life by marrying well. Their story highlights the lack of personal choice that convicts and especially women had in their choice of partners. But it also shows that it was possible to rise above the convict stain by marrying well.

My great-great-great-grandmother, Honora Ahern, was an 18-year-old illiterate servant girl of Cork who was sentenced to 7 years transportation in 1813. No record has been found of her crime. Honora was one of the three youngest of the 98 Irish female convicts transported on the *Catherine*. It was the height of the Napoleonic wars; the *Catherine* and the *Three Bees*, with male Irish convicts were to sail in convoy, under the protection of the armed frigates *Niger* and *Tagus*.

The voyage did not go entirely as planned. Weather delayed their departure first from Cork and then from Plymouth. Near Cape de Verde, the *Niger* and *Tagus* entered into a chase and battle, before capturing the French frigate *Ceres* which was under the command of Baron de Bougainville. The *Catherine* and *Three Bees*, with their cannons armed, continued on without their escort or further incident. They arrived in Port Jackson (Sydney) in May 1814, and their arrival coincided with a 'send more women' request from Lieutenant Governor Davey. So three weeks later, Honora set sail again on the brig *Kangaroo*, with 60 other convict women.

The *Kangaroo* had a nightmare voyage, and was blown back past Port Jackson from near Eden. She eventually arrived in Hobart Town on 14 September 1814 (just over 200 years ago!). Honora Ahern had been on a ship almost continuously for 11 months since she left Ireland, and had had enough excitement for a lifetime.

From 1803 to 1813, only about 90 convict women had arrived in Hobart and there was an urgent need for more female convicts as domestic labour (and wives!). I can't find a male/female ratio for 1814, but I expect it was even more unbalanced than the 1820 ratio of 9 males to 1 female among the convict population.

As the youngest of the women sent to Hobart, Honora was presumably quite a prize for an eligible bachelor. The lucky man was 32-year-old George Lowe who had gained his Certificate of Freedom 2 years earlier. This was well before the Female Factory and at the very beginning of the assignment period. No records exist, but Honora may have been assigned to him. It's hard to imagine that they met by chance and fell in love; it is much more likely that money changed hands as it usually did for George.

Five months later they were married, with the required permission, by the Reverend Robert Knopwood. Honora would have been assigned to her husband after their marriage (if she wasn't already). He could have her charged and punished if she was insolent or disobeyed his orders, but there is no evidence of this. The first of their 7 children was born 9½ months later so no shotgun was involved.

There are very few details of Honora's married life, so we have to surmise what it is was like from the extensive information available on her husband's life.

18-year-old George Lowe had been convicted in Kent in 1801 with an unfortunately name accomplice, Martin Bryant, for breaking into a house and stealing 2 silver watches. They were sentenced to be hanged, but their sentences were commuted to transportation for life.

They sailed on HMS *Glatton* to Port Jackson, arriving in early 1803. Most of Lowe's sentence was served in the Sydney area, apart from a period in 1805 at Port Dalrymple on the West Arm of the Tamar. He served the last year in Hobart Town and in March 1813 he obtained, by servitude, his Certificate of Freedom. He had served 12 years of a Life Sentence that had at some point been commuted to 14 years.

Two questions arise from Lowe's convict period. The first is was he illiterate? His background suggests he was likely to be, and when he made a detailed statement about an escape at Port Dalrymple in 1805, he signed with his mark. However, his subsequent astute business activities and financial management suggest otherwise.

The second question is how did he apparently acquire money while he was under sentence? We do know that he was assigned to 'Boat Crew' in Sydney, an occupation which would have given him good opportunities to earn money on the side by assisting with rum smuggling. This is described well in Kate Grenville's book *The Secret River*, which also talks about buying sentence reductions and pardons.

We also know that Lowe absconded to the Feegees on the American Brig *Jenny*, whose crew were involved in the salvage of another ship which was reputed to have 40,000 Spanish silver dollars on board. With stories of cannibalism rife, Lowe surrendered and returned to Sydney, where he seems to have evaded any disciplinary action. Did he come back with a supply of silver dollars to help him along his way?

Three years after his emancipation, the now married George Lowe paid £120 cash for a farm of 78 acres situated on the Derwent River in the district of New Norfolk. And six months later, he successfully tendered to supply 1500 lbs of fresh meat to His Majesty's Magazine. He continued to prosper. He regularly appears on lists as donating 10 shillings to £1 toward various causes; he foreclosed on debts, was a witness in a forgery trial, and served as a juror on a Commission of Inquiry.

Honora appears to have settled well into her role as wife and manager of a household with convict domestic servants, and the mother of 7 children. All but one, a toddler who died of snakebite, survived to adulthood. Honora gained her freedom by servitude after 7 years, in 1820.

Ten years after she arrived, Honora accompanied her husband on a trip back to the mother country. That's very unusual for emancipated convicts. George's business affairs and at least 2 of the Lowe children were left in the care of a convict servant, indicating they intended to return. They were away 17 months and returned with another baby and a large cargo of imported goods to sell.

In 1827 Lowe became the Licensed Publican of the King's Head Inn, New Norfolk (*now Valleyfield*), and soon after purchased it from the Abel family. He established a very successful store there and built stables and a coach house which still stand, with his initials on the keystone. In 1830, and then started the colony's first coach service, between New Norfolk and Hobart.

Meanwhile, Lowe had also bought "*the valuable premises at the corner of Collins and Argyle streets, near the Market place, for £1500*". His various business activities prospered and by 1835, preparing to move to Sydney, he advertised a clearing sale – the itemised description is of a very wealthy gentleman's household.

Included in the numerous items were:

One very splendid silver tea service, and a quantity of useful plate

One handsome China dinner service, blue and gold

Two of the best and most expensive carpets in the Island

*The dining and drawing-room curtains are costly, with elegant brass poles, imported to order
6 clocks by celebrated makers*

One gentleman's dressing case, mounted with upwards of 20 ounces of silver

The paintings are numerous and valuable, many being by the most celebrated masters

The works in the library treat on almost every subject, ancient and modern, and the greater part are elegantly bound

"It is hardly necessary to remark, the Proprietor has for a length of time made it his study to select the very best articles the Colony afforded, without the most remote regard to cost."

Returning to Hobart from Sydney not long after, Lowe seems to have become a money lender, with a penchant for ruthlessly foreclosing on debts. In 1839, he put in an unsuccessful bid to buy the Theatre Royal from Peter Degraives for £2,250.

Honora died on 19 November 1839, age 44, and was buried in the Catholic cemetery at St Mary's, Hobart. From a very inauspicious beginning as an illiterate servant girl in Cork, she had achieved economic security and a relatively secure social standing in a society where it was possible for her husband to progress from convict to self-titled gentleman. His death notice in 1861 described him as *"an old and respected colonist, aged 78 years"*.

Further information: <http://www.rosfamilyhistory.esco.net.au/Lowe.htm>

The Lowe s' daughter Mary was born in 1819 while her mother was still under sentence. At age 15, now the daughter of a successful businessman, she was told by a convict servant "If you peep around the parlour door, you'll see your father talking with the man you are going to marry".

She entered into an arranged marriage with John Pearson Rowe, a recently arrived young colonial surgeon. In a town where men still outnumbered women, eligible young brides were still a rarity. It is not known whether Rowe knew of her parents' convict origins, or whether their past was early enough in Hobart's history for them to have successfully blended in with the free settlers. It is also not known if a dowry changed hands. The family story is that it was a condition of the marriage that Rowe educate her – perhaps socially rather than academically.

Young Dr Rowe was quite a catch! He had been educated by a tutor at home prior to attending Stonyhurst, a Jesuit Catholic College in Lancashire. He then served an apprenticeship as a surgeon/ apothecary at the Liverpool Infirmary. Too young to be registered as a doctor, he put up his age and signed on for a return trip to VDL as a surgeon to troops. He arrived in Hobart in early 1832, but the ship was sold for whaling and he was paid off (£300) and settled in Hobart. Dr William Crowther and Rowe opened a public dispensary and Sick Poor Friend's Society in Collins Street, as an alternative to what was described in the newspapers as the 'poorly administered public hospital in Hobart'. He bought extensive landholdings in South Hobart when Birch's farm was subdivided and pastoral land in the Brighton area (where he built a beautiful sandstone house he called "Stonyhurst" after his old school).

In 1846, Rowe left Van Diemen's Land to become a pastoralist in Victoria. He bought the best sheep, from the best breeders in Europe and the colonies. He adapted to changing circumstances, moving from wool, to meat in response to the demands of the gold rush population, then back to wool. At various times he owned extensive holdings in the Mansfield area, Rochester, Terrick Terrick and finally Seven Creeks Station at Euroa. He had a gun fight with Harry Power and a young Ned Kelly who were trying to steal his horses. He hosted the Burke and Wills expedition for two nights when they passed through his station; and he used his apothecary skills to develop effective ways of managing scabies and liver fluke in sheep. Rowe was on the first Melbourne University Council and the founding subcommittee which established the university's medical school in 1862.

Over a 30-year period, Mary Rowe gave birth to 13 children, including 3 who died in one week during a typhoid epidemic in Melbourne. Their eldest daughter was sent by herself to boarding school in England at the age of 5, in the care of the Captain of the ship, and two of their teenage sons were later sent to school at Stonyhurst in England. The younger children had governesses and were taken on an extensive world tour, visiting all the best places.

While the bush-life absorbed Rowe's interest, Mary disliked it, preferring the social life of Melbourne. She felt the loneliness of the bush, and especially disliked the summer heat - she said she was "Southern born". In 1856 Rowe bought a house in Heyington Place, Toorak, with 9 acres of land down to the Yarra River, where Mary and the younger children could live during the hot weather, and the cooler part of the year in the bush. Sir Henry Barkly, the Lieutenant Governor, was a next-door neighbour and the Rowes shared a much loved governess with the Barkly family.

It was reported that their house in Toorak became the centre of the musical culture of its time. The Rowes' love of music is well documented. A piano was in their worldly goods carted by bullock dray to their first slab house in the bush. Their daughters' voices were later renowned for their beauty. One made a career in London as a contralto singer and voice coach to the rich and famous. The family were also connected with the popular soprano Madame Carandini, whose widowed mother had married Mary Rowe's widowed father (aka convict turned gentleman, George Lowe)

In an interview for her 90th birthday, Mary Rowe recalled the days when "women had to fight against many odds". She was described as a clever, intelligent woman who attributed her good health to the interest she took in every passing event". She'd certainly led an interesting life.

My mother remembers visiting her great-great-grandmother Mary – a small, elderly woman dressed in black, with a lace cap and an ear trumpet. Mary Rowe nee Lowe died in Melbourne in 1819, age 95.

In summary. Honora Ahern and her daughter Mary married well, and were apparently able to embrace their new roles. It is interesting to speculate how soon George and Honora managed to suppress their convict past – was it when they went overseas and returned? Did JP Rowe, from an old English family, know he was marrying the daughter of convicts? The extensive collection of letters written by Mary Rowe and her daughters (now in the Victorian State Library) reveal they were quite snobbish and had assumption of social superiority. Was Mary knowingly hiding her past? I'm confident the daughters had no idea of their convict ancestry – we had no idea until the records were opened in the 1960s and my aunt found the truth.

It seems that Jane Austen was right – even in convict Hobart Town, marriage could be a means to secure social standing and economic security.

Further information: <http://www.rosfamilyhistory.esco.net.au/Rowe.htm>