

Self-Harm by Female Convicts: Is there any evidence for it?

On 11 October 1818, 25-year-old Eliza McEwen arrived at George Town on board the *Elizabeth Henrietta* from Sydney, having arrived there on 17 September 1818 on board the convict transport *Maria I*. Eliza had been tried at Perth Court of Justiciary for theft by housebreaking and sentenced to seven years transportation.¹

Eliza was troubled by coughing and spitting of blood throughout the four-month voyage from England. Surgeon-Superintendent Thomas Prosser had requested she be taken-off the *Maria I* before it sailed, as he considered she was not in a fit state of health to undergo the voyage. However, she was not disembarked.

Two weeks after departing Deal, on 28 May 1818, Prosser wrote in his journal:

Took two pins without heads out of her arm. States her having a great many in different parts of her body. Can give me no account how she came by them. Had 19 pins taken out of her by Doctor Monro and several by the Surgeon of the Prison she came from. Some of them are very superficial others very deep seated.

From this time until the ship's arrival at Sydney in September, nearly two dozen other pins were removed from various parts of her body, including the arm, thigh, abdomen and breast.²

Why would Eliza have forty to fifty pins inserted in her body? Was she self-harming?

Self-harm is the 'intentional, direct injury of body tissue most often done without suicidal intentions'.³ However, there is an increased risk of suicide in those who self-harm.

The most common form of self-harm is skin-cutting but self-harm also covers a wide range of behaviors including, but not limited to, burning, scratching, banging or hitting body parts, interfering with wound healing, hair-pulling and the ingestion of toxic substances or objects.³

Self-harm is often a coping mechanism which provides temporary relief of intense feelings of anxiety, depression, stress and emotional numbness, among others. It is often associated with a history of trauma and abuse.³

It is without doubt that some, if not most, convicts would have felt anxious, depressed, stressed and/or emotionally numb at being transported, leaving friends, family and a familiar environment. This was a traumatic experience in itself, without

¹ NAS, AD14/17 *Crown Office Precognitions*, 1817 (Eliza McEwen), online at <http://www.nas.gov.uk/onlineCatalogue/>

² Tardif, Philip, *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls: Convict women in Van Diemen's Land 1803-1829*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1990, pp.314-315 No.409

³ *Wikipedia*, Self-harm, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-harm>

the influence of any other trauma or abuse they may have experienced prior to transportation. It would not be unexpected then that some of the female convicts were self-harmers.

Sticking pins into your body certainly seems to fit the definition of self-harm. So we can conclude that it is probable Eliza McEween was a self-harmer. Are there any other female convicts who self-harmed?

An analysis of the surgeon's reports and journals which have been transcribed into the *Female Convicts in Van Diemen's Land* database does not provide any further examples. Furthermore, an analysis of scars (as described in the marks section of the description list) showed only those that would be expected, though they did indicate evidence of abuse, particularly facial scars.

An analysis of a selection of case reports of female patients at the Asylum for the Insane at New Norfolk also failed to find any examples of self-harm, as defined above. Examples may exist, they just haven't been found or were not recorded.

What did emerge from the analyses was the prevalence of attempted suicide among the female convicts. Even though attempted suicide is not technically categorised as self-harm, there are many parallels. Self-poisoning, a form of self-harm,³ was a favoured form of suicide among women, as was hanging and drowning. According to Kippen, 'found drowned' was 'a term often used as a euphemism for suicide'.⁴ In comparison, men tended to cut their throats or shoot themselves, but also hung themselves.⁵ 'Suicides caused around 0.5 per cent of total deaths in each decade (from 1860 to 1899). Half of all suicides were committed by those in the age group 35-49 years.'⁶

Sarah Green was transported for ten years on the *Rajah* in 1841 for larceny. The Surgeon-Superintendent described her as 'Well behaved but passionate'.⁷ She was about 24 years of age and single. In July 1842 she married George Wright and they worked for Reverend Mr Bedford in Hobart. In March 1843, Reverend Bedford charged Sarah with disobedience of orders in refusing to work and also absenting herself. Reverend Bedford's court testimony about her behaviour suggests that she was perhaps suffering from depression.

On the 27th February last I had been out with Mrs Bedford and on my return I was told that nothing was prepared for dinner, I sent to the prisoner and she returned her word that she would not get any ready. On the following day I spoke to her on the subject of her misconduct, she then said she would make an apology to Mrs Bedford, then did not make the apology and I sent for her she said she was sorry for what she had done & that was all the apology she had to make. I then told her I would take her before Mr Spode. She went away, and afterwards refused to do anything. The next day she did nothing, after that she

⁴ Kippen, Rebecca, 'Death in Tasmania: Using civil death registers to measure nineteenth-century cause-specific mortality', Australian National University PhD thesis, 2002, p.80

⁵ Kippen, 'Death in Tasmania' p.213

⁶ Kippen, 'Death in Tasmania' p.92

⁷ TAHO, CON40/1/4 p.263 No.252 [image 190] (Sarah Green)

*went to work as usual. On the Monday following she would not do any work, on Tuesday after breakfast she went to work again. On the Thursday following the bell was rung once or twice no one came. I sent to the prisoner, she refused to come, and then her husband told me she had taken poison. She was sent to the Hospital. I understand that she was discharged yesterday, but I have not seen her until now.*⁸

Sarah's propensity to depression, and hard-drinking, was later confirmed by her husband who stated the poison she had swallowed was oxalic acid, which he used for brass-cleaning. As punishment for her disobedience, Sarah was sentenced to six months hard labour at Cascades Female Factory.

George and Sarah Wright had seven children and later moved to Auckland, New Zealand. However, she continued to suffer from depression and alcoholism. In July 1865, 22 years after her first attempt, Sarah succeeded in poisoning herself by drinking oxalic acid, with two of her children as witnesses. George stated she had been suffering from *delirium tremens*.

Another *Rajah* convict, Elizabeth Clayton, attempted to commit suicide twice by poisoning herself with laudanum prior to her arrest. Elizabeth had been an inmate of the Refuge for the Destitute in London from which she was hired into the service of Mr Joseph Salmon. While there, she met and was seduced by a young man named Holmes who promised to 'take her round the country' if she robbed her master. This she did and they travelled for a while before ending up in Chichester where he once saved her from an overdose of laudanum then deserted her. Elizabeth took another overdose and was found in a field by a policeman, who discovering there was a warrant out against her, arrested her. Elizabeth was sentenced to ten years transportation, but the man Holmes, though well-known to police, was not caught.⁹

After her arrival in Hobart, Elizabeth was involved in riots at Cascades Female Factory before marrying Thomas Dowling in 1844. Nothing is known of her after she received her Certificate of Freedom.

A third *Rajah* convict also attempted suicide by poisoning. Ellen Holden too was transported for ten years for larceny. Just four months after arrival in the colony she attempted to poison herself, when in the employ of Mr Turnbull. She was returned to the Crown for medical treatment. Ellen lived for another 52 years, but her life was fraught with violence, alcoholism and abuse. She married and had two children in Victoria, where she spent the rest of her life, much of it in and out of gaol.¹⁰

⁸ Cowley, Trudy & Dianne Snowden, *Patchwork Prisoners: The Rajah Quilt and the women who made it*. Research Tasmania, Hobart, 2013 (forthcoming July 2013), biography of Sarah Green, online at www.researchtasmania.com.au (forthcoming July 2013)

⁹ Cowley, Trudy & Dianne Snowden, *Patchwork Prisoners: The Rajah Quilt and the women who made it*. Research Tasmania, Hobart, 2013 (forthcoming July 2013), biography of Elizabeth Clayton, online at www.researchtasmania.com.au (forthcoming July 2013)

¹⁰ Cowley, Trudy & Dianne Snowden, *Patchwork Prisoners: The Rajah Quilt and the women who made it*. Research Tasmania, Hobart, 2013 (forthcoming July 2013), biography of Ellen Holden, online at www.researchtasmania.com.au (forthcoming July 2013)

So, what became of Eliza McEween? She does not appear to have married or had children. After gaining her freedom in September 1824, nine colonial offences were recorded on her conduct record, all to do with assault and/or being drunk and disorderly. It seems then, that her life too was fraught with violence and alcoholism. It is possible she died at Launceston in October 1834, just four years after her last recorded colonial offence.¹¹

Finding evidence for self-harm among female convicts has proved difficult. It is not improbable that it happened, but perhaps the anxiety, stress, and depression the women experienced found an outlet through drinking, violence and attempted suicide.

¹¹ *Female Convicts in Van Diemen's Land* database, Eliza McEween, ID 4436, Source Notes; TAHO, RGD 34 1834/3684 Launceston (Eliza McCuan)