

ANN BASS (aka ANN KING)

[*Canada* (4) to Sydney, 1817; *Elizabeth Henrietta* to VDL, 1817]

by

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Ann Bass, also known as Ann King, arrived in Van Diemen's Land (VDL) as a convict in August 1817.¹ Although there is some doubt about her exact age at that time, she is thought to have been in her early twenties. Two years earlier, she had been convicted in Dublin, Ireland, of the theft of money from a man in a public house and sentenced to transportation for seven years. Two months after her arrival in VDL, she married John Gwynn, a twenty-eight year old free settler, but there are indications that their life together was not a happy one. Little else is known about her. She passed away of natural causes at Sorell, Tasmania, in 1854. She was fifty-eight years old. Her death certificate described her as a 'labourer's wife'. In most respects, her story is unremarkable; like many of the 13,500 (approx.) women who were transported to VDL between 1813 and 1853, she served her time as a prisoner and then disappeared from the pages of history. However, what makes Ann's story different from the stories of others is the severe and unusual punishment to which she was subjected when, soon after her arrival in VDL, she was charged with 'behaving in a riotous and disorderly manner to her mistress and attempting to quit her place without leave'.

This is Ann's story....

Ann's date of birth is uncertain but her convict documents suggest that she was born in 1796 or thereabouts.² She was probably born in Dublin, Ireland, but nothing is known of her family or her upbringing.

On 6 November 1815, she was charged with stealing two one-pound notes and four ten-penny coins from William Cullen who was drinking alone in a public house in Dublin. At Ann's trial, Cullen told the court that while he was drinking Ann and another woman, Mary Quinn, had sat down, one on either side of him. As he stood up to leave, he realised that the money, which he had hidden inside a glove in his pocket, was missing. He grabbed one of the women and held her until officers of the law arrived to arrest her. He knew that it was Ann rather than Mary who had taken the money because it was Ann who was sitting on that side. She was sentenced to transportation for seven years. Mary Quinn was acquitted.³

After the trial, Ann was held in an Irish prison for more than a year while awaiting a ship to take her to VDL. Eventually she was put aboard the vessel *Canada* (4) which, with eighty-nine female prisoners and eleven of their children, departed from Cork on 21 March 1817.

¹ Conduct record (as Ann King): CON40/1/5, image 226; indent CON13/1/1, image 82; Police No: 3; FCRC ID: 4501.

² Approximate birth year calculated from her age at death; see Note 17 below.

³ *Saunders News Letter* (Dublin), 22 November 1815 – FCRC website, via contributor K. Searson.

Sailing via Rio de Janeiro, it reached Port Jackson (Sydney) on 5 August that year. James Allen, the surgeon-superintendent aboard the ship, was pleased to report that all of the prisoners had arrived in good health.⁴

A week later, Ann was among fifty of the women who were selected for immediate transfer to VDL. Commissioner John Bigge, who was sent from England in 1819 to examine various aspects of the laws and regulations affecting the civil administration and development of the colonies as well as the management of transported felons, explained later how the selection was made. Upon the arrival of *Canada* at Sydney, free settlers who had previously requested that female convicts be assigned to them as domestic servants were invited to go aboard to choose the women they wanted. After that, fifty of the women who remained were transferred to *Elizabeth Henrietta* to be taken to VDL for assignment there. Those still left on *Canada* – and this included most of the women who had children with them and were consequently less desirable to settlers – were sent to the Female Factory at Parramatta.⁵

On 27 August 1817, *Elizabeth Henrietta* docked at Hobart and Ann was disembarked. Curiously, the indent document shows her name as ‘Ann Bass or King’ but, to date, no explanation of her alias has been found. A possible explanation is that she was married in Ireland before her conviction and that either ‘Bass’ or ‘King’ was her married name. That, however, is speculation.⁶

Regrettably, Ann’s convict documents do not provide a physical description. However, in the ‘Remarks’ column of the indent document is the word ‘quiet’, presumably meaning that she had been well-behaved on the voyage from England. Tardif (1990) adds that she was twenty-four years of age on arrival at Hobart and that she was a ‘ribbon maker’ by trade. She was unable to write.⁷

Immediately after disembarkation, Ann was assigned to a free settler at Hobart but there, within days, she was charged with an offence. On 20 September, she had absented herself from her service and was punished by having to spend six hours in the stocks – an uncomfortable and humiliating ordeal. That punishment, however, seems to have unsettled her further. Just four days later, she was charged again, this time with behaving ‘in a riotous and disorderly manner to her mistress and attempting to quit her place without leave, contrary to the Colonial Regulations.’ She was sentenced to the stocks again, this time to spend two separate periods there, for a total of eight hours. Moreover, she was to wear an iron collar

⁴ https://www.jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_canada_1817.htm

⁵ See extracts from the ‘Inquiry into the State of the Colony of N.S.W; Report of the Commissioner, John Bigge, 1822’ at https://www.jenwilletts.com/commissioners_of_enquiry.htm#26

⁶ Indent CON13-1-1, image 82 at [https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON13-1-1\\$init=CON13-1-1p82](https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON13-1-1$init=CON13-1-1p82), conduct record CON40-1-15, image 226 at

https://liinctas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/search/results?qu=NI_NAME%3Dann&qu=NI_NAME%3Dbass

⁷ Tardif, P. (1990). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls: Convict Women in Van Diemen’s Land, 1803-1829*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson; CD disk format – see:

https://swiftconsortium.org.au/client/en_AU/default/search/detailnonmodal?qu=Exiles+--+Australia+--+History.&d=ent%3A%2F%2FSD_ILS%2F0%2FSD_ILS%3A706835%7EILS%7E0&ps=300

around her neck while there and, afterwards, to be imprisoned in the county gaol for three months. A few days later, the *Hobart Town Gazette* reported that the complaint against Ann ‘was peculiar aggravating, this woman having only been released from prison a few days back on a similar case.’⁸

Interestingly, the *Hobart Town Gazette* followed that report with this one:

*John Gwynn, a free man, was fined five pounds, for attempting to inveigle [that is, entice] the above woman from her place. We trust this example will be a warning to all young women who are assigned as servants in this Island; and cause them to remain peaceable and contented in the situation allotted them by Government, and not to be seduced by those who in a short time may leave them friendless and distressed.*⁹

Gwynn, it seems, had already become involved with Ann, despite her having been in the colony for only six weeks. Two months later, they were married.¹⁰

The entry in the church register, dated 10 December 1817, shows Gwynn as a twenty-eight year old ‘free’ man but gives no other information about him. Ann is shown as a twenty-year old convict per *Canada*. Her surname is shown incorrectly as ‘Boss’.¹¹

Little is known with certainty about Gwynn. The name ‘John Gwynn’ appears quite frequently in newspapers of the day but there were at least two - and perhaps more – men of that name in Hobart at the time. In fact, a ‘John Gwynn’ was among the *HMS Calcutta* convicts who sailed with Captain David Collins across Bass Strait to a site on the Derwent - that later became Hobart - after an attempt to establish an outpost at Port Philip had been abandoned.¹² Could Ann Bass’s husband have been a son of that earlier John Gwynn?

One of the men named ‘John Gwynn’ in Hobart at that time was a boat owner who operated a passenger and goods ferry and sold fish to the public.¹³ Was that Ann’s husband? That John Gwynn seems to have been a bit of a scoundrel and was often in trouble with the law. In 1817, for instance, he was fined for selling ‘spirituous liquor’ without a licence.¹⁴ In April 1822, he was charged with the theft of a mast and sail from a man named George Smith – and, in February 1823, he was sentenced to be transported to Macquarie Harbour for twelve months for stealing a mast and sail belonging to a Mr Stanfield.¹⁵

⁸ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 27 September 1817, p.2.

⁹ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 27 September 1817, p.2.

¹⁰ Marriage: RGD36/1/1, No. 264, Hobart.

¹¹ RGD36/1/1, No. 264, Hobart.

¹² <https://convictrecords.com.au/ships/calcutta/1803>

¹³ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 16 November 1816, p.1; 1 August 1818, p.1; 26 February 1820, p.2; *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 10 August 1827, p.2; 19 June 1829, p.1.

¹⁴ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 13 December 1817, p.2.

¹⁵ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 15 February 1823, p.1.

Almost from the beginning, Ann and John Gwynn seem to have been experiencing difficulties in their marriage. On 10 March 1818, just three months after the marriage, Ann was fined five shillings when discovered ‘drunk and absent from her lodgings’.¹⁶ Was her absence from her home an early indication that all was not going well for the couple? Muster documents reveal that they were together as man and wife in 1820 and 1821¹⁷ – but, in July 1826, the following notice appeared in the *Hobart Town Gazette*:

*Whereas, Anne Gwynn, my Wife, has, in a clandestine Manner, and without any just Provocation or Cause, thought proper to desert her Home, afterwards incurring Debts on my Account, I hereby Caution the Public of Hobart Town, and the Colony at large, against giving her any Trust or Credit whatever, as I will in no Respect, be responsible for the Debts that she may incur after this Date and any Person harbouring maintaining, or otherwise encouraging the said Anne Gwynn, after this Notice, shall be prosecuted with the utmost Severity of the Law. J. Gwynn. Hobart Town, July 25, 1826.*¹⁸

By this time Ann’s seven-year term of transportation had been completed. She was a free woman again.¹⁹

It is not known whether Ann and John Gwynn were ever re-united. Where, and how, Ann lived for the next twenty-eight years is still a mystery. Nothing more was heard of her until her death of ‘natural causes’ was recorded at Sorell on 26 March 1854. Her death certificate shows the spelling of her surname, again incorrectly, as ‘Guyynn’. She is described as a ‘labourer’s wife’. She was fifty-eight. The informant to the death certificate was James Jones, a licensed victualler at Pittwater, Tasmania, but his relationship to Ann is unexplained.²⁰ No evidence of her having remarried, or of her having children, has been located.

Ann’s story is a simple one. It is a story that could have been easily forgotten except for the way in which Ann was punished cruelly for what appears to have been a relatively minor offence today. The stocks, iron collar and three-month prison term seem to have been an excessive punishment, even for an offence made ‘peculiar aggravating’ by a similar one some days earlier. If Ann had been truly ‘riotous’ – as charged - it can be assumed that she was disobedient, insolent, rude, discourteous and disorderly and so on but there is no suggestion that she had acted with violence or that she had damaged or destroyed property.

¹⁶ Tardif, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Muster records, 1820 and 1821: https://www.ancestry.com.au/interactive/8813/41720_329549-00512?pid=21688&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%3D1%26dbid%3D8813%26h%3D21688%26tid%3D%26pid%3D%26usePUB%3Dtrue%26_phsrc%3DUAS9%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&phsrc=UAS9&phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true via ‘Ancestry.com’.

¹⁸ *The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter*, 29 July 1826, p.3.

¹⁹ Ann was free by servitude in November 1822. Her Certificate of Freedom was issued on 7 June 1823 – via FCRC d/base.

²⁰ Death: RGD35/1/23, No.133, Sorell.

Female convicts were subjected to a wide range of punishments during their servitude – some relatively mild, others very severe. An accurate count of the frequency of use of each form of punishment is difficult because of differences in terminology used by magistrates in VDL in the nineteenth century but information extracted from the database of the Female Convicts Research Centre (FCRC), Hobart, using only simple search terms, gives some indication. Mild forms of punishment were reprimands or admonishments (3,676 times); fines (1,772); having to find sureties for future good behaviour (121); re-assignment to the interior or elsewhere (1,522) and others. Some of the more severe forms were confinement in a solitary working cell (3,242); bread and water (1,124); hard labour (5,685); the washtubs (1,453; having the head shaved 52); the stocks (143); the iron collar (64) and others. In many instances, two or more modes of punishment were used simultaneously.²¹

These figures reveal the unusual nature and the severity of Ann's punishment. The stocks to which she was subjected were usually made of wood. It is likely that she was seated with her feet and ankles locked into the device so that her legs were held out straight.²² Several versions of the iron collar were used for the punishment of female convicts in Van Diemen's Land. Usually, the collar was hinged at the sides and either locked into place or riveted shut by a blacksmith. The weight of the collar varied depending on its design. The type which Ann was forced to wear is not known. However, it was reported in a magisterial inquiry into the punishment of Alice Blackstone (formerly Leith, nee Robson), a female convict who was punished with an iron collar at Launceston in 1820, that the one she wore weighed six and a quarter pounds (about three kilograms).²³

The purpose of punishment with both the stocks and iron collar was to shame and humiliate, rather than to hurt, the prisoner. Nevertheless, by the late 1830s, both the stocks and the iron collar were being seen as inhumane forms of punishment. The use of the iron collar peaked around 1827 and is thought to have been used on a female in VDL for the last time in 1834. The last recorded use of the stocks as punishment for female prisoners in VDL is thought to have been in 1841.²⁴

²¹ www.femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-institutions/punishments

²² <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-institutions/punishments>;
<https://study.com/academy/lesson/stocks-pillory-definition-punishment.html>

²³ See 'Alice Leith (aka Blackstone)' by Lesley McCoull at <http://www.tfhsdev.com/TCC/people/leith.html>

²⁴ D/base - www.femaleconvicts.org.au.