

ANN MARGARET WRIGHT

(*Providence* II 2, 1826)

by

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There can be few more remarkable stories of the 13,500 (approx.) female convicts who were transported to Van Diemens Land (VDL) between 1812 and 1853 than that of Ann Margaret WRIGHT.

In 1825, Ann Margaret Wright was convicted in England of stealing money from her employer and transported to the colony - and she was still a prisoner there thirty four years later! In that time, she had been sentenced to death on two separate occasions, had absconded from the colony and fled to India where she had suffered terribly before being recaptured and returned to VDL, had married twice and had spent many years in gaol.

Nothing is known about Ann's life in England before her transportation. Her first known appearance in the pages of history came on 13 January 1825 when, at the age of twenty, she faced the court at the Old Bailey, London, charged with the theft of 'three sovereigns, forty half crowns, eighty shillings, and forty sixpences', the property of her employer, publican John KEEN, at Aldergate. The court heard that she was also known by the name Ann LONG.¹

Sarah KEEN, wife of the publican, told the court that, after closing-time on 6 January that year, she had counted up the days' takings and put the money in a drawer before going upstairs to attend to her husband who was ill. The accused, a servant at the public-house at the time, was working in an adjoining room and would have seen her counting the money. A short while later she had hurried downstairs after hearing the door of the bar open. Ann was nowhere to be seen and the money had gone.

Thomas Lacey HAWKINS, a marshalman, testified that he had traced Wright to Wiggan, Lancashire, where he had arrested her and returned her to London. She had admitted to taking the money and said that she had spent most of it on clothes and jewellery for herself. She had only a few shillings left.

The court had no sympathy for Ann. A sentence of death was recorded but later commuted to transportation for life. After almost a year awaiting transportation to VDL in a London gaol, she

¹ Old Bailey Proceedings Online at www.oldbaileyonline.org, Ref. No: t18250113-98.

was put aboard *Providence* II (2) which departed the Downs on 24 December 1825 and reached Hobart on 16 May 1826.²

Upon arrival, Ann was described as being four feet ten and a half inches (about 152cms) tall, with brown hair and hazel eyes. She was allocated Police No.79. Her indent shows her age as nineteen. She stated that she was single and that she had worked as a cotton spinner and general servant.

Within a very short time, Ann had been assigned as a house servant to Anthony Fenn KEMP, a wealthy merchant and grazier but, on 26 July 1826, she was returned to the Female Factory for reassignment after Kemp had reported her for being 'unable to perform her Duty'. It is unlikely that she was re-assigned immediately afterwards. Her conduct record shows no other assignment.³

On 8 May 1828, Ann married George EDWARDS, a widower, in the Church of England at Hobart.⁴ Whether she was happy with her choice of husband at first is unclear but, if so, her contentment was short lived. At some time later in 1828 or early 1829, she ran off with the master of a ship bound for India.

The details of Ann's escape from the colony and of the shocking experiences she had soon afterwards are regrettably brief. Her conduct record reveals that the vessel on which she left Hobart was *Phoenix* but the name of its master at that time has not been ascertained. Nor is much known about the miserable life she endured for the next year and a half. The best account that has been located to date is that which was published in *Ross's Almanack and Van Diemen's Land Annual, 1835*. In part it reads:

She was living in comparatively happy wedlock with her husband, a free man, in Hobart-town, when, in an evil hour, she consented to abscond with the master of a vessel going to India. She had not been many days at sea when the affection of the monster [the man she had run off with] was changed to weariness and ultimate ill-usage and cruelty, which led to her abandonment among strangers, on the Indian shore. There she endured for a time a most wretched vicissitude of vice and wretchedness, travelling about with one individual after another, through various parts of that unhealthy climate. She was at last discovered to be a runaway convict from Van Diemen's Land, was apprehended and lodged in gaol. From this, with the help of a paramour, she contrived to escape, was carried to a

² CON40-1-9, Image 262.

³ CON40-1-9, Image 262; Kemp: *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kemp-anthony-fenn-2294>.

⁴ Marriage to Edwards: RGD36/1/1, No. 1113.

*distance up the country, was again apprehended, kept in a miserable state of confinement, forwarded to Calcutta, and sent back to Hobart-town ...*⁵

By early January 1830, Ann was back at Hobart. On 6 January, she was charged with absconding and punished by being imprisoned in the Female Factory six months.⁶ Did the magistrate who handed down this surprisingly light sentence take mercy on her because of the harrowing experiences she had had in India? It seems so.

Upon release, Ann was returned to her husband but, again, things did not go smoothly. On 9 May 1833, she was charged with ‘feloniously, unlawfully and maliciously cutting and wounding George Edwards, her husband, in diverse places with intent to murder him.’ She was committed to gaol in Hobart to await trial.⁷

On 22 June 1833, Ann was tried in the Supreme Court, Hobart, before Chief Justice PEDDER and a military jury. George Edwards told the court that, on 27 April that year, he had gone to Hobart to buy food for his wife and himself. When he returned empty-handed to the hut in which he and Ann lived at Old Beach, she had asked him where the goods he had bought were. He had replied that they were coming ‘later’. He admitted to Ann that he had been drinking in Hobart and he had then fallen asleep. He had no recollection of being struck. When he awoke, there were several people in the hut and he felt ‘very sore all over’.⁸

A surgeon, William Hollingsworth FOWLER, testified that he had seen Ann that evening with blood on her arms. She had told him that her husband was ‘stone dead’. She said that she and a young man named Bill COBB had killed him. Fowler had then gone to the hut and found Edwards lying on a bed ‘bleeding from head to foot’. He was alive but with dangerously deep wounds to his head. The wounds looked as though they had been inflicted with a spade.

John JONES, a police inspector, stated under oath that he had taken possession of a blood-covered spade near the hut. The spade was shown to the court.

The jury took only a few minutes to return a verdict of ‘Guilty’. In pronouncing a sentence of death, Justice Pedder said that Ann’s dreadful crime was probably the result of ‘a long indulgence in a course of habitual wickedness’ and that he ‘held out no hopes whatever of mercy’ being shown to her.⁹

⁵ CON40-1-9, Image 262; Ross’s Hobart Town Almanack and Van Diemen’s Land Annual, 1835, via Tardif, P: (2000). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson; see also *The Hobart Town Courier*, 5 July 1833, p.2;

⁶ CON40-1-9, Image 262.

⁷ CON40-1-9, Image 262.

⁸ There is no evidence that Bill Cobb was ever charged with the offence.

⁹ *The Tasmanian* (Hobart), 28 June 1833, p.7; R. v. Edwards, Macquarie Law Cases @ www.law.mq.edu.au/research/colonialcase_law/tas.cases ...

What Justice Pedder might not have realized then was that there was great sympathy in the community for Ann, now about 27 years old. As 3 July 1833, the date set for her execution, approached, the outpouring of sympathy for her increased steadily.¹⁰ Leading the cry for mercy to be shown to her was the *Colonial Times*:

*The condemnation of the young woman, Ann Edwards, for an attempt to murder her husband, has excited very considerable interest; and the fact of her being ordered for execution to-morrow has created a sympathy in the public, which redounds very much to the credit of our community. There is something so awfully melancholy in the fate of this unfortunate woman, that we are not at all surprised at the feeling, which has been excited in her favour: and even admitting her guilt to the full extent of her arraignment, we still consider, that there are some extenuating circumstances, which may prevail to the saving of her life ... In the face of all these circumstances, then, and in opposition to the humane wishes of the people, we cannot believe that mercy will be withheld - we cannot suppose that the Executive will omit to avail itself of so favorable an opportunity for the exercise of its most blessed prerogative - MERCY.*¹¹

On 5 July 1833, *The Hobart Town Courier* announced that His Excellency, the Lieutenant-Governor, was pleased to announce that Ann's sentence of death had been commuted to imprisonment for life.¹² As it happened, she was out of prison in about seven years.

Nevertheless, those seven years in prison were unpleasant ones for Ann. *Ross's Almanack for 1835* reveals that, initially, she spent a long period in solitary confinement. Afterwards, she was released into the 'Crime Class' section - which housed the most notorious women - at the Cascades Female Factory. There, according to *Ross's Almanack*, she was a constant troublemaker:

*Her depravity ... was such that, on the occasion of introducing new regulations regarding provisions allowed to persons in her situation ... she contrived to stir up a spirit of rebellion among several of the worst [women], who, with herself, acted in the most insubordinate and audacious manner to the authorities ... until Mr. SPODE, the Principal Superintendent, with a body of constables, [was obliged to place] the ringleader, Edwards, with some of her worst associates, in solitary confinement.*¹³

10 Letters to the Editor, *Colonial Times*, 2 July 1833, p.2; *The Colonist and Van Diemen's Land Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser* (Hobart), 2 July 1833, p.2.

11 Editorial, *Colonial Times*, 2 July 1833, p.2.

12 *The Hobart Town Courier*, 5 July 1833, p.2.

13 *Ross's Hobart Town Almanack and Van Diemen's Land Annual 1835*, via Tardif, *op.cit*; The Cascades Female Factory was opened in 1828.

By the time Ann was released, in late 1840 or thereabouts, she was a widow. It is thought that her husband had passed away in Hobart earlier that year. (TPI Digger lists the death of a George Edwards at the age of fifty on 12 January 1840. Was that Ann's husband? It has not been confirmed.)¹⁴

After her release, Ann appears to have been sent to Swansea, on the mid-east colony of the colony. There, on 24 March 1841, she and a man named Thomas GRIFFIN, a former convict (*Earl St. Vincent*, 1825), who, at the age of seventeen had been convicted in England of house-breaking and sentenced to transportation for life, applied for permission to marry. Their application was not approved.¹⁵ The reason, it seems, was that the authorities were not satisfied that Ann was a widow. However, when the pair applied again, on 6 November 1841, permission was granted – on the condition that the clergyman was able to satisfy himself of the death of Ann's husband.¹⁶

Ann and Thomas Griffin were married at the Church of England Schoolhouse, Waterloo Point, Swansea, on 3 February 1842. The marriage entry shows that Ann had reverted to her former name of 'Ann Margaret Wright'. Her age is shown as thirty-two but she was probably about thirty-seven. Thomas's age is shown as thirty-three. His occupation is shown as 'house servant'. This appears to have been his first marriage.

Did Ann find some peace at last in a good marriage? Perhaps she did! It was to be another eleven years before she was in trouble with the law again.

On 19 May 1843, Ann was granted a ticket of leave (ToL) and, on 20 November 1847, her conditional pardon (CP) was approved.¹⁷ However, it is likely that both ToL and CP were revoked when, in August 1853, she was charged with the theft of 'a frying pan and a tub'.

At the Quarter Sessions, Hobart, on 29 August, Ann was found guilty of that offence. (It seems that she had moved back to Hobart by this time. Although she was charged as 'Ann Griffin', it is unclear whether or not she was still with her husband.) While the *Colonial Times* of 6 September reported that she was to be 'transported for seven years' for the theft, her conduct record reveals that she was ultimately ordered to serve eighteen months probation and, afterwards, to be not permitted to enter service in the district of Hobart.¹⁸

¹⁴ RGD35/290/1840. Was this Ann's husband? It has not been verified.

¹⁵ Thomas Griffin, conduct record: CON31/1/15, Image 113; Marriage:

¹⁶ Applications for permission - March 1841: CON52/1/2, page 54; November 1841: CON52/1/2, page 65.

¹⁷ *Hobart Town Gazette (HTG)*: ToL: 19 May 1843; Cond. Pardon: 20 November 1847.

¹⁸ *Colonial Times*, 6 September 1853, p.4.

On 16 November 1858, Ann's ticket of leave was restored but just two months later – on 21 February 1859 - she was gaoled again. Found drunk in the streets, she was sentenced to only a week's imprisonment, but with hard labour.¹⁹

Gladly, that was to be her last recorded offence. By that time, she was about fifty three years old. Thirty-four years had passed since she had been transported and she was still a convict.

Much had happened in that time. Since its establishment in 1803, the colony had received more than 73,500 convicts. From the 1830s, calls for an end of transportation of convicts to Van Diemen's Land had been heard more loudly. The forced transportation of convicts from bulging English prisons had established a large British population in Hobart but opposition to 'the hated stain' of its convict past was steadily growing. The Anti-Transportation League, formed in the 1840s, had convened meetings, held demonstrations, published pamphlets and presented petitions demanding self-government for the colony. It had insisted upon changing the name of the colony to 'Tasmania' in order to counter the convict associations of 'Van Diemen's Land'. In 1851, anti-transportation supporters in all colonies except Western Australia had confederated to form the Australasian Anti-Transportation League. Members had pledged not to employ convicts and to use all constitutional means to resist further transports. In late 1852, Queen Victoria had made a speech questioning transportation. In February 1853, the Colonial Secretary had promised to send no more convicts to Van Diemen's Land.²⁰

According to Newman, in his 2005 book *Becoming Tasmania: Renaming Van Diemen's Land*, British troops stayed on to guard convicts after transportation had ended but they were reduced progressively and, in 1870, they were removed completely. After the cessation, the Tasmanian Parliament continued to receive information about serving convicts and ex-convicts for some years. One such piece of information, Newman noted, was that by March 1859, 650 males and 442 females who had been originally transported to Tasmania as convicts were now back in prison again after having become free by servitude.²¹

Unfortunately, the incredible story of Ann Margaret Wright has no happy, or even partly-satisfying, ending. What happened to her after 1859? Did she ever offend again? Was she one of the 442 female ex-convicts who had been gaoled again? Did she leave the colony? Had she changed her name again? Did she remarry? Had Thomas Griffin died?? When and where did Ann die? Sadly, there are no answers to any of these questions yet.

19 CON40-1-9, Image 262; The Hobart Town Daily Mercury, 22 February 1859, p.3.

20 See for instance: Launceston Advertiser, 12 March 1835, p.3; The Tasmanian and Austral-Asiatic Review (Hobart), 23 January 1845, p.6; <https://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2013/01/31/3680442.htm>.

21 Newman. (2005). *Becoming Tasmania: Renaming Van Diemen's Land*. Hobart: Parliament of Tasmania.