

MARGARET BRADLEY

[*Sea Queen*, 1846]

by

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Margaret Bradley arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) aboard *Sea Queen* in August 1846, one of 13,500 (approx.) female convicts who were transported to the colony between 1812 and 1853.¹ While some of these women served out their time without great discomfort and eventually became good and useful citizens, others found their term of servitude humiliating and difficult in the extreme. Margaret was in the latter group, some of whom tried to escape from their island prison. Few were successful. In 1852, after having served only six years of her ten-year sentence, Margaret absconded from her assigned service and was missing for three months. She managed to get to Melbourne but soon after arriving there was apprehended and returned to VDL, where she served out the remainder of her time. But what happened to her after that is a mystery! She seems to have simply vanished from all records. Did she leave the colony? If so, where could she have gone? Still only twenty-six years of age, and probably alone, would she have tried again to make a new life for herself in Victoria? Or one of the other Australian colonies? Or New Zealand, perhaps? Would she have dared to return to her native England where the penalty for doing so was death?² Her story is a most interesting one but, frustratingly, it has no satisfying ending.

This is her story:

Margaret Bradley was born at Stockport, England, a town about forty-two miles (about sixty-seven kms) from Liverpool in 1831.³ Nothing is known with certainty about her family.⁴

On 15 December 1845, Margaret, then fifteen, and an acquaintance, Ann Fitzpatrick, who was about a year younger, were charged at the Liverpool Borough Quarter Sessions with the theft of a quantity of flannel. They were both found guilty and sentenced to transportation for ten years.⁵

¹ CON41/1/10, image 13; Description List: CON19/1/5, image 172; Indent: CON15, image 312; Police No: 803; FCRC 1D: 10904.

² See 'Tickets of Leave, Certificates of Freedom, Pardons' at <https://www.nla.gov.au/>

³ Birth year calculated from convict documents.

⁴ The UK census of 1841 shows a Margaret Bradley, aged nine, living with her mother Mary Bradley, thirty, sibling David, aged seven, and a baby, four months old, named Adam Howe. (Census data re 'Ancestry.com.uk' via FCRC website) There is no certainty that this information refers to the family of convict Margaret Bradley.

⁵ Ann Fitzpatrick: Conduct record: CON41-1-10, image 49; description list: CON19/1/5, image 180; indent: CON15/1/3, image 320.

It was not the first conviction for either of them. Margaret had had three prior convictions, all for stealing clothes, and had spent short periods of time in gaol.⁶ Ann had also served short gaol terms for the theft of dress materials.⁷

After their trial, both were held for five months in gaol in England awaiting a convict ship to carry them to VDL. Margaret's gaol report states only that she was single and had had prior convictions.⁸ Ann's gaol report, as well as stating that she was single and had had previous convictions, noted that she had been 'latterly a prostitute'.⁹

Eventually, Margaret and Ann were put aboard the convict ship *Sea Queen* which, with 170 female prisoners, sailed from Woolwich on 12 May 1846 and reached Hobart on 29 August that year. In his medical report, the ship's surgeon, Dr. T.W. Jewell, wrote that Margaret was 'well behaved' during the passage.. Of Ann, he noted that she had been 'indifferent, quarrelsome and irritable', adding that she 'requires looking after'.¹⁰

After disembarkation, both were sent to the *Anson*, the hulk of a former naval vessel that had been moored in the Derwent River near Risdon in 1844 to be used to house female convicts in order to alleviate the overcrowding at the Cascades Female Factory. They were to be kept there for a probation period of six months before becoming eligible to be hired into service by settlers.¹¹ It is unlikely that they had contact with each other again after that.

Upon arrival at Hobart, Margaret had been described as being sixteen years old, with a freckled complexion, snubbed nose, brown hair and grey eyes. Her most striking physical characteristic, however, was her height; she was only four feet and six inches (about 146 cms) tall. She stated that she was a Protestant and a housemaid by trade.¹²

In VDL, Margaret was not as 'well behaved' as the report of the *Sea Queen's* surgeon might have led the authorities to believe. On 23 July 1847, after less than twelve months in the colony and now assigned to the service of Watkins, she was charged with 'misconduct in having sexual intercourse with a prisoner constable in the police office yard'.¹³ (The term 'prisoner constable' sounds strange but it was not uncommon for prisoners still under sentence to be appointed constables at that time. Policing was a difficult job with such a large number of desperate and

⁶ CON41/1/10, image 13.

⁷ CON41-1-10, image 49.

⁸ CON41/1/10, image 13.

⁹ Gaol report from 'Prison Register' as quoted by T. Creaney, 'Ancestry U.K.' via FCRC website at www.femaleconvicts.org. There is no mention of Ann Fitzpatrick as a prostitute on her convict documents in VDL.

¹⁰ <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>; CON41-1-10, image 49.

¹¹ CON41/1/10, image 13; hulk 'Anson', see FCRC website at www.femaleconvicts.org

¹² Description List: CON19/1/5, image 172; Indent: CON15, image 312.

¹³ CON41/1/10, image 13.

dangerous convicts in the colony; it required equally tough men to keep them in order.)¹⁴ For her offence on this occasion, Margaret was ordered to serve six months with hard labour at the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart.

That sentence, however, failed to teach Margaret a lesson. On 14 March 1848, just a couple of months after her release and now in the service of Levey, she was charged ‘with having sexual intercourse with a man’ and returned to the Female Factory for another three months with hard labour.¹⁵

As it happens, Margaret was to commit only one more offence in the colony – four years later - but it was to be an outrageous one!

Before that, however, much had happened in her life.

On 24 July 1848, a ticket-of-leave convict, Thomas Johnston, had applied for permission to marry Margaret and, on 14 August that year, they were wed at St George’s Church of England, Battery Point, Hobart. Margaret’s age is shown on the marriage entry as twenty-three. Johnston’s age is shown as thirty-six but it is likely that he was a little older than that.¹⁶

Johnston’s story is a complex one. A silver-plater by trade, and known to some as ‘William Hazleton’, he was a native of Belfast, Ireland. On 16 January 1829, he had been convicted at the Suffolk Quarter Sessions and sentenced to transportation for seven years. His conduct record reveals that, by 29 August that year, he was a prisoner in New South Wales. Assigned as a labourer shortly afterwards, he was charged on 6 November 1829 with ‘neglect of duty and threatening his master’s life’ and spent the next six months in irons. On 15 February 1832, he received twenty-five lashes for absconding and, on 6 April 1835, another twenty-five for again ‘absenting’ himself.¹⁷

However, worse was still to come! On 8 November 1836, he was charged in the Supreme Court, Sydney, with an ‘unnatural crime with a boy’ (that is, sodomy). Although he continued to maintain that he was innocent of the charge, he was sentenced to life, in solitary confinement, at Norfolk Island. There, he was charged with only one offence – having tobacco in his possession – for which his original sentence was extended by three months.¹⁸

¹⁴ CON41/1/10, image 13; see, for instance, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-28/tasmanian-police-george-rex-laurence-donovan-remembrance-day/11555594>

¹⁵ CON41/1/10, image 13; it is not known whether her partner this time was the same man..

¹⁶ Johnston: CON33/1/68, image 27; permission to marry: CON52/1/2, page 249 and *Colonial Times*, 28 July 1848, p.4; marriage: RGD37/1/7/1733/1848, Hobart. Johnston’s age was shown as thirty-six when he arrived in VDL in 1845; if that is correct, he would have been about thirty-nine when he married Margaret Bradley in 1848.

¹⁷ CON33/1/68, image 27; the crime for which he was convicted in Suffolk is unknown.

¹⁸ CON33/1/68, image 27; it is thought that the ship which took Johnston to N.I. was ‘Norfolk’ which had arrived in VDL in August 1835 and was then making its way back to England.

But, despite having been banished to Norfolk Island for life, for some unknown reason Johnston was shipped off to VDL per the vessel *Governor Phillip* in 1845.¹⁹

Arriving in the colony on 26 July 1845, Johnston was described as being thirty-six years old, single, five feet and six inches (about 170 cms) tall with a fresh complexion and brown hair. On his right forearm, he had a tattoo of ‘a man dressed in flowery garments, feathers in his cap’; on his left arm he had a tattoo of a woman. A cross was tattoo-ed between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and he wore a ring on his third finger.²⁰

In VDL, Johnston was well behaved. On 20 October 1846, he was granted a ticket of leave and on 22 August 1848, a month after his marriage to Margaret, his conditional pardon was approved.²¹

Soon after the marriage, Margaret, too, was granted a ticket of leave.²² However, her marriage might not have been a happy one. There is no evidence of her ever having adopted the ‘Johnston’ surname, or of the couple living together, or of children being born to them.

Around September 1852, Margaret committed her third, and most serious, offence. Probably as a stowaway – and possibly with the connivance of some of her rogue policemen friends - she absconded from her service and managed get to Melbourne in the neighbouring colony of Victoria where she remained free until apprehended three months later. A reward of £5 was offered for any information leading to her apprehension.²³

Margaret was not the first female prisoner to attempt to escape their penal servitude in VDL in this way. Since the early 1820s, women had been concealing themselves aboard ships about to leave the colony. It might have been more recent attempts, however, which prompted Margaret to try it. In June 1850, for instance, Catherine Woods (a fellow prisoner on *Sea Queen*, 1846) had hidden herself on the steamer *Shamrock*. In 1851, Emma Robinson (*Tory*, 1848) had climbed inside a sailor’s sea-chest aboard *Pilot*. In the same year, Mary Morris (*Emma Eugenia*, 1846) had been apprehended aboard the brig *Raven*. In February 1852, Mary Smith (also *Emma Eugenia*, 1846) had been found on the barque, *Favourite*.²⁴

All of these women had been discovered prior to the departure of the vessels but obviously Margaret was not deterred by that.

¹⁹ CON33/1/68, image 27.

²⁰ CON33/1/68, image 27.

²¹ CON33/1/68, image 27.

²² *Hobart Town Gazette*, 15 July 1851; *Launceston Examiner*, 19 July 1851, p.8.

²³ CON33/1/68, image 27; by this time Margaret was in service at Launceston.

²⁴ See FCRC website at www.femaleconvicts.org for details.

How Margaret had lived in Melbourne for the three months that she was there is not known. However, on 9 December 1852, *The Argus* (Melbourne) reported that eleven escaped convicts had been captured and placed aboard the steamer *Yarra Yarra* under the guard of soldiers of the 40th Regiment for return to VDL. The report concluded with the news that, regrettably, one of the convicts, an unnamed female, had made her escape unnoticed shortly before the vessel left the wharf.²⁵ As it happens, that unnamed female was Margaret.

But Margaret's escape from *Yarra Yarra* was to be short-lived. Within a few days she was back in custody. On 18 December 1852, *The Argus* reported that she had been apprehended by a constable in a draper's shop in the central Melbourne shopping district. In court the previous day, a solicitor representing Margaret had argued that, as Margaret had been pardoned for good behavior, she was no longer a prisoner of the Crown. The magistrate, however, took the word of a detective from VDL who swore that Margaret was still a ticket of leave holder and, therefore, was 'illegally at large'. The magistrate ordered her to be returned to VDL.²⁶

Margaret's court hearing in Melbourne on 17 December was interesting in that it had exposed rampant corruption among police. According to *The Argus*, the constable who had apprehended Margaret in the draper's shop told the court that he had been offered £40 not to say anything about her - and that it was suspected that her escape from the *Yarra Yarra* days earlier had been connived at by the police officer into whose care the eleven convicts had been entrusted. When that news had come to the knowledge of the Superintendent of Police, a wider enquiry had been undertaken and it was soon discovered that Constable Furlong of the detective police had received a large sum of money to enable Margaret to get away. He had been summoned immediately before his superior officer and dismissed from the service. It was discovered also that acts of that kind were not uncommon and that quite a few police officers had been engaged in the same or similar practices. A number of other nefarious deeds of certain officers of the detective force had also come to light. They had been receiving large sums of money from various wrong-doers, such as brothel owners, who were bribing them to shut their eyes to criminal activities. The report of *The Argus* concluded with the news that investigation into this matter was ongoing.²⁷

In the meantime, Margaret was back in VDL. There, her ticket of leave was revoked immediately and she was sent to prison for twelve months, with hard labour, at the Female Factory, Launceston. It was ordered also that she not be assigned in Launceston again.²⁸ Afterwards, it is

²⁵ *The Argus* (Melbourne), 9 December 1852, p.5.

²⁶ *The Argus* (Melbourne), 18 December 1852, p.5; Margaret had been recommended for a conditional pardon – see *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 April 1852 – but it does not appear to have been issued (See CON33/1/68, image 27); it is noteworthy that Margaret's surname was given in court as 'Bradley', not 'Johnston'.

²⁷ See 'Pretty Disclosures' in *The Argus* (Melbourne), 18 December 1852, p.5.

²⁸ CON33/1/68, image 27; ticket of leave revoked, *Hobart Town Gazette*, 15 February 1853.

believed that she had served out the rest of her ten-year term without incident. On 15 December 1855 she was free by servitude and, on 22 December 1855, her certificate of freedom was issued at Longford.²⁹

Thereafter, however, nothing is known about Margaret. Did she ever go back to her husband, Thomas Johnston? That seems unlikely. In later years, he became a barber and a noted breeder of pigeons. His name was regularly in newspapers in regard to his pigeons but there was no allusion to his wife in those reports.³⁰

Frustratingly, Margaret – like so many other female prisoners in VDL who had completed their sentences – simply vanished from the records. There is no evidence that she left the colony again or that she re-married. A record of her death has not been located.

²⁹ CON33/1/68, image 2; certificate of freedom: *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 April 1852.

³⁰ See, for instance, *Colonial Times*, 23 May 1873, p.2; *Weekly Examiner*, 9 August 1873, p.23; *Launceston Examiner*, 9 August 1873, p.5 and 6 February 1889, p.2.