

SARAH FENTON

(*Mary Ann*, 1822)

by

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Arguably, Sarah FENTON was one of the most notorious of the 13,500+ female convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land (VDL) between 1812 and 1853. She arrived at Hobart aboard *Mary Ann*, 1 (2) on 2 May 1822.¹

The voyage had been relatively uneventful. However, the ship's surgeon, James HALL had not enjoyed it.² While this was not his first voyage as surgeon-superintendent on a convict vessel, it was the first time he had had responsibility for female prisoners and he had found the task extremely taxing.³

Since the earliest days of transportation, the authorities had struggled with the problem of prostitution at sea. Various ways of preventing contact between the sexes had been tried but none had met with much success. In the early 1820s, the problem was perceived to be worsening and surgeon-superintendents were coming under increasing pressure to be more vigilant in keeping crew members from the women and vice versa. While the master was nominally in command of all aspects of ship-board behaviour, his prime responsibility was for the safe arrival of the vessel at its destination. The prime responsibility of the surgeon-superintendent was for the well-being - moral as well as physical - of the prisoners.⁴

Hall took this responsibility very seriously but the task of keeping the men and women apart proved to be beyond him. The report he wrote as *Mary Anne* approached Hobart lists a number of women whom he found necessary to punish for having sexual relations with members of the crew - usually by locking them for days at a time in a small, dark hold in the bowels of the ship, sometimes in chains, and feeding them on a diet of bread and water. These extracts from his report give evidence of his frustration at a situation he could not control:

¹ Convict ships to Tasmania: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>; *Hobart Town Gazette (HTG)*, 4 May 1822, p.2.

² Hall was surgeon-superintendent aboard *Agememnon* which landed 178 male prisoners at Sydney in September 1820: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipNSW2.html>

³ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

⁴ Damousi, J. (1997). *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge U.P; Bateson, C. (1983). *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.

*... Sarah APPLETON, very sly, of a silent demure habit; has committed prostitution on board and has been punished ... Sarah FLETCHER, a dangerous woman to man; under a fair face and simplicity of manners lie a lustful heart, a lying tongue and great hypocrisy in religion, a prostitute ... Ellen ELLERBECK, reprobate, hypocrite, has committed prostitution on board and has been punished ... Hannah WHITELY has been found to be a vile dissembler and prostitute ... Hannah READING, a dirty reprobate and vile prostitute; very abandoned depraved girl ... Elizabeth BOUCHER, dirty, prostitute and thief ... Mary DAVIS, a dirty reprobate, vile prostitute, a very depraved, abandoned girl ... Sarah HELLIWELL, a very sly abandoned prostitute ... Ann WILLIAMS, has been impregnated by one of the sailors ... and is now threatened with a miscarriage which she may have excited; a bad woman, has borne children; swearer; disorderly, a prostitute ...*⁵

Hall also made scathing remarks about a number of other *Mary Anne* women, referring variously to Mary LOYD, Jane BUCKINGHAM, Martha BURGESS, Catherine FLANAGAN, Mary Ann GRIFFIN, Isabella HAMILL, Mary HART, Catherine HILTON, Eleanor PHILLIPS, Catherine TAYLOR, Louise VAUGHAN, Elizabeth WORRAL and two women by the name of Mary ROBINSON as ‘vile’, ‘dirty’, ‘depraved’, ‘abandoned’, ‘refractory’, ‘loose’, ‘idle’, ‘insolent’ and/or ‘disorderly’.⁶

However, it was for Sarah FENTON that Hall saved some of his worst comments. Of her, he wrote:

*... as desperate and depraved a character as has ever been transported; capable of doing murder; reprobate; never easy but in mischief; fond of exciting uproar and mutiny; a feigner of illness; a hypocrite, the Devil incarnate; has been repeatedly punished with temporary benefit; kind treatment has no effect.*⁷

Fenton’s gaol report while awaiting transportation describes her as a ‘bad character’, suggesting that she was already well-known to the authorities.

According to Philip Tardif in his authoritative *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls* (1990), Fenton and one other of the *Mary Anne* women – Rachel CHAMBERLAIN - were shipped off to the harsh penal settlement on Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour on the western side of the island

⁵ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

⁶ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

⁷ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

on 4 May 1822, just two days after their arrival.⁸ The decision of the VDL authorities to remove them from Hobart immediately must have been influenced by Hall's report.

On Saturday, 11 May 1822, this announcement appeared in the *Hobart Town Gazette*:

*Sailed on Sunday last for Macquarie Harbour, H.M.C.B. 'Duke of York', Mr CHASE, Commander; having 35 male and 2 female convicts on board, under sentence of transportation to that Settlement ...*⁹

Given the date of the arrival at Hobart of *Mary Anne* (2 May) and the date of departure for Macquarie Harbour of *Duke of York* (4 May), as well as what is already known about the relatively few women who spent time at Sarah Island, could the '2 female convicts on board' have been anyone else but Fenton and Chamberlain?

But were these two women ever actually at Macquarie Harbour? Recent research has failed to find any documentary evidence that either of them ever being there.¹⁰

Moreover, did these women deserve to be treated in this way? Were they really as bad as Hall's report suggests? You be the judge!

Nothing is known about Fenton's early life. On 17 April 1820, she was convicted of petty larceny at Leeds Quarter Sessions, Yorkshire, England, and sentenced to transportation for seven years.¹¹ When she arrived at Hobart she was 28 years old. She could neither read nor write. What had her upbringing been like? Was she married? Had she left children behind? Had she been 'on the town'? There are no answers to these questions.

Very clearly, Fenton had caused havoc aboard *Mary Anne* and had made the voyage to VDL a miserable one for Surgeon Hall. About her, he noted in his report:

*... [there are] continual uproars in the hospital from the turbulent conduct of this patient; yesterday she took her bed and left the hospital into which she was carried back by force; it is impossible to have any conversation with her as she uses violent language and refuses to take her medicine ...*¹²

⁸ Tardiff, Philip. (1990). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls: Convict Women in Van Diemen's Land*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson; *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser (HTG)*, **11 May 1822**, p.2.

⁹ *HTG*, 11 May 1822, p.2.

¹⁰ Irene Schaffer. 'The Forgotten Women Convicts at Macquarie Harbour, 1821-1826' at <http://www.tasfamily.net.au/~schafferi/index.php?file=kop28.php>

¹¹ TAHO CON40-1-3, Image 154.

¹² James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

It is not difficult to believe that Hall's report was responsible for her immediate removal to Sarah Island – if indeed she was ever there!

And, if she was there at all, it must have been only for a very short time because, on 29 January 1823, eight months after her first arrival at Hobart, Fenton married 31 year-old Anthony ARMSTRONG at St David's, Hobart. He had been in VDL since 1818 after being sentenced to seven years transportation for receiving stolen goods.¹³

The muster of 1823 shows Fenton and Armstrong together at Bagdad, about 25 miles (40 kms) north of Hobart.¹⁴ There, on 16 May 1829, Fenton (now using the name 'Ann' ARMSTRONG) gave birth to a son, Robert ARMSTRONG and, on 13 August 1831, to a daughter, Mary Ann ARMSTRONG.¹⁵ During the years of her marriage, she appears to have lived quietly at Bagdad, avoiding all trouble with the law.

However, on 16 February 1834, Anthony Armstrong passed away and, thereafter, Fenton's problems with the authorities re-commenced.¹⁶ The fundamental cause of her new troubles might well have been economic necessity.

On 18 May 1834, just three months after her husband's death, she admitted her son Robert, then six, to the Queen's Orphan School at Hobart. He remained there for the next eleven years. Two years later, she admitted her daughter, Mary Ann.¹⁷ Was it financially impossible for Sarah to keep the children with her?

On 20 April 1837 – now fifteen years after her arrival at Hobart and 'free by servitude' - Fenton was found guilty in the Supreme Court at Hobart of stealing four £1 notes. She was sentenced to be 'transported for life' to Launceston, and to spend two years in the Female Factory there. The sentence was carried out immediately. A little over a year later, while still in prison at Launceston, she stole money again. This time, her existing sentence was extended by twelve months. Eventually released around 1840, she was assigned to a family named HILL but, on 6 January 1841, she was charged with misconduct. She was sentenced to three months hard labour to be served – interestingly – at the Cascades Female Factory back at Hobart.¹⁸

Afterwards, Fenton was sent to the Brickfield Barracks – a 'hiring depot' at Hobart - to await re-assignment. While there, she offended again. In fact, she was found guilty of committing two separate offences on the same day – 7 December 1842. For the first offence - insolence to a supervisor - she was sentenced to six months hard labour at the Cascades; for the second –

¹³ Armstrong TAHO CON31/1/1, Image 12; marriage: RGD36/1/1, no.606, Hobart;

¹⁴ 1823 muster in 'New South Wales and Tasmania, Australia, Convict Musters, 1806-1849' via 'Ancestry, accessed 10 March 2017.

¹⁵ Children: Robert Armstrong, 3286/1829/32 and Mary Ann, 4186/1831/32, both Clarence.

¹⁶ Anthony Armstrong: death, 3761/1834/

¹⁷ Admission of children to Queen's Orphan School: See <http://www.orphanschool.org.au>; Reference: SWD, CSO5/86/1885. See

¹⁸ TAHO CON40-1-3, Image 154.

disorderly conduct – she was ordered to be kept in solitary confinement at the Cascades for six days. Released after this term of imprisonment, and assigned to PEARSON, she was charged again on 12 June 1844, this time for being drunk. She was sentenced to three months hard labour, again at the Cascades.¹⁹

Gladly for her, and perhaps for the authorities also, that was to be Fenton's last gaol term. On 21 December 1844, she was granted her ticket of leave.²⁰ She was only ever charged once again - on 6 July 1847 – again for drunkenness. She was fined five shillings.²¹ On 4 April 1848, she was granted a conditional pardon.²² Nothing more was heard of her again.

It is thought that Sarah (Fenton) Armstrong died at 72 on 5 November 1866 but there is considerable doubt about that. An entry in 'Digger', the Tasmanian Pioneers Index, shows the death of a 'Sarah Armstrong' at Hobart on that date but notes that this woman was also known as 'Sarah Reed'.²³ Did Sarah marry again? Did she change her name to 'Reed' to hide her convict past? Could 'Reed' have been her maiden name, perhaps? There are no answers to these questions yet..

So, was Sarah Fenton *really* as bad as their reputations suggest? Does she deserve to be ranked amongst the more notorious of the female convicts transported to VDL? She was not a murderer or a violent thug and when given the opportunity she seemed to try hard to be a good wife and mother.

Nevertheless, she does not come across as a particularly likeable character. She was a thief. She was ill-tempered, rebellious and lacking in self-discipline. That said, it must be acknowledged that she lived in incredibly difficult times, especially for women and even more so for women who were uneducated and poor. It is likely that without a man to provide for her and her children, she had little option but to resort to theft to stay alive.

It must also be acknowledged that it was ill-fortune that saw her put aboard *Mary Anne* with James Hall as its surgeon-superintendent. Subsequent events were to prove that Hall was a very strange man whose own behaviour might have incited much of their misconduct. By all accounts he was a competent and conscientious doctor but he was tactless in his supervision of females. BATESON (1974) referred to him as a 'zealous, meddlesome and litigious individual', declaring that he was 'temperamentally unfitted for the post of surgeon-superintendent'.²⁴

¹⁹ TAHO CON40-1-3, Image 154.

²⁰ HTG, 24 December 1844.

²¹ TAHO CON40-1-3, Image 154.

²² HTG, 27 April 1848.

²³ Possible death: 6482/1866/35, Hobart.

²⁴ Bateson, C. (1974, 2nd ed.) *The Convict Ships, 1776-1869*. London: A.H. & A.W. Reed, pp.225-6.

Tellingly, on Hall's next voyage to the Australian colonies, on *Brothers* in 1824, he had similar problems with a group of female prisoners he could not control. After that, he seems to have had enough of convict ships and expressed the desire to settle permanently in New South Wales. The governor at the time, Sir Thomas BRISBANE, wrote to Earl BATHURST, Britain's secretary of state for the colonies, urging him not to allow Hall to reside in Sydney because of a doubt about his 'moral character'.²⁵ It is likely that Fenton, had she heard of it, would have applauded that decision.

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²⁵ *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, Series 1, Vol, XI.