

## Gender, Crime and Empire: Convicts, Settlers and the State in Early Colonial Australia

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**Reviewer:** Tina Picton Phillipps

This study has several claims for attention, not least on account of its focus on Van Diemen's Land from the time of its colonial beginnings as a place of secondary punishment from New South Wales in 1803 to the conclusion of direct transportation in 1853: the fifty years covered by the work offer a substantial analysis of the whole period of its existence as a penal colony from its inception until 'Van Diemen's Land celebrated its liberation' (p. 256). Although it is possible that readers are aware of the southerly colony as it was described by Robert Hughes,<sup>(1)</sup> it is surely no accident that the title of this monograph omits either 'Van Diemen's Land' or 'Tasmania' but instead opts for the more general term 'Australia'.

Reid's monograph is, in fact, the first full-length work with its focus fixed clearly on the island. There have been a number of articles in academic journals but the previously published literature dealing specifically with this location, although not without their own merits, are by no means so substantial in either the extent of scholarship or range of sources.<sup>(2)</sup> It is, therefore, remarkable that within the first six months of this year (2008) two other works have been published addressing aspects of the penal colony established on Van Diemen's Land. The first of these is by the human geographer and ecologist James Boyce whose work, *Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne, 2008), is carefully nuanced and which, while covering much of the same period as Reid's monograph and paying attention to power relations within the colony, has a very different perspective. The second, by Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates: the Death of a Convict Station* (New South Wales, 2008), is concerned solely with the Sarah Island, the remote penal station in Macquarie Harbour. Despite these two works, Reid's monograph is definitely breaking new ground here as it goes far beyond either the assignment system or the penal stations.

Although comparative reference is made throughout to influences from New South Wales, Reid is successful in maintaining the focus not only on the distinction between the two antipodean colonies but also in demonstrating why it is that Van Diemen's Land is worthy of a study on its own account. In so doing, Reid has made excellent use of the archival material, as well as the secondary literature, to provide a thoughtful analysis of the society and social mores of the time. Her use of the contemporary literature, particularly that of the Congregational minister and leader of the movement for the abolition of convict transportation John West <sup>(3)</sup> is to be applauded. A major strength is the close attention given by Reid to the contemporary archival and printed materials (British Parliamentary Papers as well as the dispatches between the metropole

and colonial administration). While couched in temperate prose, Reid indicates the drawbacks of an over-reliance on discourse theory in the field 'of gender and colonialism' making the point (p. 9) with a reference to Padma Anagol's work.<sup>(4)</sup>

It is indisputable that recent years have witnessed a number of works dealing with different aspects of the 'transportation system' and Reid's use of the rich bibliography of the convict experience is demonstrated throughout the text. It is also the case that a number of feminist and non-feminist scholars have found the female convict experiences in both New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land a fruitful area of research.<sup>(5)</sup> However, this monograph retains a continuous coherence in keeping with Reid's authorial statement that 'A central aim of this book is, therefore, to ask what happens to our understandings of gender and power in the convict colonies when we let class back into the account' (p. 8). Indeed, one of the strengths of this work is that 'gender' is not restricted to the use of its application to women. As Van Diemen's Land received '67,888 men and 12,116 women' (p. 1) it is not unreasonable that attention should be given to the majority of those who were increasingly over time the recipients of a class-biased prejudice – not only on account of their status as 'unfree' but also because they failed to meet the criteria of bourgeois sensibilities. These sensibilities became ever more entrenched as the 'free' became the beneficiaries of the labour services of the 'unfree'.

There is, I believe, an academic insult suggesting that inside a lengthy volume there is sufficient material for a short article. Here, the reverse is the case, in that in between the covers of this book there is considerably more than a foundation stone for a much larger volume. Throughout the work Reid rehearses a feature of the contemporary debate, that of the family: the family as the cornerstone of settlement in Van Diemen's Land; the ruptured families which saw one of their members being transported; the social hierarchy of the relationship of the population to the colonial governor; and, ultimately, the metaphoric use of the family to indicate the relationship of colony to metropole. This is not just a fanciful whim on Reid's part as the evidence from the time indicates that, formally at least, this was as much a part of the dominant class mentalité as it was a means of oppression.

Chapter Two, 'Regulating society, purifying the state: gender respectability and colonial authority', describes how 'discourses of gendered respectability and moral propriety' had been features of 'colonial society' since the days of early white settlement. Surveyor-General Harris undoubtedly played a paternalistic regulatory role, writing of how he had to protect his recently married wife from those who were not only less well born but also engaged in transgressive relationships. In making this case, reference is made to Harris's published letters, as well as his correspondence with his mother in 1805. Apparently, according to this correspondence, Harris and his wife could not visit his fellow brother officers as they were cohabiting with female convicts; moreover, 'it was not just the unmarried that Harris sought to place outside the family home but equally those who were married but of lower class' (p. 55). What is problematic about this argument is that there is little to indicate that a married man might not necessarily write to his mother in the same way as he would to a male companion. Moreover, it would appear from what is present in the text that Harris's was a lone voice in 1805 – so his opinions were evidently not shared by the majority of his brother officers. Indeed, it is not wholly clear how far such views permeated throughout either the colony or his cohort at that particular time. Is it perhaps possible to assume from this that social activities did in fact take place among the officers and their mistresses? It is clear from the emphasis that Harris's behaviour was based on what he 'considered fitting for his wife', but it is unclear whether Harris applied the same rules to himself. While it is pointed out that Harris was atypical of the period and was foreshadowing what was to occur in subsequent years, the description suggests that if the majority of his fellow officers and their female companions held social events among themselves then the lines of social class were much less firmly drawn than he might suggest.

Overall, the text does not rely on Marxist jargon but it is not difficult to see its applicability – Reid's description of the mechanisms enabling control of the unfree migrant labourers shows how they embodied the victory of the dominant class, in terms both of its ideology and its exploitation of the labour of the unfree, male and female. Each chapter builds on the previous pages, providing a clear trajectory of these

transformations. The reader is given ample opportunity to see just how ‘class’ influenced perceptions. Indeed, the opening chapter begins with a petitioning letter dated 20 March 1845 demonstrating how Harriet Bowtle attempted to undermine the pretension of the governor’s claims to ‘gentleman’ status should he fail to grant her request (p. 1). Indeed, Bowtle’s attempted moral blackmail demonstrated the prevailing ideology whereby social class, religious sensibility and gender were combined in a glorious subversion. Although Bowtle’s strategy was not successful, her words are not without worth for the historian.

Certainly, as one of the many vignettes provided by Reid, this does indicate the rich contextualisation appearing throughout each of the chapters, which provides a compelling body of contemporary evidence for her argument. Throughout the book the synthesis of the official documents with archival material offers contemporary illumination of the tensions between the various groups whose interests were, unsurprisingly, not always the same. Reid’s control of these sources is undisputed.

However, for those of us who know Reid’s work (6) there may well be a sense of regret that, as the book progresses, there is less of the ‘convict voice’ which she has so successfully recreated in both her published writings and unpublished conference papers. Was this, in fact, a deliberate strategy in terms of structure reflecting the fact that, as the success of the dominant class became firmly established and indeed, as this work shows, entrenched, the unfree labour migrants became even more marginalised?

This is, clearly, a review recommending the book in terms of its approach and its use of material and methodology but I wish I could be so positive about the academic conventions followed (although I do not think that the following comments are applicable to the entire text). The assumption, given the title’s presence in the Studies of Imperialism series as well as the recommendation that ‘This fascinating study will be of particular interest to all those studying imperial and gender history’ (back of the dust jacket), is that this monograph will, rightly, appear on reading lists for courses at a significant number of higher education institutions. While reading I was diverted by what I ended up listing as ‘minor quibbles’. These ranged from what I regarded as an inadequate index, for instance the omission of two key words for non-Australian scholars, ‘indulgences’ and ‘emancipists’ to the fact that in places the footnoting could have been both more expansive and more rigorous. For instance, the sentence ‘This view of the family had been a mainstay of British systems of discipline and socialisation for centuries’ (p. 112) is accompanied by n. 122 which states: ‘On the Macarthur family see: Alan Atkinson, *Camden ...*’. Reference is made to Thomas Holt’s work, *The Promise [sic] of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (pp. 203, 273) whereas the correct title is *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938*. While Reid is ultimately responsible for proof-reading there are concerns here that if reputable academic publishers are imposing a rigid adherence to a specific word limit and the author is then faced with the choice of ‘less text more references’ then clearly hard choices will have to be made.

Nonetheless, I still maintain that this work has an appeal and value for both an academic audience and interested members of the general public and that these critical comments about scholarly conventions do not, in themselves, diminish the valuable contribution that it makes to the various related fields of scholarship it addresses.

The reviewer was delighted to learn that this monograph was awarded the prestigious Kay Daniels Award (2008).

## Notes

1. Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: a History of Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868* (London, 1987). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for example, the 1988 publication by Marjorie Tipping, *Convicts Unbound: the Story of the Calcutta Convicts and their Settlement in Australia* (Victoria, 1988), which deals with the early years of settlement; or Ian Brand’s compilation of the probation system, *The Convict Probation System: Van Diemen’s Land 1839–1854* (Hobart, 1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John West, *The History of Tasmania* (Launceston, 1852). [Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Padma Anagol, 'Indian Christian women and indigenous feminism, c.1850–c.1920', in *Gender and Imperialism*, ed. Clare Midgeley (Manchester, 1998), pp. 79–80. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for example, Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (St. Leonards, New South Wales, 1998); Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge, 1997); Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: the Forced Migration of Women to Australia* (Cambridge, 1996); Annette Salt, *These Outcast Women: the Parramatta Female Factory, 1821–1848* (Sydney, 1984); and Monica Perrot, 'A Tolerable Good Success': *Economic Opportunities for Women in New South Wales, 1788–1830* (Sydney, 1983). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Kirsty Reid, 'Work, sexuality and resistance: the convict women of Van Diemen's Land, 1820–1839'. (unpublished University of Edinburgh PhD thesis, 1995); "'Contumacious, ungovernable and incorrigible": convict women and workplace resistance, Van Diemen's Land, 1820–1829', in *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration*, ed. Ian Duffield and James Bradley (London, 1997), pp. 106–23; 'Setting women to work: the assignment system and female convict labour in Van Diemen's Land, 1820–1839', *Australian Historical Studies*, 121 (2003), pp. 1–25. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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