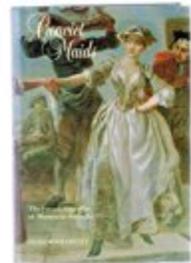


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Deborah Oxley. *Convict Maids: the Forced Migration of Women to Australia*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xi + 339 pp. \$36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-44677-8; \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-44131-5.

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Published on (June, 1998)



God's Whores and Damned Police?

Convict women were a bad lot. Everyone knows that, from the juvenile viewer of gratuitous bare breasts in ABC-TV's version of "The Timeless Land," to the unreconstructed academic gynocentrist at your local School of Cultural Studies. Ships loaded with the very worst of British womanhood arrived in Australia in the late 1700s and early 1800s, disgorging hordes of drunken prostitutes who proceeded to infect everyone in sight with their criminal tendencies, and created in the process what Manning Clark described as "a cold and barren society."

All of which is very interesting, and makes for good television, as well as for good tacky novels. Unfortunately for both, it may be long overdue for a bit of revisionism. Where did all the tattooed prigs and beaten-up scrubbers suddenly go, if not into something that looks awfully like decent society?

Deborah Oxley's book *Convict Maids* is a substantial step in this direction. She poses the question: "how could women unfamiliar with ordinary working and family life adapt so well to Australian conditions? ... (S)unshine cannot impart skills where none hitherto existed." Oxley acknowledges the work of economic and feminist historian Katrina Alford, as one of the few to recognise the economic significance of marriage and women's work in the long-term growth of the Australian colonies. She also incorporates Gothard's findings for female immigration and transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Oxley's work encompasses that of Portia Robinson, with whom she disputes the skills level of the women, claiming that Robin-

son falls between two schools—she demonstrates the economic contribution of the women, but argues that the women arrived in Botany Bay unskilled.

Oxley examines in turn the crimes of which the convict women were accused and convicted (mostly theft), comparing Irish and English offenders (the Irish were less likely to be literate and more likely to be Catholic), and then the collection of skills these women brought with them.

And there, amid the dust of excavation, is the skeleton of a solid domestic and light industrial economy. Bakers, publicans, milliners, weavers, midwives, confectioners, cooks, washerwomen, farm workers, bootbinders, lacemakers and governesses—from cradle to grave, a convict woman could provide you with everything you needed.

In fact, the bad press surrounding female convicts appears to be more a product of the land the women left behind them, than of the land that became their home. Naturally, it is more attractive, if one is British, to describe the mass transportation of female offenders from Britain as "cleaning out the dregs" rather than "transporting the solid citizens of tomorrow."

The majority of the women were single, but this does not mean that a woman has no dependents, in the form of an extended family. They were transported mainly for the theft of clothes, fabric and money, with jewellery coming in a close fourth—women with bodies to

cover and families to clothe and feed were scarcely likely to steal heavy machinery. By far and away the largest class were domestic servants, not street prostitutes—housemaids and maids of all work. In such a position, opportunities for theft arise frequently, as do seductions, unwanted pregnancies and abandonment, all of which make theft a more likely means of keeping body and soul together.

Take the case of Mary Ann Riley, who entered the shop of Mrs. Charles Casey, a shoemaker in London, and after trying on a few pairs, announced that she had not found what she was looking for. Upon being questioned about a missing pair, Mary was searched bodily, and the shoes found hidden between her thighs. “How came you to do this?” was demanded of her. Mary Ann, to her eternal credit, replied “I do not know, I was in want of a pair of shoes, and had no money to buy them with.”

Some, of course, were prostitutes—another career where theft is a perk. Mary Revlet was accused of robbing a customer, but she argued that she “had earned her £2 and would not give it up.” I am inclined to agree with her, as were some judges at the time especially when confronted by a witness willing to argue that the woman charged “deserved the money.”

Oxley draws upon a wide range of auxological and criminological research, which enhances her interpretation. If you have a mirror handy, you might like to see if you conform to the criminal type, according to nineteenth century criminologist Cesare Lombroso, quoted by Oxley:

Female thieves, and above all prostitutes, are inferior to moral women in cranial capacity and circumference, and their cranial diameters are less; but, on the other hand, their facial diameters are larger, especially the jaw.

Criminals have the darker hair and eyes, and this holds good also to a certain extent of prostitutes, in whom fair and red hair now surpasses and now approximates to the normal.

The physical characterisation of the women in records forms a fascinating subtext, especially the endless lists of slightly crooked fingers, cast eyes, burn marks, missing teeth and facial moles, which read more like descriptions of prizefighters than of stable, honest workers, wives and mothers, which many of these women became.

Oxley also gives over two chapters to examining the lands the women left behind them—England and Ireland. Given the grim conditions in Ireland and the rapidly-changing economy in England, a domestic servant could find life in a new colony a vast improvement, especially in the marriage mart. True, free immigrants were often better-educated and were of a more “moral” character, but the enormous contribution of forced transportation women cannot be automatically filed under “damned whores.”

Oxley has certainly crunched her numbers, but I felt that the stories of the individual women were a little too few and far between. It is difficult to strike this balance, but overall it is a harmonious piece of work. It is also a very useful piece of revisionism, and a valuable contribution to women’s history in Australia.

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Citation: Philippa J. Martyr. Review of Oxley, Deborah, *Convict Maids: the Forced Migration of Women to Australia*. H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

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