

# The children of mothers in the convict system of Van Diemen's Land

*Professor Lucy Frost*

Among the women sentenced to transportation in courtrooms across the British Isles, many were mothers. Their sentences would change the lives of children. Most of these children would be left behind to be cared for by relatives or to fend for themselves on the streets or to suffer the grimness of a workhouse. Others would sail with their mothers on the convict transports, facing their own future in exile. And then there were the children yet unborn. Some convict women would become pregnant while they were serving their sentences, and would give birth in the hospitals of female factories to babies whose daily existence would be controlled by the convict system. Even children born after the mothers were free would be affected. Not surprisingly, many exiled convicts never brought a sustainable order into their personal lives, and inflicted chaos and emotional trauma upon the next generation as well.

My attention was drawn to the effects of transportation upon the children of convict mothers while I was doing the research for my book published last year as *Abandoned Women: Scottish Convicts Exiled beyond the Seas*. This is a biographical study of women convicted in the courts of Scotland and transported to Van Diemen's Land on the *Atwick*, arriving in Hobart Town in January 1838. More than half the 151 women on this ship had been convicted in Scotland. As I pieced together whatever I could find about the *Atwick* convicts, I began to think about their children. Most children of *Atwick* mothers were left behind. Of the 83 prisoners' children noted in the convict conduct records, a mere eighteen sailed. Only four of the 32 children of English convicts came aboard. The Scottish mothers fared better, bringing fourteen of their 51 children. This means that 65 children suffered the loss of a parent they were unlikely ever to see again, a loss mimicking death and often skewed by the particular cruelty of not knowing what had happened to their illiterate mothers, not knowing whether they were alive or dead. At least the children who sailed would end up in the same part of the world as their mothers, though they lost their fathers and often their brothers and sisters.

What can we know of these transported children, and of how they were affected by their mothers' sentences? Who were these children anyway, and how did they get to Van Diemen's Land? The questions are simple, and the answers elusive. Luckily for me as a researcher, if not for the children themselves, I discovered that the pre-transportation lives of some *Atwick* children are not entirely a blank page because mothers had already involved them in their criminal lives. If their mothers were tried in Scotland, the children might well figure in the collection of witness statements called precognitions, documents gathered by the prosecutors before the trials.

It was here that I first glimpsed nine-year-old Agnes Hall. Agnes was sent into a baker's shop in Glasgow with one of the sixpence coins her mother had made that day. She asked for a loaf of bread, and handed over the coin. Something, perhaps the little girl's nervousness, made the baker's daughter take a close look at the sixpence. It seemed very black, she thought, and the other shop attendant thought so too. Within minutes Agnes's mother and her accomplice in counterfeiting were arrested on a busy street in the crowded old town.

As was common in industrialising cities throughout Great Britain, Glasgow's middle classes were moving away from the old town at the city's centre and into new suburbs like the one where six-year-old Grace McGuire went begging with her mother on a late summer's night. They asked for charity at a clergyman's house in Bell Grove Place, and waited until the family finished their evening prayers. The clergyman's wife handed over a few coins as alms, and her son followed the beggars along the garden path to make sure they went out the gate. In the darkness he heard something drop, and there on the ground was his father's Greek Testament. The police were called, and the mother accused. No, she kept protesting, I didn't take the book, my daughter is the thief. No, insisted six-year-old Grace McGuire, I did NOT steal this. My mother took the book and made me carry it.

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Understandably, it was the mothers of Agnes and Grace who were arrested, and not the little girls who hadn't managed to carry off their assigned roles. The two little girls may well have met in the communal cells of Glasgow gaol, locked up with their mothers awaiting trial. The mother of Agnes Hall was tried in September 1836, and Grace McGuire's mother four months later, in January 1837. And then there was a long wait before both girls boarded the *Atwick* in September. We have no way of knowing how Agnes and Grace and the other children reacted to being taken away from Scotland. Much would have depended on the kinds of lives they had known, and the lives of Agnes and Grace look difficult, to say the least. They were growing to consciousness at the edges of poverty where criminal activities and lawful work were intertwined as part of the daily mix. Getting out of Scotland might mean opportunity, a break from the repetitive patterns in which their mothers were caught.

Who decided whether a child would sail, or stay behind? This question has plagued me for years as I rummaged through archives in Australia and Britain, but instead of definitive answers, all I can offer are disjointed observations. Given the numbers of children on ships sailing directly from Ireland during the 1840s—often four or five children from a single family, and sometimes more—it looks as if no restrictions were imposed. On ships sailing from England, there certainly were gatekeepers, but I only glimpse who they were and how they operated. From the biography of the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, written by her daughters, I learn that during the 1820s, philanthropic members of the Ladies' British Society would often go to the Admiralty Offices in Whitehall to plead that "poor nurslings" separated from their mothers in prison should be restored "before the ship should sail".

Although I can't find a clear articulation of government policy, I sometimes see instructions through the journals submitted to Admiralty by each surgeon superintendent of a female transport. These were the naval doctors charged with looking after the health, well-being, and discipline of the prisoners and their children. The surgeon superintendent for the *Mary*, which sailed in 1831, was outraged by the way Chester gaol was circumventing an Admiralty regulation. "It being contrary to the regulations of the Service", he wrote, "to receive on board Infants at the breast, an expedient it appears, was most inhumanly adopted at the Prison in Chester, in Order to evade the regulations". A baby born in Chester gaol and sent to the *Mary* with its mother "had not been allowed to be suckled from its birth, and in consequence of which it was brought on board in a most miserable state of Atrophy and emaciation ... little hopes remain therefore of this poor child surviving many day's; not to say supporting the fatigue and privation of a voyage so long." A few days later the baby died.

This episode is symptomatic of what I have come to see as a deep-seated ambivalence on the subject of these children, an ambivalence equally apparent today in the language of public debate about what to do with the refugee children incarcerated in detention centres. On the one hand, early childhood was and is associated with a state of innocence. In the early nineteenth century this was a new way of thinking, one of the crucial shifts attributable to the Romantic period in intellectual history. Instead of seeing children as small adults, inescapably contaminated like adults by original sin in a fallen world, the Romantics imagined early childhood as a distinctive state of being, a state of prelapsarian innocence refiguring the Garden of Eden before the Fall. One of the most famous expositions of this new version of childhood is to be found in William Wordsworth's poem, "Ode: intimations of immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

... trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

All infants inhabit a metaphysical state close to God, whoever their parents are, even if their parents are convicts.

As children move farther away from infancy, the celestial ties loosen and influences from the fallen world come into play. This stage concerned thinkers like John West. They did not want vulnerable children to succumb to the influence of their convict mothers. In *A History of Tasmania*, West writes about the mothers of these children as if they were the reincarnation of the woman responsible for original sin, the temptress Eve. "The transportation of women", according to West, "has been a great social evil to the colonies ... It would have been better for the nation, for the male convicts, and for

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the women themselves, had they been detained at home, or banished to countries where they would have avoided the double degradation of moral and social infamy". Though the convict women were "beyond recovery", as far as John West was concerned, their children were not. While apparell'd no longer in celestial light, children might yet escape the moral infamy of their mothers if they were kept separate. Hence the rationale for establishing the colony's Orphan Schools which according to West "afforded protection to many children who must have sunk under the influence of a vicious example".

On the other hand—and here the ambivalence becomes apparent—there was a widespread belief that convict women were *not* "beyond recovery", and that they *could* be reclaimed through marriage. Marriage and motherhood might turn women away from crime, and transform them into respectable citizens. According to this scenario children play their part in redeeming their parents. Convict women whose marriages were approved by the Government while they were under sentence were permitted to retrieve their children from the Orphan School or the convict nursery if their husbands were earning enough money to support a family. And of course there were economic advantages to encouraging these new family formations. Children no longer in state care were no longer a charge upon the state. In a colony where officials were constantly under pressure to cut costs, the children of convicts were yet another public expense—as they had been from the moment they boarded the ships. In the second part of my talk, I want to look more closely at the problems and opportunities facing the children of convict mothers by telling you a little about the children of the *Atwick*.

### **The Children of the *Atwick***

Mothers lost parental control over children who clambered up rope ladders onto the *Atwick* or were carried on board. Authorities appointed by the state took over decisions about where their children would live, and how. On the ship, they learned to follow the daily rules and regulations imposed by the surgeon superintendent. No special arrangements were made for the accommodation of children on the voyage out. They slept at night in the big open dormitory below decks where all prisoners were locked in together from sunset until daybreak.

On the *Atwick*, four of the fourteen children were less than a year old, and may have spent most of the long nights asleep at the side of their mothers, especially if the surgeon superintendent distributed some of the popular opium-based sleeping potions. But another six children were aged 10 years or older, and it always surprises me that these ships crammed adolescent boys into the same dark space as the female convicts, the youngest convicts not much older than the boys. James McKenna is listed on his mother's conduct record as aged 13, though he was probably 15. A year earlier when questioned by a magistrate in Glasgow, James identified himself as a tobacco stripper aged 14. He and his slightly older brother seem to have been the main breadwinners in the family, turning their earnings over to their mother each week. Presumably it was his own choice to travel to Van Diemen's Land with his mother and younger brother instead of remaining in Scotland with his two older siblings. Perhaps he thought of the voyage as an adventure—and perhaps it was. Or perhaps it was deadly boring.

James had another choice to make when he reached Hobart Town. Even after lowering his age to 13, I suspect he could have avoided the Orphan School by assuring the local authorities that he already had work experience and could look after himself. Two other children from the *Atwick* made this choice, the sisters Isabella and Bathia Morris, whose ages were given as 14 and 13, and who must have left the ship directly to find employment because they were never admitted to the Orphan School. James, on the other hand, stayed with the younger children, and walked with them and the convict women to the Cascades Female Factory. Once the gates closed behind them, James and the other children were locked into the nursery yard. It was a grim introduction to life in Van Diemen's Land.

The nursery yard consisted of a space paved with flagstones in front of a two-storey structure built onto the high stone perimeter wall. On each floor was a room about 12 by 28 feet. Here infants born in the hospital of the Female Factory or arriving on a convict ship lived with their mothers and were breastfed until they were six months old. Then they were weaned and given to another nursing

mother to be looked after while their own mother went away, to be punished in the crime class if she had become pregnant in Van Diemen's Land, or to be assigned out to work if she had arrived on a ship. In the crowded and poorly ventilated rooms locked for twelve hours at a stretch, diseases like diarrhoea were common and many infants and toddlers died without ever seeing a blade of grass. Often the first time they left the Female Factory was when they were taken to St David's cemetery for burial.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1838, a few days after the women and children of the *Atwick* arrived, the Superintendent of the Female Factory reported a total of 83 children in the nursery yard, 40 under the age of 1, 24 between the ages of 1 and 2, and 19 older than 2 (*Hobart Town Gazette*). Given the smell and noise, the newcomers may well have wished themselves back at sea. For some reason the *Atwick* children spent six weeks in the nursery yard, where there was absolutely nothing for them to do during the day. Being sent to the Orphan School was their only escape, and it must have been with great relief—mixed no doubt with anxiety—that on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March ten boys and girls clambered onto a cart to ride across town to their new home. One girl was left behind, eleven-year-old Mary Henning. Her baby sister had been buried at St David's three days before, and her mother was now in the hospital where she would die a week later. Mary would finally join the others at the end of April.

Grace McGuire, the little girl who dropped the Greek Testament, left behind a baby sister who would survive the nursery yard until she was old enough to join Grace in the Orphan School, but Agnes Hall, who had handed over her mother's counterfeit coin to the Glasgow baker, was dead, and another four *Atwick* children would die inside the Female Factory, including one whose mother had named her Hosannah when she was born during the voyage. A year later the Catholic priest who buried the child would enter her name in the register as Oceana. At least the children riding on the cart to the Orphan Schools had each other. In the six months since they sailed down the Thames, they had shared experiences which set them apart, and hopefully bound them together. The coming years as "orphans" would be less soul-destroying for the child who did not feel utterly abandoned and alone.

Architecturally, the schools which would be their new home looked daunting. Like so many nineteenth-century institutions designed to house the poor, sick, and helpless throughout Britain and the Empire, they were not intended to foster a sense of family or domesticity. Two double-storeyed buildings stood, as they do today, at the end of an avenue flanked at its entrance by substantial stone guardhouses. St John's Anglican Church stood between the buildings separating the boys and girls in their daily routines. Their education, shaped by cultural assumptions about class and gender, was intended to give working-class children the skills appropriate to their place in a settler society.

Because a dispute between the Headmaster of the Orphan Schools and the Master of the Boys' School was generating a heated correspondence at the time the *Atwick* children arrived, we know much more about the boys than about the girls. We know, for instance, that the boys wore leather trousers with unlined moleskin jackets. The trousers, according to the master, 'prove but little warmth—chafe the skin—cannot be cleaned—when wet are excessively cold and flabby—and at all times emit an offensive smell'. The boys slept in hammocks, ate standing up (the master suggested benches for the dining room), used water closets which 'fill the building with offensive effluvia', and were expected to wash daily in two small horse troughs where 'the excessive coldness of the water makes them averse to washing and frequent chastisement is required in order to preserve personal cleanliness'. In the one and only schoolroom, boys from the ages of five (or younger) to fourteen (or older) sat on backless benches studying lessons sent out to the colony by the British and Foreign School Society. No library of books encouraged them to improve their reading or to learn more about the world, and yet the *Atwick* boys probably benefitted from learning the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Schoolroom lessons occupied the boys only part time. According to the master, 'every alternate day from ½ past 8 to 12 and from ½ past one to ½ past 4 (allowing for the Saturday afternoon being a half holiday)', they worked with one of the trade instructors employed to prepare them for apprenticeships in shoemaking, tailoring, or carpentry—trades of use in a colony with no call for tobacco strippers like

James McKenna. Though the master was highly critical of ‘the experiment of teaching Trades’ and thought the boys learned little, the headmaster vigorously defended the initiative, arguing that the aim was not to produce ‘complete masters of the trades’ but ‘useful apprentices’. As evidence of the program’s success, he pointed to the willingness of masters to apprentice the Orphan School boys without the usual premiums of £50 or more. The apprenticeship program for all its undoubted failings offered some pathway to earn a living in the future.

In their classroom, boys were often flogged. Girls were not. Their schoolroom curriculum seems to be much like the boys’, and they too spent considerable time learning a trade, which in the gendered world of colonial work would fit them for domestic service. One evening a week the girls could be visited by their brothers. If the siblings cared for each other, this must have been a moment to look forward to. One can imagine how Margaret Morris delighted in weekly visits from her two younger brothers.

Five Morris children had left their home in Aberdeen to sail on the *Atwick*. Isabella aged 14, Bathia 13, Margaret 10, James 8, and Cosmo 4. Their father was a mariner who may have spent little time in the Scottish port, and in the two years before their mother’s final arrest in Aberdeen she had served three stretches in prison for theft. In Van Diemen’s Land she would prove just as fickle, and it seems pretty clear that these five children were long practiced in looking after each other. Isabella, married two years after arriving in Hobart Town, persuaded the authorities at the Orphan School that she was a proper person to be allocated an apprentice, her younger sister Margaret. The Morris children continued to look after each other in the coming years. They named their own children after their brothers and sisters.

Many convict mothers arrived in Van Diemen’s Land as emotionally damaged women who had difficulty managing the daily give and take of domestic intimacy. Like the mother of the Morris children, they would never create a reliable family household. Some mothers started over in Van Diemen’s Land and kept the children who had sailed with them separate from their new families. Joseph Douglas, aged four when he left the *Atwick*, probably never saw his mother after he entered the Male Orphan School. With no one in the world to care for him, he remained subject to the Orphan School’s austere discipline for more than ten years before he was apprenticed to a settler with a substantial property at Cleveland in the Midlands, not far from where his mother was living with her husband and their growing family of children.

When Joseph was born, his mother was a young unmarried Irish woman drawn to Glasgow’s cotton mills, but working at least part time as a prostitute. During her sentence to transportation, she met and married a steady man who understood farming. He too was a convict. Once freed after completing their sentences, they rented a holding near Oatlands, and as their family grew to five children, their two girls and three boys enjoyed a sustaining family life unknown to their half-brother in the Orphan School. I certainly don’t blame the convict woman for wanting to start the experience of motherhood all over again. But it was tough on Joseph.

As you can see from this brief introduction with its focus on a single ship, the stories of the children of convict mothers follow many different paths. A mother’s sentence to transportation took its toll on her children. Many must have paid a high price in emotional and psychological damage when they found themselves separated from parents and siblings. And yet the children who came to Van Diemen’s Land, and those born while their mothers were convicts, may have had opportunities unavailable to their impoverished relatives in the industrializing cities of Great Britain or the rural reaches of Ireland. The teenager James McKenna may have chosen to spend almost two years in the Orphan School because there at last he had an opportunity to learn how to read and write, even if the schooling seems abysmal from today’s standpoint. He may also have appreciated the opportunity to work at a variety of trades before he was apprenticed. Perhaps even the predictability of a monotonous routine suited him after the rackets life he had led in Glasgow. What happened to James after his apprenticeship, I have been unable to discover. It seems likely that he left the colony to try his fortune elsewhere. The child from the convict transport was now a skilled and literate young man in a period of pioneers, just on the cusp of a gold rush. Children who survived had a future.