

Chris Leppard: “There are besides many little articles too numerous and insignificant to be noted here”: understanding convict women through their 'checked in' luggage’

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One of the difficulties which confront historians who study the female convict is the failure to hear the story from the women themselves. Women left very few written accounts or letters. We have a wealth of convict records but they generally offer a highly subjective account of female prisoners, more frequently describing their *misconduct* - the verdicts and punishments meted out by authorities. We could of course ‘read against the grain’ to look for the subtext within those official documents and indeed we do! However one set of records which offers a unique insight into prisoners’ lives, are the property lists which describe the possessions which they brought with them.

Far from arriving with merely the clothes on their backs, female convicts came equipped with items of both practical and sentimental value; goods and chattels to establish households. And because the goods had to be accommodated within the crowded dimensions of a convict transport for several months, they were stored in the hold of the ship. Thus records were created of the items, to enable them to be returned to their owners on arrival. Ships carried in their holds, precious objects which linked the women with home.

Peter Leonard, Surgeon-Superintendent on the *Atwick*, explained the process whereby the women, ‘were compelled to wear the clothing supplied by the Government, while every article of private clothing which they possessed was packed up and stowed away in the hold’. ¹And according to Surgeon-Superintendent Wilson on the male transport *Governor Ready*, there were no regulations governing, how much luggage a prisoner could bring. He stated as

¹ PRO (AJCP) Adm. 101/6 Reel 3189, Journal of the *Atwick* (1838) Surgeon-Superintendent Peter Leonard.

much when forced to justify why he permitted a prisoner to embark with five boxes and two trunks.²

The property lists can be found within the Tas Papers in the Mitchell Library.³ They are not indexed but are part of the documentation for individual ships. The lists were compiled by either the surgeon-superintendent, or ship's master, or a clerk on their behalf.

So what did the women bring? They brought with them not only a wide variety of clothing and fabrics, but household goods such as: tea pots, sewing needles, books, work or sewing boxes, bedding, tea caddies, china and glassware. Some lists read like an auction notice, others like a bride's glory box. Here are just a few examples.

Maria Wood brought: 7 chemises, 4 petticoats, 10 gowns, 2 pairs of shoes, 17 pairs of stockings, 3 pairs of stays, 15 caps, 2 bonnets, 1 shawl, 1 pelisse⁴, 12 aprons, 1 towel, 7 handkerchiefs, and 3 bed gowns.⁵

As well as clothing, Caroline Browning brought fourteen books in her luggage.⁶ Several boxes were required to contain Hannah Yewland's belongings - one for wearing apparel, the other for bonnets.⁷

Ann Solomon arrived at the wharf with six pieces of luggage and four children in readiness to board the *Mermaid*. She embarked with: one trunk for wearing apparel, a small trunk of children's clothes, a box of wearing apparel, a box with two feather beds, a fender and fire irons, a hamper with china and glass, and a tea chest with bonnets, pelisses, a silk dress and muff, and a fur tippet.

² ML TP 23 Reel CY 1275, List of Prisoners' Boxes and Bundles (*Governor Ready*).

³ Property lists for individual ships can be found within the Mitchell Library records. For example: ML TP 21 Reel CY1273, List of packages belonging to female convicts on the *Mermaid*; ML TP 21 CY1273, List of prisoners' baggage on the *Sir Charles Forbes*.

⁴ Cloak with armholes or sleeves.

⁵ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of prisoners' baggage on the *Sir Charles Forbes*.

⁶ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of prisoners' baggage on the *Sir Charles Forbes*.

⁷ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of packages belonging to female convicts on the *Mermaid*. Also called Hannah Yewband and Yeoland.

Rosina Smith's trunk of wearing apparel included 'valuable dresses'. Prior to her conviction she had been in service to Lady Oxford.⁸

The *Mermaid* list records that, 'unmade dresses' were contained within Elizabeth Thetford's luggage, and the same items were brought by her shipmate Honour Hayes.⁹

Mary Stannaway brought babies' clothes.¹⁰ She was a sixteen year old who was found guilty of highway robbery and transported for Life. Why bring babies' clothes all that distance? Was she hoping to sell them? She may have been pregnant, but no Surgeon's Journal survives to verify that. She was assigned on arrival, so was not nursing a child. Maybe she simply aspired to a home and family, and considered servitude to be a temporary phase before motherhood.

On arrival in Van Diemen's Land the women were reunited with their belongings and the number of bags and boxes, and their final destination, was matched with the women's names on the newly drawn up appropriation lists. Women disembarking from the *Borneo* were given their bags, but boxes were sent to the Commissariat Store.¹¹ Presumably not all new masters could spare a cart or wagon to fetch their assigned servant, hence the women had to walk and carry their belongings. The boxes followed later, when requested by the new master. Sarah Owens was assigned to Mr. Joshua Fergusson on July 4 and on July 20 her box of wearing apparel was dispatched to Mr Fergusson.¹²

So what do the property lists tell us about the women, and the culture which they left? The lists are important because they help us to understand who the women were. By examining the items which they chose to accompany them on their voyage, we can catch a glimpse of their priorities and perceived future

⁸ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of packages belonging to female convicts on the *Mermaid*.

⁹ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of packages belonging to female convicts on the *Mermaid*.

¹⁰ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of prisoners' baggage on the *Sir Charles Forbes*.

¹¹ ML TP ML TP23 CY 1275, List of Boxes and Bags of women on board *Borneo*.

¹² ML TP 23 Reel CY 1275, Appropriation List for the *Mermaid*.

requirements. We know that possessions were important to the women, if only because they took the trouble to bring them on an unknown journey, to an uncertain future, and with no clear idea of how they would physically handle the boxes, trunks and chests containing their belongings. And we know that authorities also saw them as important because they in turn took the trouble to create detailed records of that property - firstly when the women embarked in Britain - and then when they were landed, and the appropriation lists were annotated with details of that property, and where and when it was to be despatched.

They tell us that women saw themselves as having rights to own possessions, and the expectation that those rights would be respected. When assigned servant Jane Miller, fell out with her Mistress Mrs. Spode, Jane was ordered out of the house and off to the Magistrate. Before leaving, Jane asked Miss Spode to return her book, to which Miss Spode replied, 'you need not be so careful for your books you will be obliged to come back again.'¹³ This statement tells us that not only did Jane possess an item which was desired by her 'betters' but that she had more than one book and like Caroline Browning, may have brought them with her to the colony. Jane fiercely defended her property.

In fact the loss of one couple's belongings resulted in the first case of the civil court of New South Wales in July 1788. Prisoners Henry and Susannah Kable brought - books, linen and household goods, which were either lost or stolen during the voyage. They sued the captain of the ship and were awarded £15 in damages. Here is a very early indication that convicts had rights of ownership, and that the authorities respected that ownership.

¹³ Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (Crows' Nest, 1998), pp. 90-91.

The items were also powerful on a purely personal level as mementos and souvenirs of their past: tangible objects which connected them to that past, as they approached an uncertain future.

The Lists further demonstrate relationships between prisoners which pre-date their shipboard experience. Three pairs of women stored their possessions together on board the *Mermaid*, each couple being tried at the same court, on the same day - but for unrelated crimes. Mary Sherbird's trunk held not only her clothing but that of Mary Jones.¹⁴ They were tried at the Old Bailey on January 10, 1828 and had possibly become acquainted in the gaol.

Personal objects also enhanced the women's self esteem and self-identity in a society where status was demonstrated by appearances. We know that image was important to the middle and upper classes, as is evident in any novel or newspaper of the period. The theft of clothing may indicate that members of the working class were equally sensitive to outward trappings.¹⁵ Deborah Oxley believes that twenty per cent of female crimes can be attributed to clothing theft, and whilst it may have answered the need for money (through resale) it may also have reflected the aspirations and ambitions of the poor.¹⁶ Objects, and particularly clothing, enhanced their power and place within their social hierarchy. We know that the *Flash Mob*, in the House of Correction, wore worked caps, silk handkerchiefs, earrings and other forms of jewellery.¹⁷ The *Flash Mob* had status in Hobart Town.

And when Governor Arthur ordered that women were not to be landed in their own clothes, it highlighted this very issue. As a witness to the *Select Committee on Transportation* observed, '[convicts] land with no particular kind of dress;

¹⁴ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of packages belonging to female convicts on the *Mermaid*.

¹⁵ Beverley Lemire, 'The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 1990), pp. 255-276, p. 257.

¹⁶ Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The forced migration of women to Australia* (Cambridge 1996), p. 49.

¹⁷ CSO22/1/50, *Report and Evidence of a Committee Enquiring into Female Convict Discipline 1841-1843*, p. 315.

they land in silks, satins, parasols and everything they can afford.’¹⁸ Dress obliterated the difference between free and convict. Finery defied the image of the degraded, banished convict.¹⁹ Women were forced to wear standard prison clothing to create uniformity - to suppress individuality. So it was inevitable that they would attempt to reclaim their individuality and femininity through items of personal adornment stored in the hold of the ship.

These transported objects also reveal future aspirations. What has been described as signposts of future goals. A sewing box was a frequent inclusion in the property lists, and it could mean that its owner expected to earn her living through needlework, or that she expected to sew and mend for her own future family. On archaeological sites we can identify the rooms where women gathered and stitched by the tiny pins found beneath the floorboards. The sewing box was an item which transcended class and time.

Baby clothes were carried, not only by convict mothers, but by unaccompanied women, who once again may have had an eye to commerce, but more likely had expectations of family formation much like their sisters who remained at home.

And what of the twenty-six yards of cotton, jointly owned by Margaret Bower and Ann Fenn and stored in the hold of the *Sir Charles Forbes*?²⁰ Were they hoping to sell the cotton; to perhaps go into business?

Books were frequently transported with the women. Were they brought as merchandise to the colony? Or did Caroline Browning hope to add to her fourteen books and one day open a school? Or were they just the familiar everyday items necessary to create some normality in an unfamiliar world.

¹⁸ *British Parliamentary Papers, Report from the Select Committee on Transportation Together with the Minutes of Evidence Appendix and Index, Crime and Punishment, Transportation 2* (Shannon [Ireland], 1968), evidence of Mr. E.A. Slade, 25 April 1837, p. 46.

¹⁹ Grace Karskens, 'Revisiting the Worldview: The Archaeology of Convict Households in Sydney's Rocks Neighbourhood', *Historical Archaeology*, 37, 1 (2003), pp. 34-55, p. 46.

²⁰ ML TP 21 Reel CY 1273, List of prisoners' baggage on the *Sir Charles Forbes*.

Archaeology confirms what the property lists tell us. Grace Karskens, in her excavations of convict houses in Sydney, discovered that convicts came prepared to establish households. By identifying houses inhabited by convict families, and examining the remaining artefacts, Karskens concluded that the household (not the gaol, nor the gang), was fundamental to Sydney's early society and economy. She found a culture of consumption and domesticity. Karskens concluded that archaeologists and historians who explore the culture of convicts, rather than their civil condition as prisoners, find a most acquisitive group of people, strongly influenced by popular culture.²¹ Such objects further suggest that the world which they left behind was one of consumerism. The commercial revolution in Britain revolved around things and everyday domestic life, and was not limited to the wealthy.²² Jane Elliott used account books and ledgers, to show that early Sydney shops were patronised largely by convicts and ex-convicts, the wealthy preferring bespoke, or tailor made items.²³

And the clothing which women brought with them was not only desirable for adornment but also as a currency.²⁴ New arrivals to Hobart Town bartered their clothes and possessions for tea, meat, sugar and tobacco.²⁵ Items retrieved from the ship's hold could be worn, bartered, sold or handed down.

Thus the policy of allowing women deemed outcasts and incorrigibles, to transport their simple belongings, (along with themselves), has further blurred the line between convict and free.²⁶ It also weakens the argument, for a criminal class, as distinct from Britain's working class.

²¹ Grace Karskens, 'Revisiting the Worldview: The Archaeology of Convict Households in Sydney's Rocks Neighbourhood', *Historical Archaeology*, 37, 1 (2003), pp. 34-55, p. 46.

²² Beverley Lemire, 'The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 1990), pp. 255-276.

²³ Jane Elliott, 'Was There a Convict Dandy? Convict Consumer Interests in Sydney, 1788-1815', *Australian Historical Studies*, 1995, 26 (104), pp. 373-392.

²⁴ Daniels, *Convict Women*, p. 89.

²⁵ Daniels, *Convict Women*, p. 138, evidence from Mary Haigh.

²⁶ Daniels, *Convict Women*, p. 90.

Margaret Bower's twenty-six yards of cotton, and Caroline Browning's fourteen books, speak of self determination and agency. Ann Davis' work box, Margaret Ash's tea caddy, Mary Stannaway's babies' clothes, and Mary Ann Denham's 'small tin tea pot' speak of family ties, future aspirations and domesticity.

When Surgeon-Superintendent James Mc Ternan grew weary of recording the items proffered by women on the *Sir Charles Forbes* and instead substituted,

'There are besides many little articles too numerous and insignificant to be noted here,' he dismissed the collective culture and future aspirations of the women. Insignificant they may have appeared to Mr Mc Ternan, but fortunately the items which he did chose to record, allow observers in 2015 to understand the women more fully than the Surgeon in 1827.