

The Governesses – Notes for a talk at Runnymede May 2012

When Thea Pitcairn, the first mistress of Runnymede, advertised in 1835 for someone to take care of her child, she wanted a free woman - a term she used in almost all her advertisements for staff. Thea had arrived here on the York in 1829 as a free settler. Her father was a military man who had no qualms about employing convicts; her husband was a lawyer and a very public anti transportationist. In the early days of their marriage, he too hired convict labour.

In one of the letters written to her husband from her family's property at Westbury, Thea was upset. She wrote *'I was in dismay at the account of old Mary's doings. It is too discreditable the idea of having such a woman about the house. I fear indeed that she has been a prisoner and perhaps it is better she left It is inconvenient to be without a proper person to look after the cooking and cleaning for the pots and pans – but it cannot be helped'*. Thea had advertised for a free woman as cook and perhaps 'old Mary' had been forced to lie about her convict past in order to gain employment.

It is unlikely that any of the governesses who were transported ever set foot in Thea's home. But Convict women were child minders in many colonial homes, where several of them were charged with offences relating to their masters' children: being drunk whilst in charge of the children and losing them, striking and ill-treating a child, giving alcohol to a child, using disgusting language in front of the children, taking the child out without permission and returning it home drunk, *or not returning it*. One woman was absent all night with her master's child and they were found in a public house the next day. Another woman encouraged her master's daughter an 11 year old to have sex; Maria Wood taught obscene songs to Mrs Anstey's infant daughter.

The role of a governess is a complicated one, even today. In Thea's time, a governess was one of the hidden women. She had to be trusted, sufficiently educated to teach the children of the upper class and aspiring middle class; yet she was required to earn her living. In her recent work on governesses, Kate Matthew tells us that *'They usually lived with the families they worked for, but were not part of them. They were*

present at many social engagements, but usually as a chaperone. The governess's ability to teach her pupils, both traditional subjects such as English and French, and drawing room accomplishments such as dancing and singing, was only ever as good as her own education had been, which in turn impacted on her ability to earn a good salary.' Charlotte Bronte was paid 20 pound a year in 1841 for her work as a governess. Out of place upstairs, governesses were not always warmly welcomed below stairs either. **'I don't like them governesses, Pinner,'** the cook in *Vanity Fair* says of Becky Sharp. **'They give themselves the hairs and hupstarts of ladies, and their wages is no better than you nor me.'**

Few governesses had their qualifications queried. But the hours were long, the rewards few and their status within the family and community was variable, even though they were 'free women'. There were many advertisements in the Tasmanian Colonial papers for governesses placed by 'respectable' and 'genteel' families. Some were specific about the skills they required. One requested English, Geography, Writing Arithmetic, Drawing, and Music; another required a 'moral, talented and accomplished' lady. One simply wanted a governess 'competent in the higher branches of Female Education'. John Whitefoord advertised stating *'No qualifications, beyond those of character and good disposition, are required, but a knowledge of reading and writing'*, and then he mentioned that some domestic duties were also included in the role. One can only imagine the governess arriving to find she needed to do a little gardening; perhaps make a meal or two and what about the washing?

Mr Walker of Rhodes expected more. He required a *'free female, between the ages 'Of 17 and 40, a native of England, who has received' a plain, useful education, of an even temper, who would be willing to assist at needlework, and instruct a young family in the country, in reading, writing, the first, rules of "arithmetic" and needle work. A healthy single person, or widow, without encumbrance will answer; an exceptional moral character will, be requisite'*

Several convict women identified themselves as educators, both as governesses and schoolmistresses. Some appear to have had the relevant skills, others appear to have had none. What is not obvious from their records is that any of them taught anyone but their own children in this colony. I will give you a little background on just a few of them.

© Colette McAlpine

Julia St Clair Newman was from Trinidad in the West Indies, She claimed she was a governess who could teach the piano. Apparently, she was educated at a French boarding school, but after a change in circumstances, she and her mother were imprisoned for fraud and theft. Her mother died in prison, and Julia became a thorn in the side of all at the Millbank. She was a perfect nuisance. When the matron gave evidence about her at a Select Committee, she described Julia as 'lady-like, a gentlewoman who though not handsome was interesting'. Julia could paint and sing quite beautifully, she scratched verses of poetry in the whitewash of the cell walls, wrote illicit letters and feigned insanity. The governor wrote '**So wily, ingenious, clever, and unprincipled a deceiver as this prisoner cannot, I submit, after all that has passed, be placed amongst others without endangering the subordination and discipline of the whole ward; and unless the committee are prepared to direct that she be kept altogether apart, I hope they will bring the matter to a crisis and scud her abroad.**'"

Everyone was afraid of her. She was strong, intelligent, determined, stubborn and reckless. Sometimes she was violent. Julia was sent to Bedlam and in 1838. When her case was raised in the House of Lords it was '**declared that she had been sent to an asylum, not because she was mad, but because by birth a lady**'. Julia returned to the penitentiary, where the governor was relieved when news came that she was to be transported. It is unlikely that she worked as a Governess in the colony, where she tore pages from the Government Bible to curl her hair, strutted about in her Mistress's stays and clothes and destroyed her master's property. After she married she used her literary skills to write to the colonial papers in defence of her constable (kunstable) husband.

Mary Ann Brown could teach French, Italian and music. The surgeon on the *Tory* found her 'exemplary and accomplished'. Her father was a vicar, but her father's moral code did not stop her forging an order for the payment of £470. She had befriended Lady Margaret Nelthorpe; in

fact, she stayed at her home, using the opportunity to perfect Lady Margaret's signature. The police constable charging her noticed that she was dressed '*in a genteel, lady like manner, and looked very much a like a lady*'; but her appearance did not save her from transportation.

Hannah Mary Anson loved art and books – enough to steal them both. When caught she said she was a governess, born in Spain and with a mother, Grace Jerusalem, in Paris. A bigamist with delusions of grandeur, Hannah married Henry Wyatt, an architect, under the name of Octavia Sarah Moore de Bellevue. The marriage was not successful, but Hannah was not deterred. She returned to London where she married Anton Joseph Koller, a hair artist. Then she moved to Cheltenham where she dressed richly and moved in fashionable circles under the name of Lady Ada Alice Wyatville. Claiming she was widowed, she married a civil engineer named Thomas Hinckley. Hannah was acquitted of bigamy after the court heard of brutal treatment and desertion; she appearing more 'sinned against than sinning'. Her time in the colony was peppered with problems. She was charged with theft and pawning and rarely spent longer than a month with any employer.

Helen Elizabeth Mackay worked as a governess in England and in India where she arrived with very good reference and the 'decided piety and high religious feeling' deemed necessary qualifications for teaching by the Society that employed her and where her brother worked as a missionary. She was transported from India for sadistically and systematically murdering her niece and namesake after the child whispered suspicions of incest to her amah, noticing that her aunt and her father seemed closer than siblings should. When Helen Elizabeth arrived in the colony, *The Colonial Times* predicted that '**the very convicts themselves with whom she is now sent to herd must feel themselves contaminated by the presence of such a fiend.**'

Beatrice McBarnett, a 'bold and intriguing' woman charged with deliberately lighting a fire in Edinburgh, was the daughter of a slave owner from St Vincent. She left behind three small children in Scotland and had three more in the colony, one of whom became a famous unionist, an orator of great skill, and a Federal politician. Here the authorities warned on her record that she was not to be employed where there were children. Why, we do not know.

Louisa Grange liked pretty things. She hired an elegant carriage, dressed with style and went to the jewellers where she took rings in the name of Countess de Noailles. Her partner in crime and lover was a French man named Eugene Rossiet Lennon, who was also transported. While Louisa might not have worked as a governess, Lennon was employed as a teacher, tutoring the children of Francis Cotton at Kelvedon. A flirtation with young Mary Cotton put an end to his career there. He became a regular contributor of short stories and poetry to the *Colonial Times* and taught privately in Hobart Town. The Society for the Promotion of Public Education expressed the opinion that the idea of former convicts being employed as teachers 'breathed contamination; and children, knowing the situation of their master, could never be brought to look on him with that respect which was so necessary'. They might have been surprised to learn that Lennon ended up as Headmaster of Flinders National Grammar school at Geelong.

Twenty women stated their occupation as Governess. Most were over 25, the majority in their mid-30s; one was 54. Several spoke foreign languages; six of them grew up in countries outside the British Isles. Eight combined their teaching skills with needlework. Most were transported for theft and several stole from their employers. Only five of them, that I can find, had children in Van Diemen's Land. Each of these governesses is an interesting and complex woman.

Tasmania was the first colony to have a government education system that was compulsory for all children, but that was not until 1868. Free settlers often advertised for governesses or sent their children to schools such as Horton College established for the children of the landed class. But who was teaching the children of the poor?

In 1848, the *Cornwall Chronicle* reported that 'Of the convict teachers in the Church of England penny-a-day Schools, there are four masters and four mistresses, who are convicts at present, and four masters who have been convicts. Of convict teachers in the Church of Rome penny-a-day Schools, there is one master who is at present a convict, and two masters who have been convicts.' The *Launceston Examiner* of January 1849 reported that 'Eight of the government schoolmasters, recognised teachers of colonial youth, are prisoners holding no indulgence; sixteen more of the same class similarly patronised by his excellency's administration possess tickets-of-leave, &c.! A Petition praying that government will leave Education alone rather than sustain convicts as schoolmasters, presented by Captain Swanston, was disregarded.'

In 1849, the Church of England school at Richmond employed a prisoner and his wife, also a prisoner, as schoolmaster and mistress. The *Colonial Times* reported that the money raised in a penny-a-day school was not enough to keep qualified free teachers in the system, nor the colony. Out of necessity, some schools in Van Diemen's Land employed convicted men and women as teachers and some of our governesses may have been among them.

We cannot know what they taught or how they taught it. But these women were neither conventional nor entirely proper; and perhaps, sometimes, their pupils caught a whiff of their difference.

