

This is an account of a relationship between a female convict servant and her master. Jane Keegan, her Master Mr Thomas and the events leading up to Jane's incarceration, are all a work of fiction. Regardless, there is no denying the possibility that it could be an explanation for *gaps in our records* pertaining to the whereabouts of some convict women. Such women may have disappeared from the official records but they managed to survive in the male dominated and controlled society that was Van Diemen's Land in the early nineteenth century.

Treatment of convicts by their masters – gaps in the records

We have read their stories, been saddened and in awe of their experiences. Every step of their journey to Van Diemen's Land was meticulously documented, from conviction and incarceration, months at sea and assignment. For most descendants of these women there has been an opportunity to learn about the lives of loved ones whose spirits have long gone. But for some women who arrived on the Hobart Town wharf, there are gaps in the records. They somehow slipped through the system and for a time, their whereabouts unknown.

They arrived in a colony where a gender imbalance saw women being greatly outnumbered by and at the mercy of their British captors. Jane Keegan disembarked from her transport ship in Hobart Town and vanished. Six months later she was incarcerated in a Female Factory, charged with absconding, but from where?

Life on board ship for Jane was difficult. She was demure and certainly not unattractive. Unfortunately her shy and unassuming nature was seen by others as haughtiness. As if the target of school yard bullying, her voyage was long and lonely. "She thinks she's just a bit better than the likes of us" said one, and "thinks she's a princess" said another. Unwilling to complain Jane tried to keep out of harm's way, hoping that the next stage of her journey would be a little more bearable.

Waiting patiently for the arrival of Jane's ship was a new comer to Hobart Town. But not just a free settler ready to make his fortune and return to the mother country, this gentleman, who would play a leading role in the administration of the colony, was eagerly awaiting the next batch of women into town. Mr Thomas had arrived a few months earlier, choosing to travel without his wife and family.

Some settlers were more critical of the female convicts than others. One gentleman complained "my domestic servant was recommended for her good character, but she spent her nights out drinking and acting in a depraved manner". Regardless of the backgrounds of these women there was no consideration given as to how and why they found themselves on board a convict ship, and in some instances there were advantages for both master and servant. Female convict servants did not draw a wage, but once assigned to a master had to be provided with the essentials of life. Ladies were an asset in a male dominated society, with convict women particularly in demand for domestic service.

Mr Thomas struggled to maintain a discrete demeanour whilst anxiously studying the new arrivals amidst crowds of men, all jostling for a good position to view the women as came ashore. Jane was only four and a half feet tall and liked to keep her head down. He was on the lookout for a companion following months of living alone. In the early days of

transportation it was not uncommon for these women to be treated as prostitutes and they were taken in by certain residents, under the guise of being for domestic service. So it was that amid the pushing and shoving, Mr Thomas managed to converse with the representative from the convict department. This then was Jane's fate. She was not registered in the usual way and sent with her fellow travellers to the hiring depot, but simply disappeared, as Mr Thomas, pleased with his choice, led her away from the crowded docks, past a wooden church and to his residence in the town.

Some challenged the rules and enjoyed the types of behaviour that have become synonymous with convict women, but Jane did not. Her only crime was to steal a child's petticoat and for that was now faced with the probability of both domestic duties and providing the type of service she had witnessed, and was terrified of, in dark alleyways back home. Perhaps life on board ship was not looking too bad after all. And, what could she do or who could she complain to? As far as the authorities were concerned she did not exist. Jane now had to begin again, work out a new game plan and endeavour to bide her time as best she could, whilst not upsetting the man who, after all, had provided her with new clothes, a warm bed and plenty of food.

The days passed quickly enough, she was a servant and had many chores around the house. Not alone, she was one of three convict domestics in a busy household, where people often visited and parties were held weekly. But there was one difference, as Jane soon noticed the favourable attention she was given by the master. Mr Thomas would watch her work and soon requested her company for a walk in the extensive gardens. After a time, these sojourns became commonplace and Hobartians looked on as Mr Thomas and Jane Keegan enjoyed more and more time in each other's company. Moreover, Jane was

beginning to enjoy the partying and dancing and felt strangely at ease mixing with other assignees and the wives of free settler's alike. She even enjoyed the hospitalities afforded to her as a guest at Government House and went arm in arm, with her Mr Thomas to many social and semi-official engagements. And indeed, Jane could feel at ease, for within this male dominated society, many seemed to turn a blind eye to the indiscretions of married men openly engaging in immoral behaviour. Some even had their wives and children with them in the colony, apparently feeling no shame. Hobart Town was not a thriving metropolis where secrets could remain hidden in the crowds. Also, Hobart Town's reputation was, to say at the least, tarnished. Not only because its population was made up mostly of convicted felons, but because of the not so polite behaviour of some of Her Majesties representatives.

Four months had passed since Jane stepped off her transport ship. From the perspective of those around her, Jane's life must have seemed pretty good for a domestic servant. But, as with her shipboard experience, her relationship with the other household domestics was becoming difficult. Jane was not inclined, as were her fellow workers, to ransack the spirit store and spend her days tipsy. Mr Thomas was becoming moody and inattentive and Jane's situation was becoming intolerable, as it was now obvious to her that she had more to consider than just her own well-being.

Jane was incarcerated within a female factory and her conduct report recorded her as an absconder. This petite and quietly spoken young Irish woman, living far from home and family and considered only useful as a domestic servant or prostitute, now had to prepare for her next challenge, that of motherhood. **That was Jane's story.**

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You will become acquainted with a lady (Emma Carter) in the soon, to be released, *Launceston Female Factory* book. Not unlike the fictional Jane, she too disappeared from the official records, only to re-surface six months later. She was also charged with absconding, but from whom? There is no reason to suggest that her story bears any resemblance to the fictional Jane's experience, but what is beyond doubt is that nineteenth century Van Diemen's Land was largely a man's world, where many wives and free settling women accepted their place as subservient to their men folk; as was the Victorian way. This was a time when the indiscretions of certain men were often ignored, whilst female convicts were considered to be the lowest of the low, prostitutes and socially shunned.

On a brighter note, what is also clear from the historical records is that many convict women made good lives for themselves and their families, some becoming wealthy in their own right. Maria Risley, who arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1804, married Mr Edward Lord in 1808. Mr Lord, once the colonies Chief Executive Officer, became a bigamist when he married Maria, but they both gained financially through mutual business endeavours. Maria also found some degree of social acceptance when on the death of Governor Collins in 1810; she became the first lady of the colony when Lord took on temporary command. But even though it was a man's world with opportunities a plenty, Lord's reputation suffered due to his relationship with a former convict, eventually becoming for him, both politically and socially, a liability¹.

¹ J. Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Black Inc. (Melbourne, 2008), pp. 132 – 133.

Whether reading about the fictional Jane or the real life Maria, it is clear that for convict women in Van Diemen's Land their ability to begin their lives anew whilst surviving in a man's world, reveals the qualities of courage and strength of character often attributed to the men who ruled over them.

Thankyou

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Listed below are some references pertaining to the records of female convicts and how they were treated at the hands of their masters.

Alison Alexander, *Tasmanian Convicts – How Felons Built a Free Society* - desperate times for domestic servants.

Alison Alexander, *Governor's Ladies – The Wives and Mistresses of Van Diemen's Land Governors*.

Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police the Colonization of Women in Australia* – in relation to the reputations of convict women and prostitution.

James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land* - Mr Thomas may well have been a governor and many this book contains many references to governors and their relationships with convict women. Van Diemen's Lands colonial appointees often took mistresses.

More reading about **Victorian Morality** – www.laura-ceniolade/.../8-1-introducation-into-victorian-morality

Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly, Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* – especially chapter 3: Disrupting the Boundaries, with reference to master, servant relationships during the assignment period.

Alex Graeme-Evans, *Tasmanian Rogues and Absconders 1803-1875 (vol 1), New Frontiers*, “In those early days of settlement, if a convict female was pretty and not pregnant another onslaught on her fate would commence...If not promptly chosen by one of the civil establishment to be their mistress or de facto wife on an official ‘assigned servant’, basis, free settlers might choose her, with similar intentions” (p. 29).