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Seminar Paper

**PROSTITUTION AS A RESPONSE BY FEMALE CONVICTS TO THE
TRAUMA OF TRANSPORTATION TO VAN DIEMEN’S LAND:
QUESTIONS AND CASES**

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PROSTITUTION AS A RESPONSE BY FEMALE CONVICTS TO THE TRAUMA OF TRANSPORTATION TO VAN DIEMEN'S LAND: QUESTIONS AND CASES

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Introduction

Between 1804 and 1853, more than 12,000 females were transported to Van Diemen's Land. Most were from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland – the vast majority of them young, ordinary working-class women. Although a fair proportion of them had had a previous conviction, their offences were mostly of a minor nature: petty theft, vagrancy, drunkenness and disorderly behavior. Most of the women were single. Some who had children were able to bring them but most were forced to leave them behind.

How did these women cope with the trauma of being wrenched away from family and friends with little hope of being able to be re-united with them ever again? How did they cope with having to live in the strongly male environment in which they now found themselves? (During the same period, 60,000 male convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land where society was characterized by roughness, drunkenness and violence.)

Alexander (2010, p.63) observes that 'almost all commentators at the time saw female convicts as dreadful, worse behaved than men: rowdy, rebellious, disobedient, drunken, and far too free with their sexual favours.' While complaints such as these undoubtedly sprung from the fact that Victorian expectations for women's behavior were far higher than for men, the evidence suggests that most of the women soon married - and thereafter settled down to orderly, law-abiding lives.

Some women, however, continued to behave badly after arrival in Van Diemen's Land, re-offending in various, sometimes self-destructive, ways, including self-harm, violence, crime, drunkenness, disorderly behavior and prostitution.

Of particular concern in this paper are those women who turned to prostitution. To what extent were these women responding to the trauma ('emotional shock') of their transportation?

Questions

That prostitution occurred in convict-era VDL is not in itself remarkable, of course. To a greater or lesser degree, it has existed in every society from the beginning of time – and it probably

always will. But what is intriguing is the debate over its actual extent and causes in convict-era VDL. This debate gives rise to several important questions:

- How prevalent was prostitution in VDL in the first half of the C19th?
- Was prostitution more prevalent in VDL than in more settled and stable societies?
- What, if any, were the causes of, or reasons for, prostitution in VDL that were unique?
- To what extent can the prevalence of prostitution in VDL be linked directly to the trauma of transportation?

These are complex questions, and clear answers to any of them are unlikely to emerge during this brief seminar. However, raising the questions may help to clarify some of the issues that surround the debate and ultimately bring us closer to the truth. In the hope that their stories might throw light on the questions posed, this paper is illustrated – albeit briefly - with the cases of a number of women who are known to have engaged in prostitution after transportation.

How prevalent was prostitution in VDL in the first half of the C19th?

At the outset, it should be noted that prostitution was not illegal in C19th England. No women were transported to VDL because they were prostitutes. However, many women who had been engaged in prostitution in England were transported for associated crimes such as theft and vagrancy.

Hence, it is fair to say that prostitution was quite prevalent, and certainly visible, in VDL in the convict era. Even a cursory glance at the offences listed on the conduct records of convicts and police reports in newspapers of the times – with their frequent mentions of ‘houses of ill repute’ and ‘nymphs of the *pavé*’ - confirms that.

But how prevalent is ‘quite’ prevalent? And is the assessment of many observers that these were days of widespread moral degeneracy fair?

One difficulty in dealing with this matter soon becomes apparent. As Babette Smith (*Australia's Birthstain*, 2008, p.241) points out, prostitution is frequently in the eye, or the suspicious mind, of the beholder. In this vein, James Boyce (*Van Diemen's Land*, 2008, p.128) asks whether the open relationship of David Collins, VDL's first Lt.-Governor, with Ann Yeates and later with Margaret Eddington, can be seen as moral degeneracy? To what extent can the relationship of William Sorell, Lt-Governor of VDL (1817-1824) with Mrs Louisa Kent be seen as depravity? To what extent can the relationship of Capt John Bowen, the commander of the first settlement on the Derwent, with Martha Hayes be seen as immorality? Boyce (2008) maintains that these relationships were ‘more akin to serial monogamy than degraded vice’ and believes that they better reflect the moral norms of the times.

Boyce (2008) argues that ‘much of the condemnation ... of Van Diemen’s Land has its origin in the evangelical revival of C19th Britain with its rigid belief in the evils of sex outside marriage, whereas society in VDL reflected the values of an earlier era – the late C18th – which had quite a different set of norms.’ Even the Rev. Robert Knopwood, who went to VDL from Port Philip with Collins as chaplain in 1803, turned a blind eye to couples who lived together without marrying. His view, like that of like-minded authorities, appears to have been that it was better for men and women, many of whom had been torn from their partners in England without hope of re-union, to live together openly as husband and wife rather than to resort to a more secretive and degraded lifestyle.

Boyce (2008) observes that one modern historian (Southerwood, 1986) wrote of Van Demonian society as ‘a ‘great mass of vice and corruption’, and that another (O’Farrell, 1969) argued that ‘the moral tone of the settlement was appallingly low; every kind of immorality thrived’. Boyce (2008) quotes Lloyd Robson (*A History of Australia, Vol. 1*, 1985) who believed that ‘convicts and officers lived in a sort of moral anarchy’. Anne Summers (*Damned Whores and God’s Police*, 1975, p. 267) quotes Lt. Ralph Clark, an officer of the NSW marines, who, when he saw the female convicts of *Lady Juliana* disembarking in Sydney in 1790 exclaimed: ‘No, no – surely not! - not more of those damned whores! Never have I known worse women!’

‘Almost all commentators at the time,’ writes Alison Alexander (*Tasmania’s Convicts*, 2010, p.63), ‘saw female convicts as dreadful, worse behaved than men; rowdy, rebellious, disobedient, drunken, and far too free with their sexual favours.’ Men were allowed their little foibles; women were expected to be chaste.

Boyce (2008, p.108) maintains that John Pascoe Fawkner, himself the son of a convict, was ‘one of the few commentators to put the moral character of early Van Diemen’s Land in context’. His view that ‘the prevalence of so much good moral conduct in the face of all this evil’ seems to be a balanced one, thinks Boyce.

Summers (1975) has argued that women in the Australian colonies were stereotyped by a male-dominated society as either ‘damned whores’, whose role was to satisfy men’s sexual urges, or as ‘God’s police’, who, as prim and proper wives, were responsible for keeping men morally upright. Although she perpetuates the notion that many women fell easily into prostitution, she shifts the blame for this situation to men. Earlier commentators had blamed the women themselves.

Taking a more psychological approach, Miriam Dixson (*The Real Matilda*, 1976) postulated that the convict societies of early Australia had given women a ‘crippled self-image’ of themselves. Victimised and castigated, they internalised the images that society had given them, developing low self-esteem – a form of self-harm - and self-loathing. Defined as outcasts, many became outcasts, often acting aggressively and reinforcing their prostitute image.

Reconciling these disparate views is difficult. Perhaps the best that can be said within the scope of this short paper is that the prevalence of prostitution in convict-era VDL needs to be considered more closely – and in the context of the age in which it occurred.

Was prostitution more prevalent in VDL than in more settled and stable societies?

According to historian Judith Walkowitz of Johns Hopkins University, a 19th century European city would commonly have had one prostitute per 36 inhabitants, or one for every twelve adult males. (<http://www.english.uwosh.edu/roth/Prostitution.htm>)

In London in the 1840s, the Police Department claimed that there were 7,000 prostitutes there while the Society for the Suppression of Vice put the figure at about 80,000. Scholars believe that the Society's guess might be closer to the truth. In 1841, Greater London had a population of two million which, by Walkowitz's reckoning, would yield 55,000 prostitutes.

According to figures published by the Parliament of Tasmania in 2010, the total population (free settlers and convicts) in 1853 was 65,000. By Walkowitz's reckoning again, this would mean that 1,800 prostitutes might be expected to have been working there.

Alexander (2010, p.22) analysed the conduct records of a sample of 5048 VDL convicts, with the ratio of men to women the same as the total number of convicts, finding that one per cent of the women were called prostitutes and that another 22 per cent admitted to having been 'on the town', which usually meant working as a prostitute. As the total number of female convicts transported to VDL was just over 12,000, about 2,500 of them might have had some experience of prostitution before arrival, not all of whom would have offended in that way in the colony. These figures seem to suggest that the prevalence of prostitution in VDL was roughly in line with that of other European cities, including London.

What, if any, were the unique causes of, or reasons for, prostitution in convict-era VDL?

In a recent study of prostitution in Scotland (Macleod et al, "Challenging Men's Demand for Prostitution in Scotland", Women's Support Project, 2008), 417 respondents suggested 23 main categories of cause or reason:

- Poverty (debt, no recourse to public funds) (62 mentions)
- Addiction (alcohol/drugs) (57)
- Coercion (pressure or force by partner, trafficking) (48)
- Childhood abuse or neglect (most commonly child sexual abuse) (35)
- Lack of alternatives (no skills, poor education) (29)
- Homelessness (25)
- Family history of prostitution (learned behavior) (16)

- Lack of self-esteem (a form of self-harm) (16)
- Peer pressure ('in with the wrong crowd') (14)
- Hope for a better life (status, giving children better opportunity) (14)
- Demand (by men) (13)
- Attitude of public (cultural acceptance, historical attitudes) (10)
- Family breakdown (9)
- Miscellaneous (reclaiming control, turning the tables, etc) (9)
- Mental health issues (9)
- Easy money (8)
- Survival (8)
- Lack of support networks (isolation, etc) (8)
- Power imbalance (abuse of power, social inequality, men have money) (7)
- Need for love and affection (loneliness, boredom) (6)
- Lack of deterrent (criminal justice system response) (5)
- Media glamorisation (4)
- Learning disability (3)

While this study – and those comparable – have ‘poverty’ (economic necessity?) at the top of the list, it is simplistic to imagine that any one of these is the sole cause of, or reason for, women turning to prostitution. Undoubtedly, there are multiple factors in individual cases.

Although it is possible to suggest other causes and reasons (e.g., Karkov, 2012, cites ‘sexual curiosity’ as a leading cause), it seems likely that this list covers the vast majority of the causes of, and reasons for, prostitution in VDL.

However, in looking for causes and reasons that were *unique* in convict-era VDL, observers have given much attention to the gender imbalance in the infant colony. Smith (2008, p. 208), for instance, refers to the Select Committee established in England in 1812 to enquire into aspects of transportation. Noting that the Committee spent much time discussing prostitution, she quotes from its final Report:

Your Committee feel ... that the women sent out are of the most abandoned description, and that in many instances they are likely to whet and encourage the vices of men ... Much misery and vice are likely to prevail in a society in which the women bear no proportion to the men ... To this, in great measure, the prevalence of prostitution is reasonably to be attributed.

The Report of a second Select Committee (Molesworth, 1837) established in England to investigate the management of convicts delivered a similar devastating condemnation of the convict women sent to the Australian colonies:

... all of them, with scarcely an exception, [are] drunken, abandoned prostitutes; and even were any of them inclined to be well-conducted, the disproportion of the sexes in the penal colonies is so great, that they are

exposed to irresistible temptations ... they are not uncommonly employed as public prostitutes.

Today, however, many would argue that the disproportion of the sexes in VDL was not in itself a cause of, or reason for, the extent of prostitution there but, rather, a condition in which the causes and reasons suggested in the list above, and elsewhere, were able to exist. It was very much a patriarchal society. Most women lived in economic subjugation, their skills often overlooked and their productive capacity and output largely ignored. .

To what extent can the prevalence of prostitution in VDL be linked directly to the trauma of transportation?

It seems reasonable to assert that many of the women who turned to prostitution in VDL might have led very different lives had they not been transported. But to what extent was their prostitution a response to the trauma of prostitution? Is a direct link evident? An examination of the lives of some women who were charged with prostitution offences in VDL might help to answer these questions.

CASE 1: Johanna Lynch (*Janus/Princess Charlotte*, 1820)

At the age of 21, she was convicted of the theft of ‘two cloaks and a petticoat’, the property of her employer, in her native Co. Waterford, Ireland. She was put aboard *Janus* which reached Sydney with its cargo of 104 women – about half English, half Irish - on 3 March 1820. Quizzed after disembarkation, all of the women reported that they had been well treated. But it soon became apparent that this might *not* have been the case when two of the women were found to be pregnant. One claimed that the master of the ship was responsible for her condition, the other that it was his chief mate. Both women admitted that that they had spent much time in the cabins of these men and that they had lived willingly in ‘a state of prostitution’ with them during the voyage.

A subsequent inquiry, ordered by Gov. Macquarie, found that the master, his mate and others of the crew had been guilty of ‘gross impropriety’ and that they had made ‘insufficient exertions’ to prevent the licentious behavior that had occurred. Evidence was given also that many of the women ‘were as determined to communicate with the sailors as they themselves were’ with the women.

Although a number of women were named at the inquiry, Johanna was not among them. In fact, two Catholic priests who came out as passengers on *Janus* swore that none of the Irish women had participated in any way in what had occurred. Nevertheless, for some of the younger and more vulnerable women aboard, it must have been a terrifying experience. Although little is

known about Johanna's life before transportation, she seems to have had no previous convictions and to have led a blameless life.

Within weeks, she and a number of the other women were transferred to Hobart. Shortly after her arrival there, she was cohabiting with a convict by the name of Cavanagh, well known to police as a 'dangerous ruffian'. By early 1826, she had given birth to three children by him.

At this point, her life might have continued to go well. But, in May 1826 Cavanagh was killed, foolishly and needlessly, in a street fight and her life spiralled out of control. The Hobart census of 1826 lists her three children among those in Hobart 'having only a mother living'. A notation beside their names reads: 'Mother a prostitute'. During the next fifteen years she was charged with a range of offences from drunkenness and theft to being the maintainer of a 'bawdy house'. She was gaoled frequently. She died after a lingering illness in October 1841. She was 43 years old.

Why had her life taken the course it had? Why did she choose prostitution? Could she not have chosen a different path? Was it economic necessity? Was there no other way to provide for her children after her husband's untimely death? Alexander (2010, p.63) makes the point that female convicts had some advantages that their male counterparts did not; there were fewer of them and there was a great demand for them in their traditional roles as wives and domestic servants.

Had the *Janus* experience shown her that prostitution offered better protection and the promise of favours – as, indeed, it had for the women who had shared the cabins of the master and his mate? Was it alcohol addiction?

CASE 2: Ellen Wilson (*Arabian*, 1847)

She was 60 years of age when she arrived in VDL. A widow and the mother of three children, she had been convicted in Cork, Ireland, for the theft of a shirt, and sentenced to transportation for seven years. She had been convicted previously for stealing potatoes. Her gaol report describes her as 'quiet'. A housemaid, she was 5 feet 1¼ inches tall with black hair, a sallow complexion and a large nose and mouth. A notation on her conduct record reads: 'Very much wrinkled'.

On 20 March 1848, she was found guilty of 'being in a Water Closet with a man for an immoral purpose' and sentenced to three months hard labour at the Hobart Female Factory. On 21 May 1848, she was given a ticket-of-leave. In September 1848, she was sentenced again, this time for 'neglect of duty', an offence for which she served another four months hard labour. Thereafter, she slipped from the pages of history.

How can her 'immoral' act be accounted for? Was it a response to the trauma of transportation? Was it economic necessity in her case? (The charge of 'neglect of duty' suggests that she was employable.) Easy money? Loneliness? Lack of self-esteem? A combination of these?

CASE 3: Bridget Murphy (*Arabian*, 1847)

Convicted of larceny in Kerry, Ireland, for the theft of a cloak and sentenced to transportation for seven years, she was 20 years old and single when she arrived in VDL. A country servant, she was described as being 5'5" tall, with a 'large head', a 'large sharp nose' and a 'large mouth which she keeps half-open'.

Possibly un-assignable because of her appearance and attitude, she spent most of the early years of her servitude at Brickfields, Cascades FF, Hobart FF and on the hulk 'Anson'. Her only brief assignment – in early 1852 – lasted two weeks. Her conduct record lists a string of offences – most involving disorderly conduct, indecent language and assault - between the time of her arrival and the granting of her ticket-of-leave in 1851; she was gaoled with hard labour frequently. She was gaoled twice in 1852 – first for 'disturbing the peace by fighting' and later for being 'out after hours'. In 1853, after being freed 'by servitude', her offences continued. In 1863, she was gaoled for being 'idle and disorderly'.

In 1864, she was convicted of being a 'common prostitute' and sent to gaol for another month. In March 1877, now living at Westbury under the name 'Brewer' – although there is no record of her having married - she was gaoled again for being 'idle and disorderly'. Her last recorded offence was in February 1877 when, at Launceston and using the names 'Brewer' and 'Hempby', she was gaoled for 'vagrancy'. The date of her death is unknown.

Is low self-esteem sufficient to account for Bridget's wayward lifestyle? Would her life have been different had she not been transported? Was she responding to the trauma of transportation in the way she conducted herself, or was she simply what some people today might call a 'hard nut'?

CASE 4: Anne Burnes (*Greenlaw*, 1844)

She was 19 years old when she arrived in VDL, having been convicted in Ireland of stealing a surplice from a church and sentenced to transportation for seven years. She admitted to having had a previous conviction for 'stealing clothes' and to having been 'on the town' for two years. She was 5'2" tall, with a small nose and mouth and a 'freckled' complexion.

A nursemaid, she was assigned to a settler upon arrival but sentenced to a month's gaol in 1846 when she was discovered 'under a shed with Constable Wicks for an improper purpose'. Later

that same year, and again the following year, she was charged with 'absconding' and served time in the Launceston Female Factory. In 1847, she was sentenced to 14 days solitary confinement for 'insolence'.

In early 1848, she married a 27 year-old ex-convict at Longford and, for some years, appears to have stayed out of trouble. However, after moving to Melbourne with her husband in the early 1860s, her difficulties resurfaced. In March 1863, she was arrested and charged with 'disorderly conduct' when she and her husband 'brought their matrimonial differences under the notice of the public in Lt. Bourke Street.' Although she was excused without penalty, her husband was fined six shillings for the incident. Two years later, still in Melbourne, she was fined ten shillings when arrested for 'disorderly conduct', this time as a prostitute. Her last recorded offence was in 1869 when she was again fined ten shillings for 'insulting behaviour'. Nothing is known of her life after this time.

It's interesting to note that Ann's first conviction for prostitution did not occur until after she had been in VDL for nearly twenty years. Can it be seen as a response to the trauma of transportation? Is it not more likely that it was a response to the unsatisfactory, and possibly abusive, relationship with her husband?

CASE 5: Ann Green (*St Vincent*, 1850)

When she was arrested for drunkenness in September 1864, a police report which appeared in *The Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, noted that she was 'a very old offender who has, for the past 5 or 6 years, been doing 9 months out of every 12 in gaol'.

She had been convicted for stealing a watch in her native London in 1849. She had admitted to two previous convictions for felonies and five for drunkenness, disorderly behavior and indecent conduct. A house servant, she was 4'11¼" tall and of swarthy complexion. She had a large mole on her chin.

From the time of her first arrival she was in trouble with the law. Between April 1850 and October 1854, she had been arrested nine times for offences including disobedience of orders, drunkenness, being absent without leave, using threatening language, out after hours and insolence. She had been sent to the Cascades Female Factory to serve time with hard labour on each occasion.

In 1854, a convict by the name of Thomas Earnest applied for permission to marry her, but no record of the marriage actually having taken place has been found. Nevertheless, the years between 1854 and 1860 appear to have been calm ones for her. In 1856, she was granted her Certificate of Freedom.

But in 1860, she was arrested in Campbell Town and charged with being a common prostitute and sent to gaol with hard labour for three months. For the same offence she was arrested in 1861, and served another two months in detention. Her last recorded conviction was in 1865, this time for being idle and disorderly.

Was her apparent addiction to alcohol the main reason for her unruly behavior?

Conclusion

In this brief examination of the lives of only five female convicts, there is inconclusive evidence to assert positively that there is a strong and direct link between prostitution and the trauma of transportation.

Rather, it seems likely that there were multiple causes or reasons: the social conditions from which the women came, their previous 'on the town' experience (in some cases), alcoholism, low self-esteem, loneliness, physical and mental abuse by a partner, poverty, economic subjugation and others – all indubitably compounded by the trauma of transportation.

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