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THE ADVENTURES OF A BROTHEL KEEPER: BAD GIRL BESS AND POLLY THE NIPPER

This paper was presented to Female Convicts Research Centre Seminar, 'Succeeding in the regular economy: the aftermath of convict sentences', Saturday 9 May 2015, Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania, Hobart.

This is a much abbreviated version of a longer, fully referenced paper to be published later in 2015.

Mary Ann Hunter was also known as Mary Ann Wilson as well as a variety of other names. But the name by which she was most commonly known was 'Polly the Nipper'. Of course, we might wonder just how Polly earned such a nick-name. She already had a notoriously bad name in Melbourne. And upon moving to Ballarat during the 1860s was regarded as one of the 'worst and lowest prostitutes in Ballarat'.

Late on Saturday night, 13 June 1868, Polly was at her place of employment in Esmond Street, Ballarat, when a client arrived. They went to bed, as one does, in that line of work, and eventually, they fell asleep. Upon awaking in the morning the man was shocked to find Polly lying beside him stone dead. He hurriedly dressed and left the house, and was not heard of again.

The police were called, not an unusual occurrence for that house in Esmond Street, and an inquest was subsequently conducted. The verdict was that Polly had died of a 'severe attack of laryngitis'. Well, Polly the Nipper, nipped no longer.

Polly's employer was known in Ballarat as Betsy Buckley, because her defacto husband was called George Buckley. Betsy and George Buckley had moved to Ballarat in the mid-1860s and established their brothel in Esmond Street, after Melbourne became too hot for them. The Esmond Street neighbours were not impressed. Apart from Polly the Nipper, Betsy Buckley employed a host of other girls. There was Fanny Foster – who was notorious for using the most obscene language imaginable whenever the police came to collect her; and there was also Topsy, who was described as a coloured girl, and who was one day found plucking a goose suspected of being stolen. There was also Elizabeth Taylor, who was one day caught relieving a client of his cash, but then decided to turn witness for the prosecution against the Buckley's to avoid her own prosecution. The Buckley's were not impressed when they spent three months in gaol and Miss Taylor was set free. Not surprisingly Miss Taylor's windows were soon smashed.

There was always something unpleasant going on. If it wasn't the neighbours calling the police, it was the clients who shouted 'Murder! Police' after they discovered they had been relieved of their cash.

Sometimes the police laid charges that were successfully prosecuted and Betsy and her girls spent a few weeks in gaol. But, on an equal number of times, the charges were dismissed because of lack of evidence – usually because the complainant was too drunk to give reliable evidence, or because the alleged offenders were too drunk to have committed the crime.

Relieving her clients of their cash by putting her hand in their trouser pockets – both while the trousers were being worn and while they were not – was a technique Betsy had perfected many years earlier in Launceston, and it was in Launceston in 1860 that Betsy first met George Buckley.

Buckley was a bad character who had been transported for seven years in 1850. But constant misdemeanors meant his sentence was extended again and again, and he did not receive a ticket of leave until 1860. He quickly put his limited freedom to good use when he met Betsy. By November 1860 she had given birth to a daughter. They named her Rosanna Buckley. George Buckley was registered as the father, but Betsy gave her name as Betsy McHugh even though she had been officially married to one Robert Richardson since 1851. But we will come to Robert Richardson shortly.

Despite being granted a conditional pardon in March 1861, two months later, George Buckley was back in prison. And, as the old saying goes, 'While George is away Betsy will play', and Betsy took up with one George Wilson, and quickly learned how to seduce men in the pubs of Launceston by getting them drunk, then searching their pockets for cash. After a few successful attempts, they were caught, and remanded to await their trial.

In the meantime George Buckley was released and, with Betsy in prison, he promptly accused Sarah Bell, his neighbour, of stealing not only his money, but his also trousers. The case was dismissed when the trousers were found out in the street.

When Betsy's turn came to appear in court in September 1861, she wept bitterly in front of the magistrate, and pleaded to be allowed to be with her children. Not only was there young Rosanna, born the year earlier, but it was now revealed that she had at least two other older children.

Indeed, Betsy had at least four other children. But to understand where they came from we now need to go back to the beginning.

Betsy McHugh was born around 1831 at Gibraltar, but by her teenage years she was living at Manchester and working in a factory. In 1849 she was caught receiving stolen goods and spent six months in prison. A year later she was caught stealing a pair of boots and transported for seven years.

Betsy arrived at Hobart on 10 August 1851 and within eight weeks was given approval to marry convict carpenter Robert Richardson. Despite Robert's original conviction for stealing a watch and some carpentry tools from his employer, he seems to have been

quite a decent man, and was granted a ticket of leave only two weeks after arriving in Hobart in 1850. Betsy McHugh and Robert Richardson married at Hobart in December 1851.

Very quickly Robert Richardson may have wondered what he had done. Betsy regularly went absent without leave, and spent months at a time back at the house of correction. By 1853 they had moved to South Brunni Island where Richardson used his joinery skills to build boats, and Betsy used hers to give birth to their first child, who was named Thomas. A second child named Robert was born early in 1855.

In September 1855, Richardson was accused of stealing a boat. He claimed he had built the boat, but the owners had abandoned it. So, he figured it was his. When the owners tried to take possession of the boat, Betsy stood in the prow defiantly holding her four month old baby, and refused to move.

The altercation with the wealthy boat owners led to nocturnal assaults on the Hobart waterfront, and Richardson clearly thought he should leave for safer places, and by early 1856 he disappears from the record – he possibly moved to Geelong where he worked as a carpenter. Betsy however, now pregnant with a third child, was sent back to the House of Correction. Her two boys were admitted to the Orphan School, in January 1857. She gave birth to the third son, named Charles, at the Brickfields Nursery in February 1857.

Betsy left the House of Correction later in 1857 and returned south where, in Robert's absence, she took up with Thomas Maddocks. In November 1858, with Maddocks as the father, Betsy gave birth to a fourth child who was named John William Maddocks.

Early in 1859 Betsy, Maddocks, and at least three of the children went to live at Green Ponds. However, things were not looking good and not only did young John William die "from want of nourishment" in September 1859, but in February 1860, Betsy absconded leaving the other boys in the care of neighbours. They were readmitted to the Orphan School.

From Green Ponds, Betsy headed north to Launceston, and it was there that she met George Buckley, and gave birth to Rosanna in November 1860.

Buckley and Betsy moved from Launceston to Melbourne early in 1862, and continued their trade of seducing men in pubs and relieving them of their money. Soon they employed other girls to do it for them. Of course, these activities did not always work to plan, and Buckley and Betsy were just as frequently before the court in Melbourne, as they had been in Launceston.

With her parents spending more and more time in prison, in December 1864, young Rosanna was made a ward of the state, and admitted to the new Industrial School in Melbourne for a term of seven years. In September 1865 Buckley was sent to prison for

three months. In the same month, Rosanna was transferred to the Geelong Industrial School, and in November Betsy was sentenced to one month in prison for larceny.

When Buckley and Betsy were released from prison early in 1866 they moved to Ballarat, where Betsy promptly set up business in Esmond Street, employing a range of girls, including the infamous Polly the Nipper. Buckley was almost immediately arrested for highway robbery, but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. Within months, Esmond Street had become notorious, and the Ballarat newspaper headed their reports with words like: "Esmond Street Again". In December 1866, the headline was "A Foul Den" when the *Ballarat Star* reported that Buckley and Betsy had been sentenced to yet another six months in prison.

Betsy failed to appear in court in June 1867 in a case against Mary Ann Smith. However both Betsy and Buckley certainly appeared in court in mid June on yet another charge of relieving a client of both money and trousers, and were both given another three months. Almost immediately on her release, Betsy was in court again on a charge of having no lawful visible means of support.

George Buckley went to Melbourne and by November was again caught stealing and was sentenced to another three months. By February 1868 he was caught again and this time received three years in prison with hard labour. In September of that year, Rosanna, now aged seven, was transferred from Geelong to the Ballarat Industrial School.

At the end of 1871, when she was eleven, Rosanna was discharged from the school, but in the absence of her mother, she was immediately readmitted for another four years. An entry on Rosanna's record with the Industrial School states 'Mother dead' and suggests this information was provided by Buckley on 18 March 1872.

In February 1873 Rosanna was licensed out to work for Thomas Taylor, a draper of Bridge Street, Ballarat; and in May she went to work for farmer Charles McRae, at Clunes.

George Buckley went to Melbourne and by 1875 he was serving yet another twelve month sentence for vagrancy. He died in the Geelong Gaol in August 1875.

It appears that Rosanna became pregnant while at McRae's, and gave birth to a boy, whom she named George Buckley, in 1876. Betsy's older boys eventually left the Hobart Orphan School, married and had families, the descendants of whom still live in Tasmania.

**Female Convicts Research Centre
Seminar
Succeeding in the regular economy: the aftermath of convict sentences
Saturday 9 May 2015
Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania, Hobart**

9:30 Registration

9:45 Welcome

10.00 Session 1: Marriage as an arbiter of success

Chair: Trudy Cowley

- James Parker, "Could marriage change convict women, as the authorities believed? Could it increase their economic security?"
- Ros Escott, "Far from Jane Austen's World: the importance of marrying well"
- Jennifer Garvey, "The Next Generation: a convict daughter makes good"

11.00 Short break

11.15 Session 2: The up-and-down fortunes of Publicans

Chair: Dianne Snowden

- Alison Alexander, "Women at the bar: ex-convict publicans"
- Meredith Hodgson, "I am still keeping the same house as when I last wrote I am keeping out of debt but saving no money"
- Ian Leader-Elliott, "Colonially Convicted Innkeeper turned Litigant: Catherine Connelly"

12.30 Lunch

1.15 Session 3: A land of opportunity

Chair: Julie Henderson

- Douglas Wilkie, "The adventures of a Brothel Keeper: Bad Girl Bess and Polly the Nipper"
- Deb Norris, "From Ireland to the Huon Valley of Van Diemen's Land: Ellen Talbot's contribution to building a community"
- Fiona McFarlane, "What Lies Beneath: Some of the best discoveries require a little digging... An Archivist's journey of exploration through the records at the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office"

2.15 General discussion of the seminar theme

Chair: Lucy Frost

2.45 Close

3.00 Business Meeting of the Female Convicts Research Centre (all welcome)