



My granddaughter trying on an unfinished convict bonnet

The town they left behind: Convict women from the Fair City of Perth, Scotland.

By Lillian MacDonald

November 2015

I have to admit to being a novice when it comes to researching convict history. In fact we, as a family, are relative newcomers to Tasmania. There will be many of you here today with far greater expertise and I hope to learn from you. Here the legacy of convict settlement is all around us, but if I had remained in Scotland I would never have given these women a second thought. Transportation was something that occurred elsewhere, in England and certainly Ireland.

I came to my current research project by accident. I had heard that Christina Henri was organising an event down at the wharf at which people would be asked to wear servant's bonnets to commemorate the women convicts. I had made a couple of bonnets in the past, so I thought I would make two or three more and perhaps cajole my daughter and granddaughter to come along.

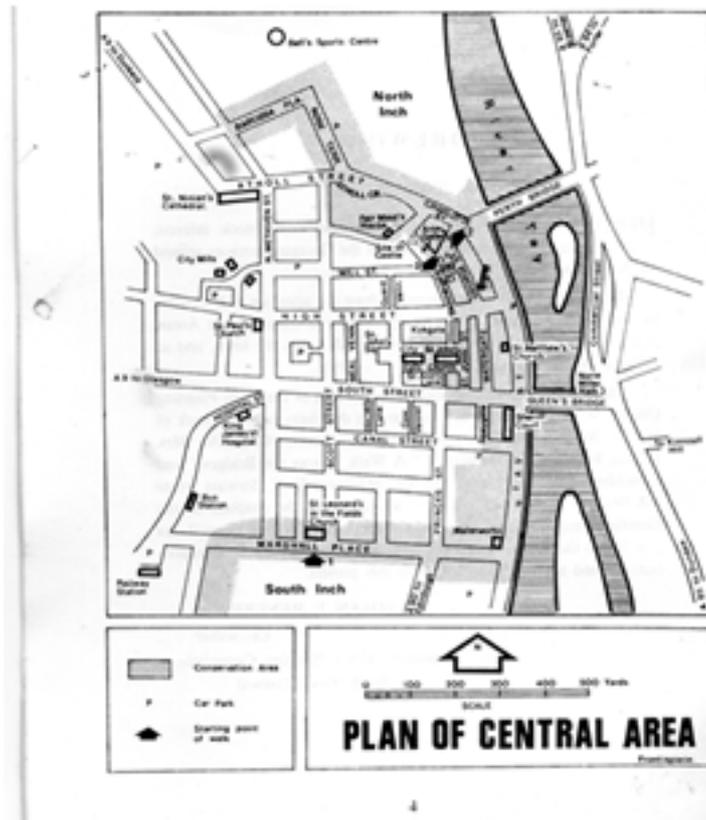
When I reached the point of embroidering names on the new bonnets I was stuck. I had no specific convicts to commemorate.

It occurred to me, then, that if I searched the lists, I might find one or two women from my home town of Perth, in Scotland and use their names. So I started my search and I ended up with 191 names of women who had been sentenced to transportation from Perth. 21 of

these had been born or had lived in Perth itself. To say that I was surprised and shocked would be an understatement!!

I was born and raised there myself. I lived there for the first fifteen years of my life and returned there when I was married for a further six years. I thought I knew the history of the town from my schooldays. We were taught to be proud of our heritage. Yet I had never heard anything about women being sent 'beyond the seas' from the High Court sittings there. This was probably not considered a topic for polite society and it seems to me that their names and their history have been expunged from the city's collective memory.

Perth



A number of you here today will have visited or lived in Scotland and may know Perth well. For any who are unfamiliar with the city, this map shows that the modern grid differs very little from the medieval town with the two main thoroughfares of the South Street and High Street predominant. The River Tay flows to the east and the bridges form a link to the suburbs of Bridgend, Barnhill and Kinnoull. Perth was and is a prosperous market town.

Perth in the 19th century

The mid nineteenth century saw Queen Victoria on the throne and her interest in Scotland sparked a revival in what were regarded as traditions and the creation of new schemes to idealise these. Sir Walter Scott was admired for his novels. Landseer painted glens populated by tags. This was the romantic image.

There was an uglier truth. Industrialisation was transforming centres such as Glasgow and Dundee into over-crowded slum cities, with expanding populations crammed into insanitary, disease-ridden tenements.

The Fair City of Perth has an ancient history, perhaps dating from Roman times. Its streets have seen the trade guilds of the middle ages, the riots following the preaching of John Knox and the passage of the Jacobite armies. Perth in the nineteenth century had rich farmlands and country estates surrounding it. The patronage of landowners, such as the Earl of Mansfield at Scone Palace, boosted the wealth of the community. The Provost, William Marshall, was aware of the New Town developments in Edinburgh and aspired to the same Georgian settings for Perth. He commissioned the terraces which still stand alongside the parklands of the North and South Inches.



St. Leonards in the Fields Church (built 1885) with Marshall Place and Georgian Terraces built around the early years of the 19th century



The Georgian Terraces of Rose Crescent built in the 19th Century still stand overlooking the North Inch

The town was progressive. The scourge of cholera prompted the construction of a waterworks building near the South Inch in 1832. Water drawn from a well on Moncrieffe Island in the river was pumped here and provided a safe supply. The Sheriff Court buildings had been completed on Tay Street in 1819, in the classical Greek style. The High Court of Justiciary of Scotland met here twice a year in spring and in autumn. This is where the women convicts would have faced their judge and perhaps a jury of fifteen men.



The county buildings (built in 1819) holding the Sheriff Court and the semi-circular court room used by the High Court of justiciary



Perth Bridge seen from Rose Crescent and the North Inch

To further promote the sophistication of the city a domed Art Gallery and Museum was built in 1824. Beside this, the first major bridge over the river had been constructed in the late 18th century.

The harbour at Perth brought in a variety of cargoes. While there was no major industrialisation in the city, two whisky distillers had set up their businesses. Flax and cotton were spun and woven and bleached in mills on the outskirts of the town



Old mill buildings at Stanley on the outskirts of Perth

In 1848 the firm of Pullars opened a dyeworks which became one of the largest in the world. By the 1850s banks, friendly societies and charitable institutions had opened offices in

Perth. Civic pride was further boosted by the construction of St. Ninian's Episcopal Cathedral in 1850.



Victorian Gothic: St. Ninian's Cathedral (1850)

The city was well-served with churches. Charity for the poor had always been part of their mission. Under the new Act of 1845 this was formalised with the Parish Councils taking responsibility for the 'deserving poor' who had a claim, through birth, marriage or long residence upon their help. Money from bequests and collections was to be used for this purpose. But, while this system of Parish relief offered help to the destitute and those suffering disease, for those who were able-bodied, fit to work but fell upon hard times, there was no assistance. They would be classified as vagrants or beggars—an embarrassment to respectable citizens. There was a palpable sense of prosperity in the town. Sir Walter Scott wrote "The Fair Maid of Perth". In 1842, according to local press reports, the town was excited by an idea which caused, in the words of the writer 'an enthusiasm of the most animated and devoted kind, a tumultuous paroxysm of joy' when news came that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were to visit in September of that year.



**Cobbled streetscape in central Perth around the 19th century
Medieval traces 19th century**



Map of the city in 1774

There was, however, a darker side to this picture. The centre of the town still held echoes of its medieval past. Here narrow lanes, wynds and vennels connected the main streets. Here housing was cramped and dingy. The names of the Meal Vennel, the Skinnergate and the Watergate were synonymous with decaying properties and poverty.

The great Church of St. John had dominated the centre of the town in medieval times and these narrow streets grew around this hub. In this area were the taverns and the brothels. Here cholera outbreaks occurred. Here the respectable citizens preferred to turn their eyes away.



St. John's Church Perth: Founded in medieval times by the 19th century a lack of funds for maintenance meant that three congregations worshipped within the building.

The convict women

And so we come to the convict women who called Perth their home. The number is small when considered as part of the grand total of those transported. The 21 women from Perth were tried in the High Court. 17/21 faced 7 years transportation. 2/21 faced ten years. One woman was sentenced to 14 years for fraud and one to life for infanticide. This child (for she was probably still in her teens) drowned her baby son in the river at Dundee 'because she had no means of caring for him'.

In 19/21 cases their crime was theft. For 5 of these women the items stolen had some major intrinsic value such as sums of money or items of jewellery. The remaining 14 convictions for theft range from the stealing of a handkerchief, through gowns, shawls, a wheelbarrow, a bucket and a blanket. In 20/21 cases the women had previous convictions for theft. The greatest numbers of the women were sentenced in the decade between 1840 and 1850.

Two of the 21 women brought children with them to Van Diemen's land. 15 of them married or re-married in Tasmania. There are records of the deaths of 8 of the 21 women. 2 died within 3 years of reaching Hobart. The remaining 6 lived on the island for between 18 and 46 years.

Most of their 'crimes' would seem to present day society to be petty, but repeated convictions and periods of imprisonment brought them to the dock of the High Court. The location of their homes and haunts is significant as the names of insalubrious streets and venues recur in pre-transportation data.

What these women represented was a stain upon the good name and reputation of the 'Fair City'. For 2 of the 21 an addiction to liquor further destroyed any suggestion of respectability. The description of 'a wandering beggar' was applied to another. Another seems to have been working as a prostitute. The worthy citizens would have been glad to be shot of them from the city streets. The further away they could be sent the better.

Conclusion

The topic of this seminar asks what convict women brought with them as well as what they left behind. I would suggest that the women from Perth may have brought a sense of rejection and grievance, in that their respectable city had expelled them. Around them there, there was prosperity. There was obvious relative wealth. In a fairly small town these women would have been living in the middle of this civic affluence. So I would propose that contrasts within their immediate society could influence the attitude of convict women to their fate. These women had been condemned for refusing to accept the depth of their sins and thus were denied salvation except by paying a price through the trials of exile.

My feeling at the moment and my rationale for starting this research project is a sense of embarrassment—if not shame—that these women from the east coast of Scotland were considered so unworthy by a respectable populace that they were sent to Tasmania to be forgotten.

I keep returning to the cases of two women at the polar extremes of 19th century society. One, Mary Dougall, who was brought up in Perth, arrived here in Hobart in April 1842, sentenced to seven years penitence for the theft of a handkerchief. The other, the Queen, Victoria, drove through triumphal arches in September 1842, to receive the keys to the city of Perth from the Lord Provost. According to accounts she was cheered by the entire population as she made her royal progress through the city.

So while Mary Dougall served her time as a prisoner of her Majesty in Hobart, Victoria Regina slept at Scone Palace as the guest of the Earl of Mansfield. The contrast between the circumstances of these two women could not have been more extreme.