

Miss Leakey's Port Arthur Sojourn

A most striking representation of the female convict experience in Van Diemen's Land is contained the novel *The Broad Arrow* written by Caroline Leakey.¹ This work of fiction predated the serial publication of the more famous *For the Term of His Natural Life* by Marcus Clarke by eleven years.² Both books found a ready audience. This short paper considers Caroline Leakey's extended stay at the parsonage at Port Arthur on her fictional account of convict life.

The Broad Arrow portrays the life of Maida Gwynnham, a literate young lady who fell from grace in the arms of a cad. She covered for his crime of forgery and was transported for infanticide: a crime she did not commit. Her baby died of starvation due to the extreme poverty of her reduced circumstances. Maida was sentenced to life when she had wished for death and her narrative, presented in parallel to several families with which she is associated as a convict, offers a precise and detailed insight into social and family life in the colony. Maida, the pitiful convict heroine, is put to work as housemaid, parlourmaid, cook, and to wait on the dining table during her term in the Evelyn household.³ She is never asked to mind the baby for, having a life term for infanticide, the lady of the house distrusted her. Her story plays out and despite some kindness it is one of woe, shame and condemnation. The author resists a romantic happy ending and Maida dies in the colonial convict hospital resolute, dignified and innocent to the end. Insanity, arising from guilt, is the fate of her former lover.

A remarkable aspect of Leakey's novel is that the author worked with 'vivid details of convict oppression and brutality'⁴ that were not challenged as false or extreme, then or since. Miranda Morris notes Leakey's novel displays 'a good understanding of the lives of women ... both convict and free'.⁵ Leakey stayed in a number of houses during her stay in Tasmania during which time she was unwell but alert enough to study the local living habits and situations. Researchers and scholars have used *The Broad Arrow* as a work of social history, unsurprisingly given acknowledgement that the novel is embedded in the daily life of convict Tasmania in the early 1850s. At the very outset of the book, Walsh, the publisher, notes:

'The Board Arrow' was written by a lady long resident in Hobart Town, who, from her position, had access to sources of information from which others were debarred, and who, therefore, has been able to weave into her story facts as startling and terrible as any creations of fiction... this story has an added interest from the introduction, under slightly changes names, of real persons who cannot fail to be recognized.⁶

Caroline Woolmer Leakey, although resident in Tasmania for only five years, is enough of note to have an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, the *Tasmanian Index of Significant Women* and the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*.

Again according to Morris,⁷ who drew on various biographical references, Caroline Leakey was born on 8 March 1827 at Exeter, England. She was the fourth daughter and sixth of eleven children of painter, James Leakey and his wife Eliza Woolmer. Caroline grew up in a deeply religious home and ill health, for herself and others in the family, was to be a dominant feature of her life.

Caroline left England to join her sister Eliza in Tasmania. Eliza, her husband Reverend Joseph Gould Medland and their child lived in Hobart Town. Medland held a chaplaincy post with the convict department and was part of a learned protestant social set led by Bishop Nixon. Eliza was expecting her second child and the intention was that the unmarried 20 year old Caroline would support her to avoid the necessity of a convict nursemaid. Caroline arrived in Hobart Town in January 1848 and seems to have enjoyed a period of good health in which she was able to visit and get about as well as assist her sister. But this did not last and after 12 months in the colony her health failed and she again became an invalid.

Caroline Leakey spent time in the company of Bishop Nixon, his wife Anna Maria Woodcock and their large family. Nixon purchased Bishopstowe [now Runnymede] in 1850 and it appears that Joseph Medland leased his former home Boa Vista and the family, including Caroline, then lived there. It is from Boa Vista that much of Leakey's poetry was written. According to JC Horner's biographical notes, 'though confined to the [Medland] house she was able to observe the children and servants of the household, while [her] particular concern was the colony's medical and hospital care.'⁸

In November 1851 Leakey's health improved and she travelled to Port Arthur to stay with friends, Rev Thomas Boothby Garlick and his wife Ann, at Port Arthur. There, in a visit that lasted 12 months, she absorbed the sights and sounds of the convict settlement. Interestingly, while she was there Ann Garlick was delivered of a daughter who was named Caroline but that is another story.⁹

Her health again deteriorated on her return to Hobart Town and medical advice was that she return to England. She departed Tasmania aboard the *Australasia* in March 1853. Gillian Winter notes that Leakey did not leave her cabin for the entire three month voyage.¹⁰ Her later life in England was one of religious and family devotion, ill health for herself and care for her aging parents when well enough, and charitable and educational works when her health and resources permitted. Her constant ill health resulted in overconsumption of both laudanum and alcohol which each influenced her physical and mental state.¹¹ She published a book of poetry, having earlier been encouraged to do so by Bishop Nixon and Caroline, Lady Denison both of whom are acknowledged in the volume.¹² Leakey was a devout woman dedicated to her family and to 'good works'. *The Broad Arrow* is her only novel. Her later writings were religious tracts and occasional stories for religious publications.

Leakey's novel draws strongly on colonial social life and Gillian Winter and Shirley Walker each describes it as a primary social document'.¹³ Winter notes many of the characters in *The Broad Arrow* are portraits of colonial figures: Dr James Wilson Agnew medical officer and later politician was Dr Lamb, Joseph Medland [Leakey's brother in law] was Rev Herbert Evelyn, her young nephew Joseph was the child Charlie Evelyn and Rev Thomas Garlick was Rev Harellick. Governor Denison and his wife were portrayed as the Denmans. And, the invalid Emmeline bears some resemblance to Leakey herself. It seems Leakey also borrowed from other authors for the courtship details of convict servants Lucy and Robert in *The Broad Arrow* bear a similarity to the published account by Louisa Anne Meredith of the circumstances in Meredith's own household at *Riversdale*.¹⁴ Leakey and Meredith would have been acquainted as the Merediths were also part of the literate and artistic protestant set.

As I've already noted, Caroline Leakey stayed in Port Arthur about a year, in 1851-52, residing in the parsonage. The settlement was a bustling community if an unevenly structured one. Coutlman Smith notes it was dominated by men: convicts, soldiers, warders and administrative officers.¹⁵ Females living at Port Arthur were almost exclusively the wives of officers and administrators of the convict department or their daughters. Access to the entire peninsula was only possible with the permission of the Lieutenant Governor and daily life was strictly supervised. Free people in Port Arthur attempted to live as normal a life as was possible in its remote and institutionalised environment. The near environment of the parsonage in the early 1850s was of an English garden. The Officers' Gardens, where the ladies walked, built largely as a result of the planning and interest of William Champ who was commandant from 1844-1848, held ornamental trees, rose gardens and borders of English flowers, with long paths giving vistas of the gardens and the water.¹⁶

Champ had been replaced by Lt George Courtney in 1848 and Courtney was still in the post of superintendent at the time of Miss Leakey's visit. He had commenced his tenure with complaints about every aspect of his role,¹⁷ but by 1851 administrative life had again settled into an institutional pattern. According to Maggie Wiedenhofer,¹⁸ '... prisoners in chains were a common sound and sight': as evoked in the novel.

The parsonage was built c 1840 and was the only double storey residence in the Port Arthur settlement. It was part of the row of houses known as Civil Officers' Row which stood next to the convict church. Walter Pridmore suggests the double storey construction was reflective of the status of the clergyman.¹⁹ Its first occupant was the Wesleyan minister Rev John Allen Manton who took up residence in 1842. Its most notable residents were Rev George Eastman and his large family. Eastman arrived in 1858 from his former post at the Ross Female Factory and remained until his death in 1870.²⁰ He was then reputed to haunt the residence. The parsonage was destroyed by fire in 1895 and rebuilt then used as the post office. The reconstructed building still stands and likely we will visit it today.

Towards the end of the novel, the Evelyn family, whose trials and tribulations run parallel to Maida's story, journey to Port Arthur where the family patriarch, Rev Herbert Evelyn, is to cover the post of Anglican chaplain to allow the incumbent, Rev Harelick, to take a holiday. Thus the reader is transported aboard the *Kangaroo* for the sea journey from Hobart Town to Port Arthur, stopping at the probation stations along the way to deposit convicts and officers. Then the reader is treated to a narrative account of the social history of Port Arthur, from the perspective of free settlers immersed in the institutional life of the convict settlement.

While Maida is not along for the trip, it is nonetheless an important segment of the novel for it presents life at the convict station as a contrast to life in Hobart Town. It also describes domestic life without female convict servants for the parsonage is supplied only with men including for the duties of cook and nursemaid. For free women, life was dominated by household matters, supplies, bartering, gossip and making do.

For the fictional character Emmeline, the arduous journey to Port Arthur resulted in her remaining in her parsonage bedroom, established in the front downstairs parlour to save the invalid from the stairs, for many weeks of recovery. Leakey described Emmeline's view of the parsonage aspect thus:

[her view] opened on the station, and had by no means the pleasant landscape which enlivened the upper apartments. The lovely Bay, and the Isle of the Dead, were not to be seen; but some gardens intervening, beguiled the more immediate sight from the prison apparatus, unescapably conspicuous on a prolonged survey from the bow window.²¹

The ground floor veranda at front and sides of the building was likely a spot for a chair for the invalid Miss Leakey to recline, to take the air, and to watch, listen and record the scenes and sounds of the settlement. The novel recalls the bell sounding the start of each day, the clanking of the second-sentence men's irons as they are marched away for their work, and the bustle of settler households as they sought to bring some ordinariness to their life in an extraordinary location.

Leakey's novel addresses social conditions, the convict system, the scenic qualities of Tasmania, and the fate of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Convict institutions including the *Anson*, convict hospital and Cascade Female Factory are faithfully depicted. There are detailed descriptions of houses and shops, the clothing of both the fashionable settler and the transported convict, and the taverns and 'dives' where convicts and poor alike take their pleasure.²² All is described as a result of first hand observation and experience [though it is unlikely Leakey ever set foot in a grog shop]. For Winter, '... the most powerful achievement of the novel is the portrayal of the female convict system in all its facets.'²³ While it is not our job to consider Leakey's literary output, critics are divided about the merits of *The Broad Arrow*. To some it is sentimental and melodramatic and overlaid with a priggish religiousness. To others it is an important early work of feminist fiction. For those with an interest in Vandemonian convicts and in private domestic life, it is a trove of social history.

Endnotes

¹ Caroline Woolmer Leakey, *The Broad Arrow: being the story of Maida Gwynnham a 'Lifer' in Van Diemen's Land* (North Ryde, NSW: Eden, 1988). The novel was written under the pen name Oliné Keese.

² Debra Adelaide, ed. *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Ringwood: Penguín, 1988). p. 3.

³ Leakey, *The Broad Arrow: being the story of Maida Gwynnham a 'Lifer' in Van Diemen's Land*. p. 181.

⁴ Adelaide, *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*. p. 3.

⁵ Miranda Morris, *Placing Women: a methodology for the identification, interpretation and promotion of the heritage of women in Tasmania* (Hobart: Government of Tasmania, 1997). p. 76.

⁶ From the 'Original Publishers' Note' in Leakey, *The Broad Arrow: being the story of Maida Gwynnham a 'Lifer' in Van Diemen's Land*.

⁷ Morris, *Placing Women: a methodology for the identification, interpretation and promotion of the heritage of women in Tasmania*.

⁸ JC Horner, "Leakey, Caroline Woolmer (1827–1881)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974). See: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/leakey-caroline-woolmer-4001>, accessed 1 November 2012.

⁹ *Colonial Family Links Database*, <http://portal.archives.tas.gov.au/>, accessed 1 November 2012.

¹⁰ Gillian Winter, "'We Speak That We Do Know, and Testify That We Have Seen'. Caroline Leakey's Tasmanian Experiences and Her Novel *The Broad Arrow*," *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings* 40, no. 4 (1993). p. 137.

¹¹ Shirley Walker, "'Wild and wilful' women: Caroline Leakey and *The Broad Arrow*," in *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Debra Adelaide (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988). p. 88.

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- ¹² Caroline Woolmer Leakey, *Lyra Australis: Attempts to Sing in a Strange Land* (London: Thomas Harrild, 1854).
- ¹³ Winter, "'We Speak That We Do Know, and Testify That We Have Seen'. Caroline Leakey's Tasmanian Experiences and Her Novel *The Broad Arrow*." p. 150, and Walker, "'Wild and wilful' women: Caroline Leakey and *The Broad Arrow*." p. 89.
- ¹⁴ Louisa Anne Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania during a residence of nine years*, 2 volumes (London: John Murray (facsimile published by Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society, Swansea, TAS in 2003), 1852). Volume 2, pp 192-3.
- ¹⁵ B Coultman Smith, *Port Arthur's Convict Days: an Historic and Pictorial Review of Port Arthur, Tasmania* (Hobart: Mercury Press, 194-). p. 6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 25.
- ¹⁷ Maggie Weidenhofer, *Port Arthur: A Place of Misery*, Second ed. (Port Arthur TAS: B and M Reid in association with Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, 1990). p. 54.
- ¹⁸ Weidenhofer, *Port Arthur: A Place of Misery*, p. 62.
- ¹⁹ Walter B Pridmore, *Port Arthur... as it was* (Murdunna TAS: WB Pridmore, 2002). p. 60.
- ²⁰ *Port Arthur People* at <http://www.portarthur.org.au/>, accessed 30 October 2012.
- ²¹ Leakey, *The Broad Arrow: being the story of Maida Gwynnham a 'Lifer' in Van Diemen's Land*. p. 281.
- ²² Walker, "'Wild and wilful' women: Caroline Leakey and *The Broad Arrow*." p. 95.
- ²³ Winter, "'We Speak That We Do Know, and Testify That We Have Seen'. Caroline Leakey's Tasmanian Experiences and Her Novel *The Broad Arrow*." p. 152.