

Female Convicts Research Centre
Seminar 11 May 2013

'Female Convicts and Resilience'

The Centre is glad to report that this was a most successful seminar, attended by over 60 people on a beautiful autumn day. A number had come from interstate and overseas (New Zealand) and they were most welcome.

The seminar topic arose from a paper Stephen Lucas gave at the previous seminar, when he suggested that some female convicts suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We decided to have a seminar on how female convicts coped, separated from family, friends and everything they knew, and taken across the world. While under sentence the government or their employers fed and accommodated them, but once they were free they were on their own hands. How did they manage?

The first session was titled 'Traditional female methods of coping'. Alison Alexander spoke on marriage, which was encouraged by the authorities, society and women themselves. Of her sample of 229 female convicts, 76% married in the colony, a minimum figure. She could not discern a pattern, though women who married tended to be younger, to be single and childless, to be Irish and Catholic.

In 'Prostitution as a response by female convicts to the trauma of transportation to Van Diemen's Land', Don Bradmore discussed reasons for women becoming prostitutes, estimating that there were about 2000 prostitutes in VDL in the later convict period. His 5 case studies did not show that prostitution was a reaction to transportation.

Norma Watt discussed two of her ancestors, one with an unhappy life in VDL, and one who was much more successful in coping. Among other devices she invented a life story in which she was not a convict but the most respectable widow of a Presbyterian minister.

Following morning tea, in the second session, 'Escape through the mind', sisters Cyndy Brandsden and Maureen Brandsden spoke on 'Better or worse': whether education affected women's futures in the colony. They organised their sample of 240 convicts according to age, literacy, and whether the woman committed further offences in the colony. They could not discern that literacy made any difference to the number of offences, though age did: those in their 20s committed more.

In 'Understanding resilience through the frame of madness', Nicola Goc considered the hospital records of 150 women admitted to the New Norfolk Asylum. After analysing the records in terms of diagnosis and treatment, she called attention to those convict women with the resilience to survive both the convict system and their incarceration in the asylum, women who were never readmitted to the hospital after their initial discharge.

After lunch, Dianne Snowden and Joyce Purtscher conducted **tours of the Orphan School**, which people found extremely interesting. We would like to thank Dianne and Joyce.

The third session was simply entitled 'Resilience?' James Parker, in 'Keeping out of trouble', forecast his thesis on the topic of women keeping out of trouble by good behaviour, as encouraged by the authorities, and demonstrated how he uses our excellent database in his research.

Jan Richardson spoke on 'Queensland's female convicts: tragedy and resilience', very interesting as most of those present knew nothing about convicts in Queensland. Jan discussed those who went to Queensland after the convict period there ended, in 1842.

Trudy Cowley ably concluded the afternoon with 'Self harm by female convicts: is there any evidence for it?' She could find evidence for only one female convict who committed self harm, but many more who attempted suicide, an extreme response to transportation.

Each session was followed by an animated discussion period, and at the end of the third session it was concluded that no particular pattern of resilience had been shown but women certainly had many methods of coping with their new lives.