

Un-natural Acts – the Plight of Convict Lesbians.

It may challenge some perceptions you hold. I would like to ask you to allow your perceptions to be challenged and to be open to some new ideas that may not fit in with your current ideas on the topic of lesbians.

During the convict era, prevailing attitudes towards female same sex relationships at the time were not what you might imagine. It was quite a complex situation. The British of the 1800s were well known for their reserved attitude towards sex, sexuality, and all things involving the female body. This was the Victorian era and it was alive and well in colonial Hobart – especially in the Female Factory.

However, a woman expressing passionate love for another woman was fashionable, accepted, and encouraged. These relationships were termed romantic friendships, Boston Marriages or the women in society were known as sentimental friends. This was common in the U.S., Europe, and especially in England. What went on in the privacy of their own bedrooms was not a matter for public discourse. Women could and did form strong and exclusive bonds with each other. They would still be considered virtuous, innocent, and chaste. A similar relationship with a man would have destroyed a woman's reputation. In fact, these relationships were promoted as alternatives to and practice for a woman's marriage to a man. It was believed that many women who professed love for other women would change their feelings about such relationships after they had experienced marriage to a man and took on the roles of wife and mother.

Here is something else that might surprise you. Marriages between women were recorded in England right up to the mid 1800's. They were rare, but they did happen and they are recorded. In public life, female same sex relationships were commonplace.

Beds and who slept in them are interesting places to visit. In our modern times we have become used to the idea of the privacy of the bedroom as a place housing the three "great horizontals" – birth, sex and death. We need to be reminded that it was not always like this. Up until the early 1900s, especially in the overcrowded conditions that most

people experienced, beds were often in public rooms such as kitchens and halls. It was a standard that women shared beds, whether they were sisters, friends, cousins or even complete strangers as travellers staying at the inn. Commonplace sleeping arrangements of the times made lesbianism invisible.

It wasn't until the woman became a convict in a female factory that sexual intimacy between two women became such a crime and so offensive to the sensibilities of the general public. It was termed as an unnatural act and lesbianism is a relatively recent concept. The term didn't even reach a dictionary until 1890. When scholars of the 1800s began to pay attention to lesbians and to categorize and describe their homosexual behaviour they were hampered by two things. One was a lack of knowledge about lesbianism or women's sexuality. They distinguished lesbians as women who did not adhere to the traditional female gender roles and designated them as mentally ill.

The other consideration was that these scholars were hampered in their thinking by the dictates of the church. The church considered that a same sex relationship was an unnatural act, as it could not result in children, and everyone in Britain at the time knew that the only reason a couple had sex was in order to produce children.

Nearly 12,500 convict women were transported to VDL. Based on current population studies, it is likely that roughly 10% of them would have had a preference towards same sex relationships. That equals 1,250 women who would have been at risk of being charged for engaging intimately with another woman. When British laws were passed that criminalised male homosexuality, banning lesbianism never crossed their minds. The male establishment avoided legislating on lesbianism for fear of drawing the women's attention to its existence.

It is curious to consider that as lesbianism wasn't a crime, what business did the management of the Female Factories have in attempting to regulate and punish same sex intimacy? Conduct records indicate that female homosexuality was an offence on par with illegitimate pregnancy, public drunkenness, inciting riot, or trafficking in forbidden goods such as alcohol, tobacco, and money.

Research has produced some fascinating records of how the women used their sexuality as a weapon of power within the convict system. By engaging in group displays of brazen disobedience and same-sex licentious behaviour, the women not only responded to the excesses of male prison authority, they also exercised their collective power to challenge the male dominated social system.

In the prisons of England in the early 1800's there was no segregation of male and female prisoners and the inmates were left to their own devices while waiting to be punished or transported. When the British first set up camp in Hobart Town, they hadn't provided for the strict separate incarceration of women. As the colony grew so did infrastructure and a desire for a certain level of order and control over the behaviour of the convicts. Prior to the Female Factories, there was no direct observation of the intimate interactions between the women. Prison reform and structural redesigning of prison buildings brought with it the idea of constant surveillance. Contact between the female convicts was seen as an opportunity for physical and moral contagion, so all contact had to be observed and prevented.

Once the women entered the factories they lost all personal identity as well as personal privacy. While the factories may have been designed to better monitor and control the women, what they did was to shape and enable certain behaviours the management was trying to prevent. One of the significant roles of the FF institutions was to be a regulator of morality. They worked on the idea of reform through manual labour and improving convict women through the enforcement of morally acceptable behaviour. Married couples were hired to run the FF in order to set an example of good, upright living.

The black-market trade within the prisons nurtured same-sex relationships between female inmates. In 1848 Dr William Irvine, the Superintendent of the Ross Female Factory gave details of what was, within the colony, politely termed 'The English Vice'. He labelled one partner in the relationship as the man-woman or pseudo-male. He detailed how young girls were in the habit of decorating themselves, cleaning themselves scrupulously, and

making themselves as attractive as they could before meeting with their chosen 'man-woman.'

He observed that a large proportion of the disputes in the FF arose from disagreements concerning the choice of a pseudo-male, or jealous feelings which resulted from changes in relationships. He seems to be surprised at the ways in which female convicts courted and seduced new lovers and behaved as two people would if they were male and female. Dr Irvine applied for and was granted permission to build solitary cells at the Ross Female Factory in order to punish and prevent such behaviours.

There were harsh punishments meted out to women in steadfast, long-term relationships as seen in the case of Catherine Owens and Ellen Scott in the Launceston Female Factory. In 1842 Ellen started a riot because she had become enraged over the prolonged solitary confinement of her lover, Catherine. Catherine had been locked in the cells because neither woman would agree to demands that they end their relationship.

Within the prison casual sexual activity was used as a way for the women to procure and trade illicit luxuries, most commonly extra food rations, alcohol, and tobacco. Conditions in the Female Factory were always crowded and it was a standard that the women would have to share cells and hammocks. Records detail frequent incidents of same-sex casual encounters between female prisoners.

As in any prison situation there will be predators and the Ross Female Factory was no exception. In 1851 reports made by Margaret Knaggs describe her interactions with prisoner Agnes Kane. Agnes was quite the predator, following young Margaret about everywhere, pestering her for sexual favours but Margaret wasn't keen on the idea. Agnes became quite insistent and threatening, and then bragged that she had many girls who liked her and that if Margaret were to like Agnes in the same way then things would go well. Agnes promised Margaret gifts, money and protection. When reporting to the authorities, Margaret was adamant that her virtue was uncompromised, but she hadn't

bargained on being seen by Bridget Grady who reported that in exchange for gifts and money Margaret repeatedly yielded to Agnes and her attentions.

In 1841, an inmate of the Cascades Female Factory called Ann Fisher, reported on the nocturnal activities of Jane Owen with whom Ann shared a hammock. Ann said that after lockdown, another inmate Eliza Taylor visited Jane and that Eliza & Jane talked together until dawn in what Ann describes as an indecent and obscene manner. Having arranged the terms of their exchange, the following evening Ann was again awakened when Eliza came back to visit Jane. Eliza directly asked Jane to grant her the favours that she had promised the night before. Apparently Jane obliged and after about five minutes Eliza gave Jane the agreed payment and left. At this point Ann decided she had seen enough and reported the pair. Eliza & Jane were punished for their same-sex encounter by a period of solitary confinement in the cells.

The solitary cells became the place to send female convicts as punishment for same sex intimacy. The women sent there were considered to be hardened, reckless, miserable creatures who were said to be raving under the impulse of their ungovernable passions and indulging in such conduct without remorse. It was hoped that the strict separate confinement of these cells would modify the worst conduct of the women and that separation would become the standard of the place. The persecution of lesbians and same sex relationships within the Female Factories was yet another in the list of dehumanising elements of the man's world of a female convict prison.

So, in conclusion, you might ask – what has changed for incarcerated lesbians? Today's prisons are cleaner and they get better food and legal representation, but that seems to be where it stops. Lesbians in prison are still persecuted by authorities and other inmates. When they are in the wider community they are still shunned, insulted and discriminated against. But as you have seen recently in modern day Tasmania, we are willing to at least discuss the issue of removing discrimination and granting equality for all members in society regardless of their sexual preferences. I would love to know what our lesbian convicts would have made of that. Thanks for listening.