

Martha's Shawl

On a cold winter night in July 1874 Martha McLaren's red woollen shawl went missing. Martha believed Sarah Ladds stole it. The story was reported on 10 July 1874 in *The Mercury*. At the time Martha was a resident of Kangaroo Point (now named Bellerive), and had come into town on the previous Saturday 'to receive some money due to her'. During the afternoon she had a drink at the New Market Hotel on Macquarie Street, Hobart. After going outside she met Sarah and went home to Sarah's house in Watchorn Street, Hobart. It was here Martha discovered her shawl was missing and asked Sarah for its whereabouts, whereupon Sarah proceeded to hit Martha on the head with an unknown object and pushed her out onto the street. Sarah told the court she had taken the shawl to wash Martha's head with it, but Martha denied this was true. Who then was telling the truth? Could Martha or Sarah be believed? After all Martha's background would have been said by some as being rather dubious. Sarah's story until, and after the shawl incident, is unknown.

The two policemen in charge of the case had a very cold reception from Sarah when they tried to interview her. Inspector McConnell and Detective Simpson had arrived at Sarah's house on the Sunday morning. Opening the door Sarah immediately slammed it in their faces. Unfortunately for Sarah they forced their way into her house and found her wearing the shawl. This fact in itself does not make Sarah guilty, but the testimony of a witness does give some doubt to her innocence.

William Robbins, the landlord of the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel, on the corner of Watchorn Street, Hobart, testified seeing Martha wearing the shawl when she ordered a pint of beer. He said she left shortly after and reappeared three hours later in a drunken state, still wearing the shawl and demanded more alcohol, which he refused to give her. Robbins noted blood running down the side of her face. When he questioned her about it, she would not tell him why, nor did she mention anything about a robbery.

It appears neither Martha nor Sarah were capable of giving an accurate account of what happened that night. For this reason the magistrate refused to hear the testimony of a second witness and discharged Sarah. Apparently Martha was originally in possession of the shawl, and due to her intoxicated state she may have muddled the correct sequence of events. However, if Sarah had nothing to hide, why did she slam the door in the policemen's face? Had she past dealings with the police, perhaps as a convict? Why we do not know for sure, we do know that the Magistrate would have been aware of Martha's convict past.

Martha's story as far as I have ascertained, begins in England. Her birth date is uncertain due to records varying in their estimate, but I believe it to be around 1824. I know nothing of her childhood. The census of 1841 confirms she was residing in the parish of St. Paul Shadwell, Ossultone, in the county of Middlesex, England with a Thomas McLaren, aged thirty, apparently her brother and a mariner. But he may also have been a love interest as living together outside of marriage was frowned upon, but because nothing more has been found on Thomas this is only speculation. When Martha arrived at the ship to transport her to Van Diemen's Land she was required to state the names of her parents and siblings. She recited her parents as William and Lucy and her sisters as Lucy, Sarah, Caroline and Harriet. There was no mention of a brother or what her parent's surname was. Furthermore, she declared herself as single. Living together would not have been looked upon favourably. Taking Thomas' name may have disguised their transgression. Unfortunately because of inconsistent recording and the destruction of records by fire it is impossible to be certain about names or dates of birth.

The population expanded about the time Martha was living in London. Outer boundaries, such as Middlesex, merged with London. Martha would have been part of the increasing numbers of people driven from the country in search of work. Though a dressmaker by trade, she may not have always found work in the industry. Another descendant of Martha believes she found work in London as a housemaid. But this did not last long. For reasons unknown, Martha's mistress hit her

with a whip, whereupon the feisty Martha took the whip and struck her back. This act was ultimately to send Martha on a path of degradation and crime. While there seems to be no recorded criminal offence for the whip incident, her court transcript records a previous felony. Felony at the time covered many crimes; therefore, it may not have been the serious offence it is deemed now. Without a reference from her mistress, Martha would have been out of work. Her convict record states she was '3 years on the town', which is sometimes a reference to prostitution.

Like many women, Martha would have been driven to prostitution out of desperate circumstances. Though it was Martha's word against the accuser Thomas Campbell, it was he whose story was believed. Campbell, a sailor, advised the London Central Criminal Court, otherwise known as the 'Old Bailey', of going home with Martha and paying her. He claimed Martha had pawned his jacket. Both Martha and her friend Hannah Welch testified that Martha sold the jacket with Campbell's permission to get something to eat. A witness, Thomas Joseph Barrett, a pawn shop owner, confirmed that Martha sold the jacket. The damning evidence against the pair confirmed their guilt in the eyes of the court. One can imagine her standing in the dock of a dark austere courtroom, the panel of so called male superiors judging her. To them, Martha and Hannah would not have fitted their picture of 'genteel' women and transportation to the colonies was a way of reforming them into respectable women.

Martha and Hannah were found guilty and sentenced to ten and seven years' transportation respectively to Van Diemen's Land. They sailed from London on the ship *Tasmania* on 8 September 1844, arriving in Van Diemen's Land on 20 December of that year. It was a long and arduous journey for the 191 female convicts aboard. Two of those poor women died on the journey but the majority made it alive to the land that was to be their home forever more. Martha was lucky to be one of them. Perhaps in her favour, in order to receive pay, the surgeon and the captain were responsible for ensuring all of the convicts arrived in good condition.

I am unaware if a photograph of Martha exists, but from the description on her record I imagine her hazel eyes looking out across the Derwent, taking in the surrounding hills, as the *Tasmania* arrived in Hobart Town. Her brown hair tucked into her calico cap, stray wisps about her face as she tries to comprehend the strange new land which was to be her new home. In a colony where women were in the minority, I am certain Martha would have endured the stares and whispers from the people already settled there. I imagine particularly men looking for a wife, and the women, who considered themselves respectable settlers, would have given them careful scrutiny. Perhaps some were even harsh in their comments.

Martha probably went to the *Anson*, a moored hulk in the Derwent River, used from October 1844 to house convict women, as the Brickfields Hiring Depot and the Cascades Female Factory were overcrowded. Assigned to a Mr Combs, Martha quickly found herself in trouble, for in February 1846 she was sentenced to three months in the Cascades Female Factory for being "absent all night". I wonder how Martha felt about the sombre grey mountain overshadowing the Factory. The Factory was cold and damp and even in summer the thick sandstone walls would have ensured it stayed that way.

The inmates of the Factory were required to wear a uniform as all prison inmates usually do. Martha wore a grey woollen jacket and long skirt, buttoned to the neck and a long calico apron and bonnet. She would have toiled in the laundry or sat working diligently at her needlework. An inadequate diet would have contributed to a forlorn existence. Life seemed to go from bad to worse for Martha. Whether she liked it or not the authorities aimed to convert their charges to respectable and marriageable women. The women were given a bible with the expectation they would read it daily. Those women not able to read were read to. Martha could read but not write and possibly read the bible herself.

Was Martha any better off in Hobart Town than London? Perhaps, but Martha like many of the women in the Factory continued to push the boundaries, serving other stints in the Female

Factory. An interesting entry to Martha's record was the charge of 'indecently exposing person', for which she received a sentence of five weeks hard labour. While it is not clear what she was doing, it is likely she was revealing more than what was considered decent at the time.

Martha was sent to the Factory in 1848 for falling pregnant outside of wedlock. Having an illegitimate child was a punishable offence for a convict woman. In this very patriarchal society the man was not taken to task for his part, only the woman whose morals should have been beyond reproach. James McLaren was born on 20 January 1848. His story promptly fades into oblivion. There seems to be no further mention of him. Perhaps he died like many of the little ones born at the Female Factory. It is likely that James died of one of the diseases such as chronic diarrhoea which was rampant in infants at the time. There are scant records of these deaths and burials and unmarked graves were common. One can only imagine the grief and torment Martha felt at losing her child. Though a father is not listed, Stephen Knightes (Knight) is a likely candidate. The only clue is an entry, listed at Richmond, for a permission to marry request between Martha and Stephen in 1848. Therefore, Stephen was known to Martha at the time.

The couple had another child, a daughter Rosina, before their marriage. Rosina was born on 11 September 1849. Interestingly, there is no charge listed on Martha's conduct record for this pregnancy. In March of 1850 she received her Ticket of Leave but this was revoked two and half years later for an unknown reason. In the spring of 1850, Martha married Stephen. It is likely she was assigned to her husband for the remainder of her sentence. Stephen was a freed convict. They spent their married life together in the Clarence Plains area which is now known as Rokeby, at least until Stephen's death in 1873. After their marriage they had five more children—Louisa, Louis who was my great grandfather, Lavinia, Frederick and Priscilla—all of whom survived their childhood. Louisa was born 30 November 1851, Louis on 29 November 1853, Lavinia on 9 September 1855, Frederick on 17 July 1858 and Priscilla on 28 July 1860, all at Clarence Plains.

Between the years of 1850 and 1852 Martha was fined and spent several days in the cells for drunkenness and 'disturbing the peace'. Martha's wild ways made the news several more times in Hobart. The *Mercury* reported on 13 July 1870, that she had been fined ten shillings and sixpence for using 'obscene language'. On 3 October 1871 she was fined five shillings for 'disturbing the peace'. In 1874 she was again charged with disturbing the peace, this time for 'behaving improperly towards a number of Good Templars on and off board a steamer'. Respectable people equated alcoholism with convictism which led to the creation of temperance lodges. The Good Templars were a lower class temperance order who felt it was their duty to improve their contemporaries' immoral ways. It is possible they said something to Martha about her drunkenness. Her temper must have got the better of her. Brought before the magistrate he cautioned her before warning that 'the full extent of the law' would apply if she ever came before the court again. Martha was now around the age of fifty when her next appearance before the court was to accuse Sarah of stealing her shawl.

Martha did not remarry after Stephen's death in 1873. I can only guess that in her final years she was looked after by her daughter, for on Tuesday 1 January 1906 she died at her daughter's residence in Colville Street, Battery Point at the age of eighty-two. It was certainly a fine age for a woman who had a tough life. Martha's funeral notice requests her death be included in the London papers. The connection to her English relatives was not forgotten.

A year later a touching memorial was inserted in the *Mercury* by Louisa and Lavinia:

*'It is one sad year ago today
Since our dear mother was called away;
The trial was hard, the shock severe,
To part with her we loved so dear.
Farewell, dear mother, you're free from pain;
We hope our loss will be your gain.'*

A constant hum carried across the breeze from the Selfs Point fuel depot. It was a Sunday afternoon at Cornelian Bay Cemetery. Cars and people were scattered here and there. Some visitors were arranging flowers. Others were seeking out water for their vases. Some seemed lost in a moment of quiet reflection. My family, were searching an older, almost forgotten section of the grave yard where many of the headstones had fallen into disrepair, that is if the forgotten people buried there, were lucky enough to have one. We did not know what we would find, but there was a general assumption it would be an inconspicuous marker, or nothing at all. But what we did find was unexpected. There in the mostly devoid section, was a sandstone headstone. It was beautifully carved with an emblem surrounded by two branches of ivy consisting of three leaves each in the top section of the headstone. I could just make out the worn writing, 'In loving memory of Martha Knight, the date and the words Trust in the Lord'. I knew then that Martha was not just a convict, but a mother who was greatly loved. I did not care what her beginnings were or the crimes that she had committed. As for the red woollen shawl, it has faded into the distant past along with the Van Demonian convict era.

By Lyn Horton

Sources

AOT: Pioneers Index

AOT: Marriages RGD 37/2212/1848

AOT: Deaths RGD 35/55/1873

AOT: Births RGD 33/470/1848, 32/3634/1849, 32/3956/1851, 33/193/1854, 33/251/1855,
33/240/1858, 33/773/1860

Mercury: 13 Jul 1870, 3 Oct 1871, 1 Jun 1874, 10 Jul 1874, 11 Jul 1874, 2 Jan 1907.

Cornelian Bay Cemetery

Female Factory Research Group (Tasmania) <http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au>