Researchers flock to Hobart for landmark conference on multicultural history

Untold story of our deep convict past

Revealed: Colette McGuire, left, and Professor Lucy Frost have co-edited a book on convicts of various cultural origins.

Picture: NIKKI DAVIES-JONES

Alexander Simpson

FROM rebel slave in Montego Bay, Jamaica, to Van Diemen’s Land in 1835, Simpson escaped execution despite being involved in a slave rebellion. Like most of the slaves sent to Australia, he was descended from African slaves. When asked why he escaped, he answered “fleeing and escaping the slaves to rebellion. I was a slave myself.”

Simpson maintained a spiritually cleansed record and led an enlightened life in Tasmania, where the origins of slavery did not apply to the 19th century colonies.

“A lot who went to Tasmania were moved to NSW and even Moreton Bay, partly because of the weather. But lots of people here are descendants from them. Often their descendants were not Aboriginal as they may have thought.” Professor Frost said her interest was piqued when she read about a woman recorded in “Mary Jane,” a record kept on a ship, the Arick, in 1836.

“When I was in London doing other research for this book, I found an account on the trial from The Barossa.”

“Mary Jane was born into slavery in Barbados and tried in 1805 for assisting her master’s child. She was convicted and sent to transportation. She was sent to London then to Van Diemen’s Land.”

“There are scores of stories like that, and others who came to Hobart from British Honduras who were born into slavery.”

“It was so fascinating. Also interesting is that women were tried in the British Isles but were born outside the British Isles.”

She said some were born in France, but it was possible they travelled to Britain for some reason but got into trouble there.

“The French women tended to be cannibals,” Professor Frost said.

Some women were tried in Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, some tried in India.

While the research focuses on women, many more were convicted.

About 60 researchers will be in Hobart today for the seminar, organised by Hobart-based Female Convict Research Centre, headed by Professor Frost and vice president Ms McGuire.

The publisher in Convict Women’s Press, a not-for-profit publishing company. Professor Frost said its aim was to bring the stories to a wider audience.

“This is really exciting. It’s the first time our research is being documented and recorded. These women who came from so many areas of the British Empire, like you like,” Dr Geci said.

She said volunteers around the world were transcribing records, documents and official papers.

Journey to Prosperity: French Creole woman Constance Trudel was sent to NSW in 1801 and was sent to Australia, where she eventually married and lived a happy life.

Picture: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Elizabeth and Constance Velpeau

COUSINS Elizabeth, 12, and Constance, 9, Velpeau arrived from Mauritius to the colonies in 1804. Born into slavery, the French Creole speaking girls were the youngest sent as convicts.

Their parents were probably from Madagascar, a background common to many sent to Australia.

Transported to New South Wales for attempting to poison their masters, although the “powder” was not arsenic and there was evidence of its use.

They became maids to a magistrate’s daughter who, being ladies, spoke French.

This association led to lifelong benefits, especially for Constance, who married a white convict and lived a prosperous life, dying well into her 70s.

Together they set up a pastoral company and had 11 children. Elizabeth, in Sydney, did not do so well, dying a widow at 49 in Inner Sydney, because her cataracts, the magistrate, fell in love after being dismissed as a magistrate.