

## **The history of the Cascades Female Factory**

**By Alison Alexander – 24<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

Convict women who arrived in Van Diemen's Land in the first half of the nineteenth century were caught between two quite different ideas of womanhood. The middle class expected women to be quiet, reserved, polite and obedient, never raising their voices, calmly bearing and raising children, running the household and, if working class, doing the housework. The middle class mainly saw working-class women when they were servants – neatly dressed, subservient, doing what they were told. If they did not, they were dismissed.

But working class girls were born into a tough world. Many grew up in poverty-stricken, dysfunctional families, with alcoholic parents and never enough money. Some were orphans, having to fend for themselves from an early age. As teenagers, many found themselves on the streets, having to earn a living as best they could, by prostitution and theft – picking pockets, stealing from shops, from houses, from anywhere. Marriage was not necessarily a recipe for a comfortable life, as all too many marriages were marred by poverty, drunkenness and domestic violence. Some families with a wage-earner could give their daughters love and security, but even so, financial disaster could happen at any time, through death or illness for example.

This situation produced resilient, tough women who were used to standing up for themselves, making do as best they could in whatever situation they found themselves. In the society they lived in, swearing, drinking, theft, lying, insolence, untidiness and disobedience were normal. So were managing to live despite the rules, getting round the regulations, and living a double life: looking innocent to a constable, for example, while covering up lawbreaking.

But then a woman would be caught stealing, transported to Van Diemen's Land and assigned to a settler as a servant. A few had training in the domestic skills, from mothers or from working as servants in Britain; but not many. For a woman from an urban slum, where housework was scanty at best, life as an obedient servant, scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, doing what she was told, all day long, must have been horrendous. How could anyone expect a woman who had never done any washing up, for example, never scrubbed a floor, to do these things obediently and competently?

Some, perhaps the ones from more settled homes, made the best of things and worked as well as they could, aiming to finish their sentences as soon as possible. They were seldom in the Factory. But many rebelled. They neglected their work, they answered back when given orders, they drank alcohol where they could, they stayed out later than they were meant to, they ran away. They became pregnant, either voluntarily or involuntarily. This was not what the middle-class expected from women. Such women had to be punished.

Enter the Cascades Female Factory, the largest institution for convict women in Van Diemen's Land, which operated in Hobart from 1828 to 1855. Of the 13,500 female convicts in Van Diemen's Land, at least 8200, 60%, spent time here – a majority. Many came on arrival to be assigned, a brief visit: but most inmates were there to be punished. For the Factory authorities, this meant trying to turn them into obedient, quiet, well-behaved women, as the middle class expected women to be. For almost all the Factory's history, the authorities tried

to do this by repression. Reform was a secondary aim, presumed to result from hard enough repression. Sometimes the women reacted by rioting – which was punished by even harder repression.

The story of the Cascades Female Factory is grim. Not enough government funding; a dark, damp site; cold stone buildings; bribery and corruption making things even worse for some inmates – as when nurses stole children's food. Career public servants were in charge, sometimes sympathetic to individuals, but with a difficult task in running the institution with insufficient funding and staff, and an eye to their own careers. They did not want to rock the boat. The occasional person who tried to help convict women, to treat them with sympathy and understanding, was crushed by a Convict Department which had no interest in such crazy ideas.

The bright spots in the Factory's history usually come from the convicts themselves. Many women, skilled in making the best of things and getting round rules and regulations, resilience drummed into them by circumstances, found elements to enjoy in the Factory: friendship, the fun of illicit activities, opportunities for bribery and for making money themselves. Their childhood equipped them to survive and even flourish in an environment where more subservient women might have faded.

The first female factory in Hobart was opened in 1822, but it was small, crowded and dilapidated. In 1828 the Cascades Female Factory was established on a large, secluded, fairly secure site.

Governor Arthur gave orders that women were to be strictly but fairly treated. They would be controlled by the staff; they would do work, attend church and behave quietly. Punishment comprised hard labour often at the washtubs, solitary confinement, having the hair cut off, and occasionally more brutal treatment. It was assumed, or perhaps hoped, that this system would reform the women, and they would return to the workforce chastened, determined to behave better.

From 1832 the Reverend John and Mary Hutchinson ran the Factory. Obedient public servants, they established a façade of order, but in fact there were huge problems. The mortality rate of babies in the nursery was appallingly high. There were many reports of a thriving convict sub-culture, with women trafficking in goods, particularly alcohol, receiving goods from outside, stealing rations, defying the authorities, preferring life in the Factory to domestic drudgery in a settler's home. An inquiry was set up, as Sally Rackham describes.

At about this time, the ship *East London* arrived with a very interesting boatload of convict women, the subject of Colleen Arulappu's talk.

By this time, reformers in Britain were claiming that the convict system did not provide reform, only punishment. In 1840 transportation to New South Wales was abolished, which meant all convicts came to Van Diemen's Land, doubling the numbers here.

In Van Diemen's Land, all convicts were to be treated under the Probation System. On arrival they served a six-month probation period where they received moral and religious training, and also training in useful skills so they could support themselves when freed. They then worked for wages in the community. For convict women, this meant serving time at the *Anson* probation station, which was separate from the Cascades. Other branches of the Factory

were set up: the Brickfields Hiring Depot for women awaiting assignment, to separate them from corrupted women being punished; and a series of separate nurseries.

However, in the early 1850s, everything was concentrated at the Cascades once more. There had been many problems with the nursery, and a new one was built, as Lucy Frost describes. As the system wound down from the mid-1850s, other inmates arrived, and Kevin Green has the details.

The legal system was part of the Factory's organisation, and information from various cases gives interesting insight into the Factory's history. Colette McAlpine informs us of what various inquests have to tell us about inmates' lives. Brian Rieusset will talk about the women executed from the Factory, which adds more light to women's lives there.

During the Factory's history there was some input from outside. Dianne Snowden describes the work of the Sisters of Charity, and Robyn Everist discusses outside opinion of the institution.