

## Convict Motherhood: an overview

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Among the thousands of women who stood in British courtrooms to hear themselves sentenced to transportation ‘beyond the seas’, many were mothers. In this short paper, Trudy Cowley and I raise questions about who these mothers were. Acutely aware that the transportation of a mother directly affected her children, we pose questions about them as well. Our research is part of the larger Founders and Survivors project, under the leadership of Hamish Maxwell-Stewart.

### Sources:

First, what sources are available, and how reliable is their information? The most systematic collection of relevant data comes from the ships’ indents, documents transferred on arrival from the surgeon superintendent to the colonial authorities. Indents included information about the prisoner’s crime, trial, and sentence, and from about 1828 included personal information about literacy, religion, marital status, number of children.

This personal information came from questioning the convict herself. Though we cannot know exactly how the question was framed, its wording was important. Because we have evidence that children who died on the voyage were not counted on a convict’s conduct record, it seems likely that the woman was asked how many children she had living. A woman whose children were all dead—and we know that many died in infancy or early childhood—would appear on the indent as a woman with no children. And some prisoners may have thought it better not to mention their children, especially if they were single. For these, and most likely other reasons, the numbers of mothers and the numbers of their children, is under-reported on the indents.

The indents themselves form an incomplete series. Sporadic survivals from the early period are now in the collection of Tasmanian Papers in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. The dataset upon which we have based our analysis is CON 15, a series of 8 volumes held by the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office. Beginning with the arrival of the *Emma Eugenia* in April 1842, and concluding with the final female transport, the *Duchess of Northumberland* in April 1853, the series is complete and covers 45 ships—over

half the 86 ships which sailed directly to Van Diemen's Land. In addition, CON15 includes two ships from the 1830s, together with a fragment of a third. The source for our analysis is the complete run of 45 indents in the 1842-1853 series of CON 15.

### **Overview of the Convict Mothers and their children**

These 45 ships carried 7981 convicts, 63% of the entire cohort of 12,649 women transported directly to Van Diemen's Land. Of the total convicts on these ships, 2285 were identified on the indents as mothers, 29%. A little less than a third. Of the mothers, 923 had children on board: 40% of the mothers. So, fewer than half the women who said they were mothers were actually bringing one or more children with them.

According to the indents, the convict mothers on these ships had 5100 children. Of these children, only 1370 sailed—25% of the children of these transported mothers. This means that 3830 children were left behind. 75%--three-quarters of the children of these convict mothers did not sail. Children left behind suffered the loss of a parent they were unlikely ever to see again, a loss mimicking death and often skewed by the particular cruelty of not knowing what had happened to their illiterate mothers, not knowing whether they were alive or dead.

### **Interrogating the overview**

Once we had the data for the overview, we began asking more specific questions which might shed light on issues we are interested in. One is the effect of marital status.

#### ***Effect of Marital Status:***

Because there is no stated policy covering the inclusion of children on the ships, we wondered whether the marital status of the mother might have some effect on whether a convict brought her children with her. If there was no obvious father to be made responsible for the children, might a widow or single mother be more likely to bring a child?

#### **The Widows:**

- Of the female convicts on board these 45 ships, 998 said they were widows: 12.5%.
- Of the convict mothers on board, 699 said they were widows: 31%.

- Of the convict mothers with children on board, 236 said they were widows: 26%.

#### The Single Women:

- Of all the female convicts on board, 5361 said they were single: 67%. Distinctly more than half the women on these ships were single.
- Of the convict mothers, 577 were single: 25% of the mothers.
- Of the mothers with children on board: 305 were single: 33% of mothers with children on board

A quarter of the women with children on board were widows, a third were single—more than half the women bringing children were either widowed or single. It looks as if having no obvious father to look after a child might have increased a convict's chances of getting a child on board.

#### ***The Irish Factor:***

From the work Trudy and I have done on specific ships, we've had the general impression that convicts sailing on ships from Ireland brought more children than those from the English ports. The *Earl Grey* with its 80 children loomed large in our thinking, of course, even though we knew it was the female transport carrying by far the largest number of children.

We posed several questions about the Irish ships:

First, a general question: How significant was the Irish cohort?

Of all the women in this series, 3226 sailed on ships coming directly from Ireland: 40% of the women transported between 1842 and 1853. If we add the 40% of women coming directly from Ireland, to the many women born in Ireland but tried in England or Scotland, we can get some sense of what an impact the Irish contingent must have made on the colony during the later years of transportation—and in the period after transportation had stopped, when Van Diemen's Land tried to throw off the convict shackles and emerge as free Tasmania.

Second, more specifically, were Irish mothers more likely to bring children?

- Of the 3326 convicts on the Irish ships, 890 were mothers: 39%
- Of these 890 convict mothers, 498 sailed with at least one child: 54%

We can see that the women coming directly from Ireland were much more likely to arrive as mothers: 39% of the women on the Irish ships as compared with

29% of all the women in this cohort. Given the preponderance of mothers, it's not surprising that they were more likely to sail with at least one child: 54% of the mothers on the Irish ships, compared with 40% of the total.

And then, to change the frame a little, we asked how many children came directly from Ireland? And how many of the "left behind" were children of the Irish convicts?

- Of the total 1370 children on board the 45 ships in this series, 717 sailed from Ireland: 52% of all the children
- The convict mothers on these Irish ships said they had 1945 children. Of these children, 1228 were left behind: 63%, compared with 75% of the total children on all the ships.

These statistics confirm our general impressions. More children were sailing from Ireland, and fewer of the Irish children were being left behind.

We wondered whether there was a spike in the numbers of children sailing during the years of the Irish famine. Of the 12 years covered by the series (1842-53), five were during the famine period (1844-49). Of the 717 children on the Irish ships, 379 sailed during the famine period: 53%. Given that 53% of the children arrived during 42% of the period covered by the series, the impact of the famine is recognisable but minimal.

### ***Age:***

In thinking about the effect of transportation upon the reproductive life of female convicts, we raised questions about age.

#### 1. The age of the mothers

- The average age of all women on these 45 ships was 27. This is slightly older than the average age of all women transported (26).
- Average age of convict mothers on board these ships is 34.
- Average age of mothers with children on board is 31.

So the average age of the mothers, with or without children, is distinctly higher than the average of all women transported.

2. And back to the Irish factor: The average age of the mothers on ships from Ireland was 34, the same as for all mothers on these voyages; the average age of the Irish mothers with children on board was 33, two years older than the average age of all mothers with children on board.

3. After looking at the average age of these convict mothers, we looked more closely at the age range.

- The age range of all women on these 45 ships was 10 to 75.
- The age range of all mothers on the ships was 16 to 75.
- The age range of mothers with children on board the Irish ships was 18 to 65.

Who were the women decades older than the average age? Some were simply older women whose children were grown. Others were older women transported along with their adult convict daughters. We discovered that 322 convicts on the 45 ships had a female relative on board. Some were sisters of course, and some mothers were transported with more than one convict daughter. Of the 322 women with relatives, 47 were mothers. Of this 47, 39 came from Ireland, and of the 39, 21 came during the famine years. The group is not large but it is nevertheless apparent that women coming from Ireland were much more likely to be transported with their daughters. One of the Irish mothers has a convict daughter with her, and a free younger daughter as well. This is where convict transportation begins to look like family reunion, and even though such cases are rare, it will be interesting to see as all of us continue our research into individual lives, what happened to the women who arrived as mothers, and how their earlier experience of motherhood may have shaped their lives under sentence and beyond.