

To the Tubs: the laundry as female punishment

Despite what Robert Cox wrote when reviewing Lucy Frost's *Abandoned Women* recently, the treatment of females in the convict system was not necessarily lenient compared to that of men. Punishment of female convicts in colonial Australia could be severe, and, in the early days at least, even savage - women were both hanged and flogged in eighteenth-century Sydney Town. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, punishment evolved for both men and women, from physical chastisement to manual labour and eventually to psychological measures such as isolation and sensory deprivation. All three types of punishment were mixed up at various times and in various places and were ameliorated and/or abandoned at different times for men and for women. What is surprising is that labour as punishment for incarcerated women survived longer in post-colonial times than it did for men, and the laundry as a vehicle for this form of punishment was still in use in Tasmania in the 1970s.

I'm unsure as to why the laundry should be so strongly considered to be female labour, but that it has, over many different societies and many different times, is I think, a matter of record. In Book 6 of the *Odyssey* which is set around 3,500 years ago, the Princess of Crete, Nausicaa has washed the palace linen in a stream with her girl-friends soaking, thrashing and laying it out to dry when she meets Odysseus. (I was washing some clothes in a Laundromat once and musing on what Nausicaa might have made of it – but I realised that she wouldn't have been very impressed - you don't meet heroes in Laundromats.) Getting much nearer to the period of the Female Factories, in a company of Wellington's army, only two men below the rank of sergeant were permitted to marry (that's two out of one hundred) and they were

permitted to do so and have their wives carried on the strength of the regiment, because those women became the company servants – in particular, the washer-women. I make no pronouncements as to why laundry was female labour, except the obvious one that it is domestic in nature, and home and hearth have often been considered woman's domain and were strongly being promoted as such in the early-mid nineteenth century.

Foucault, amongst many, has pointed out that the modern prison and the modern factory arose together as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the need for a disciplined work-force. The fact that the places of female incarceration and punishment in colonial Australia were called factories is very strong supportive evidence of this notion – though manufacturing was arguably the least important of the various functions of these places. What is often also contended is that modern gender-roles and even constructs of the feminine and the masculine – well, western twentieth-century ones, anyway – were a product of the same thinking and societal pressures. Hegel wrote that

Man has his actual and substantive life in the state, in learning and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world ...Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind.

The young Victoria, retiring to the home to look after her young family and handing the reigns of government to her capable husband, exemplified this new bourgeois life-style. However, I suggest that the situation is a little more complex than this. At the same time that the idea of woman's domain as the home and the family was being strongly promulgated amongst the emerging middle class, lower-status women were becoming factory-fodder, filling over 50% of manufacturing jobs in some areas of Europe. So, in a way, you have

middle-class women being feminised and consigned to the home, whilst factory women are arguably being thrust into external, and in Hegel's terms, masculine roles. Despite this, during the 1800s, physical chastisement of women for punishment became unacceptable - at least to the middle-classes of Britain. Whereas the eighteenth century women of the First and Second Fleets could be flogged, nineteenth century British Abolitionists pointed to the whipping of half-naked women as evidence of the moral outrage of chattel slavery in the West Indies. In 1789 John Nichols reported the women on the *Lady Juliana* being flogged before they even left port and though he says the government agent responsible was dismissed for cruelty, there were female floggings on the ship at sea. Nance Ferrell, a particularly recalcitrant convict was not tamed by being enclosed in a barrel in which she could neither sit nor walk and so, Nichols reports,

we were forced to tie her up like a man and give her one dozen lashes and assure her of a clawing for every offence. This alone reduced her to any kind of order.

Nichols obviously had some qualms at the idea of women being flogged, and by the turn of the century a definite change in attitude to physical female punishment can be discerned. In a passage quoted in Hugh's *Fatal Shore* Michael Hayes, a gentleman convict, wrote from Sydney to his wife in 1802

I have been witness to some [women] flogged at the triangle . . . [but] the mode of punishment mostly adopted now . . . is shaving the head and ducking., and afterwards they are sent up to hard labour with the men.

This line about the women being sent to labour with the men is intriguing but as we all know, by the 1820s it was considered necessary to create a separate institution for the punishment and segregation of refractory females - The Female Factory at Paramatta, where flogging was not part of the punishment regime, but labour, including laundry-work was.

The laundry was also important to the labour-as-punishment regime in the female factories of Van Diemen's Land and in the record of one particularly refractory convict, Anne Summers, or Freeman, we can see the use of mixtures of punishment and how they changed over a period of 15 years from 1830 – 1845. In that time, Anne was on a charge 40 times and becomes a sort of longitudinal study of punishment in herself. She was sent to the tubs six times. For her 40 offenses she received 14 sentences to the cells – usually on bread and water, 10 to Crime Class 2 to second class. She was “sent to the interior” twice as well and she did 9 periods of hard labour (six in separate cells) other than the 6 periods she did at the tubs. The sentences are not evenly distributed across the years. Hard labour in the separate working cells comes in after 1840 – this is in line with the changes that were general in the convict system - and her sentences to the tubs were mostly early, though she did a laundry stint in 1842.

So, at many times and places through history, the laundry was considered women's work - certainly it was at the time of the female factories. We can see from Anne's record, it was definitely used as punishment and as strong punishment – Anne has one sentence where she is to go to crime class for three months, the first month at the tubs. The question remains – why is laundry-work considered such strong punishment? Well, to put it very simply, before the invention of modern washing-machines, washing clothes was very hard work. Water is heavy - a litre of water weighs (by definition) one kilogram. I was brought up in the days of the Monday washing-day and I remember well the routine with the copper and the pole and the Reckitt's Blue, but our copper was electric, and we had one of those early Hoover washing machines with a powered wringer - my wife Trish was brought up

with a coal-fired copper and a hand-turned mangle which is exactly what our convicts would have had.

Here's the routine – let's take sheets. Boil them in the copper then extract them with a pole (often an old broom-stick) and dump them in a tub of rinsing water and then into another tub of cold water which has some Reckitt's Blue added. In the absence of Reckitt's Blue, (and it wasn't widely available in Britain, let alone the colonies, until the 1850s) I reckon you would still go through two tubs of rinsing water, so you're lifting this heavy wet sheet three times with your broom-stick and then you have to put it through the mangle. This would be heavy work for a bloke – we need to remember that the average height of a convict woman was not much over five feet, and many of them were less than five foot.. Also remember that all the water will have to be fetched from the well or tank by hand in buckets. A modern plastic bucket full of water weighs about ten kilo's – for an old fashioned iron, wood or leather one add a couple more kilos. I estimate that we would need ten buckets-full for the copper and 7 or 8 for each rinsing tub to do a home wash. That's 250 kgs of water to carry for a home-wash before we even start the heavy work of washing. For the industrial scale of washing done at the female factories, I reckon those women may have had to carry a ton of water for each day at the tubs. And of course – you get wet. Women were officially issued more than one suit of slops so theoretically you could get dry after work IF you had actually been issued the clothes and IF the Flash Mob hadn't pinched your second lot and IF the second set had dried from the day before – very possibly not in winter in Tasmania. So you probably go to bed wet or naked or both. I hope I'm building up a picture of a very unpleasant punishment indeed.

There is, however, also an element of these women being put in their place – being kept down - and what better way to them in their place than by forcing them to perform domestic drudgery on an industrial scale? Without getting either too feminist, or too Freudian, about this there does seem to be something to do with sexual transgression – realised or potential - about the offences that get a woman sent to the tubs. I have not done an exhaustive longitudinal study of women sentenced to the wash-tub, but I have looked at the records of the first half dozen on our data-base who were so sentenced - Anne Summers was the fifth - and I think I can see a pattern.

In May 1826, at MacQuarie Harbour, Jane Davis was punished for disobedience of orders and “sending an improper note to Asst Surgeon Mr. Barnes” - for this transgression and uppity behaviour she was to wash 40 shirts a week. In 1833 Bridget Kelly got 3 months at the tubs for misconduct – the misconduct being having a man in her bed, (at the Cascades Factory, by the way). Later that year she got 6 months hard labour – no mention of the tubs - for harbouring a man in her master’s house. Mary-Ann Thomson got two separate sentences of one month at the wash-tubs for being AWOL (and insolent). Jane Beavens got three months crime class with one month at the tubs for being absent in January 1836, and another month at the tubs later in the year for the same offense. So, as we saw with Anne Summers, the tubs seem to be the high end of labour punishment. Anne was “Placed at the tubs” for three months for being away, but when she was out for three weeks, she was “to be kept at hard labour at the wash-tubs” for another 3 months, so we now see not only gradations of punishment in crime class, but, apparently grades of work at the tubs. If you accept my idea that the authorities see women loose in town as a sexual threat to order - and I contend that they say as much when they are setting up the factories or sentencing women “out of town”. If you accept that, then the only sentence to the tubs that I have seen in

my short study that is not one of actual or potential sexual transgression is one given to the afore-mentioned Jane Beavens who got one of her sentences to the tubs for “extreme filthiness in her person and her work” - I suppose they thought they would clean her up – literally. Interestingly though, when our Anne was “found in an indecent situation with a man in the public street, she did not go specifically to the tubs, though I suspect 3 months in Crime Class could include the tubs - at Ross they were in the Crime Class section.

As many of you know, my interest in this topic came from growing up near the Mt St Canice Convent in Sandy Bay – or the Naughty Girls Home as we called it. where the laundry was a major activity. What many of these girls were locked up for, as is now becoming well known, was sexual transgression – getting pregnant - and the parallels with the female factories are striking. Get pregnant in the convict system in Tasmania and you get put in to the factory, have your baby taken away and do six months in Crime Class, where they dress you in slops and one of the labour punishment regimes is the tubs. Get pregnant young and unwed in the 1950s, 60s and even into the 70s in Tasmania and they take your baby away and lock you up in Mt St Canice where they dress you in sack-cloth and one of the main labour-as-punishment regimes is the laundry – I hope I’ve finally got this off my chest, but Collette has opened my eyes to the ease with which the data-base allows a longitudinal study and I fear I’m not finished.