

BRITISH HUMANITARIANS AND FEMALE CONVICT TRANSPORTATION:

THE VOYAGE OUT

By Lucy Frost

Transportation to New South Wales began in 1788. Fifteen years later, the British sent a small party of soldiers, settlers and convicts to set up camp on the island of Van Diemen's Land. In the early years of settlement, female convicts were sent from New South Wales to the new colony "in small, irregular shipments".<sup>1</sup> In 1814, "a more orderly regime was established" and according to Philip Tardif in his pioneering work, *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls*, between 1814 and 1820 "more than a quarter of the 1420 women to arrive at Sydney were sent almost immediately" to the new colony.<sup>2</sup> "Transportation of women directly from England to Van Diemen's Land commenced in 1820," says Tardif, "when the *Morley* disembarked half of its human cargo at Hobart Town before proceeding to Sydney".<sup>3</sup> The Surgeon Superintendent of the *Morley*, responsible for both the well-being and the discipline of the convict women, was John Reid, a protégée of Elizabeth Fry.

After Reid returned to England, he wrote a book about the voyage of the *Morley* and his earlier voyage on a male transport, the *Neptune*. Busy as he must have been on those voyages, he kept extensive journals and these formed the basis of a book of more than 400 pages.<sup>4</sup> Reid's account was a critique fuelled by the fervour of a prison reformer. The foundation stone of the critique's "moral architecture"—to use Penny Edmonds' evocative phrase—is provided by the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Tardif, *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1990, p 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tardif, p 1.

<sup>3</sup> Tardif, p 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Two Voyages to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, with a Description of the Present Condition of that interesting Colony, Including Facts and Observations Relative to the State and Management of Convicts of Both sexes, also Reflections on Seduction and its General Consequences*. London, 1822. Subsequent quotations in the text refer to this edition.

abolitionist cause.<sup>5</sup> On the book's frontis page is a quotation from the celebrity abolitionist, William Wilberforce, and on page 4 Reid deploys metaphor to mobilise the cause of slavery in support of his concern for the convict transportees: "The punishment of exile had other terrors for the convicts themselves; which served to render the banishment a temporary slavery" (Reid 4).

By drawing the transportees into the discursive domain of slavery, Reid sought to take advantage of a by now widely recognised moral cause. His own cause, he says, is new. Until recently, prisoners on the ships were "treated as irrational beings; in dens like wild beasts; like them fed and kept in the closest restraint consistent with their health" (Reid 34). "Irrational beings" were "irreclaimable". Reid was advocating a new model: instead of "wild beasts" to be caged throughout the voyage, the convicts were to be conceptualised as humans for whom the voyage might be a step towards moral reform.

As Surgeon Superintendent in charge of the daily routines and discipline aboard the *Morley*, Reid saw himself as expanding the mission of the British prison reformers, and specifically of Elizabeth Fry. Fry was Reid's personal mentor, and he dedicates the book to her, expressing "admiration of that zeal which urged you, regardless of all personal inconvenience, to explore the long neglected recesses of the friendless prison". Reid styled himself an acolyte impelled "to give your grand experiment a fair trial; to prove how far the system of kindness and confidence, so auspiciously commenced in Newgate, could be made to answer under other circumstances" (Reid iv-v).

Reid credits Elizabeth Fry with getting him the appointment on the *Morley*, but how he came to know her is not quite clear. The only biographical information I have found is an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Biography*, categorising him as naval surgeon and prison reformer, and saying that he was born in Ireland in 1791 to Protestant parents. Nothing suggests that he was a Quaker. Reid's book indicates that he was already committed to reform in 1817 when he established on the *Neptune* "a fixed system of order and regularity in

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<sup>5</sup> Penelope Edmonds, "Collecting Looerryminer's 'Testimony': Aboriginal Women, Sealers, and Quaker Humanitarian Anti-Slavery Thought and Action in the Bass Strait Islands", *Australian Historical Studies* 45 (2014) p 15.

the prison” based on “suggestions received from the Rev Mr Price at Sheerness” (Reid 38). After returning from that voyage, he entered the British humanitarian network as a witness bearing testimony, and apparently this is how he met Elizabeth Fry:

Having in duty reported to the proper authority the account of my voyage in the Neptune, I was requested frequently to explain to several persons interested in the cause of humanity many particulars of my system of management in the superintendence of convicts during transportation. The commands of Mrs. Fry in this respect met my warmest wishes; and as that lady’s exertions were then most actively devoted to effect a virtuous change in the female prisoners in Newgate, it was suggested that taking charge of a female convict ship to New South Wales might be productive of similar consequences. (Reid 93)

At this stage John Reid was a young naval surgeon not yet thirty years old, and I suspect an outsider, being Irish. Elizabeth Fry at forty was a confident reformer, energetic and well-connected. According to Reid’s admiring account, she acted and he did her bidding:

Mrs Fry lost not a moment in waiting on the Comptroller of the Navy, who, instantly coinciding in her views, gave his full support and encouragement; and ordered my appointment immediately to the next female transport ship to be taken up for New South Wales. (Reid 94)

Even if Elizabeth Fry was not quite a fairy godmother waving her wand, there’s no disputing the reality of her involvement with the female convict transports and her influence in Whitehall.

Reid says that while the *Morley* was being fitted out at Deptford, he visited the ship at the “invitation” of Mrs Fry. He “accompanied that lady and two others ... to visit the vessel and see the preparations going forward”. Fry had access to the ship *before* the Surgeon Superintendent because another member of her humanitarian network was Captain Young, the Royal Navy’s agent for transports. Young authorised these visits, and listened to the ladies’ recommendations for fitting out the ship, negotiating a solution to their desire that space be allocated for a school.

Fry and her friends were visiting the *Morley* as members of the 'Ladies' Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners in Newgate', established by eleven Quaker women in 1817, the year Reid was trying out his system of moral reform among the male transportees on the *Neptune*. The Ladies Committee concentrated on improving the appalling physical circumstances suffered by the prisoners, and giving them something to do while they waited through interminable days. Buoyed by their initial success at Newgate, they had begun to extend their mission to the convict transports and two years after the *Morley* sailed, a new organisation would be formed specifically to minister to the women on the ships. The Ladies' British Society (the name sounding strikingly imperial under the circumstances) would for more than ten years dedicate themselves to the daunting task of preparing a gift parcel for every single woman who sailed from the Thames. This small group of middle-class women whose meetings never attracted more than twenty-five members, and on occasion dipped to eight, affected the lives of thousands of working-class convicts.

As I have written elsewhere,

the gifts brought by the Ladies were personal and homely, the kinds of things the Admiralty (which didn't even provide clothing for the transportees at this stage) completely ignored: a bag for the convict's clothes, two aprons, a comb, black cotton cambric to make a cap, spectacles for those who needed them, a work bag with scissors, thimbles, pins, needles and thread. Every mess received a knife and fork, a ball of string, two coarse tidy aprons for cooks, and two large bags to hold the most surprising item in the gift allotment, two pounds (almost a kilo) per woman of patchwork pieces so that during the voyage each convict could make a quilt. Quilting would break the boredom, and upon arrival in the colonial port, the convict could sell her quilt and keep the profit. Today the single most significant artefact surviving from the voyages of 25,000 women transported to the Australian colonies is the patchwork quilt made collectively by convicts on board the *Rajah* during 1841, and

inscribed with a dedication to the Ladies of the British Society's Convict Ship Committee.<sup>6</sup>

When the *Morley* sailed, 21 years before the *Rajah*, patchwork pieces had not yet solved the problem of keeping the women busy. Instead, says Reid, "a quantity of straw for plaiting, and some materials for knitting and sewing were purchased" by the Committee, "as their funds would allow, in order to afford the convicts employment on the voyage" (Reid 97). Plaiting straw in the open air on a sea voyage ... the Ladies' system was still in its experimental phase. But what interests me most is that it was possible for a small group of dedicated reformers to make real, effective interventions within the massive bureaucracy of the British Admiralty. It looks to me as if Fry understood the bureaucracy, knew who made what decisions, and cultivated a London network of men (from her own class) who shared her values and could make things happen.

However, no matter how much influence Fry and her fellow humanitarians exerted over the outfitting of the ships or the gifts to the convict women, their practical control ended when the transports sailed from the Thames. During the early years of transportation, horror tales had filtered back to the British public, tales of sickly and emaciated convicts suffering from diseases like scurvy or typhus, and of sexual promiscuity turning the ships like the *Lady Julian* into the "floating brothel" about which Sian Rees has written so vividly.<sup>7</sup> By the time the *Morley* initiated the transportation of women directly to Van Diemen's Land, the Admiralty had introduced a 'New System of sending properly Qualified Naval surgeons in charge of the convicts'<sup>8</sup>. The 'System' in its early years was little more than a collage of improvisations, and this was especially true when it came to looking after women and children. A naval surgeon who might well have practiced medicine exclusively on a Man-of-War was suddenly delivering babies, caring for infants, and diagnosing menstrual complications. Moreover, he was compelled to keep a journal compiling a daily

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<sup>6</sup> Lucy Frost, "Gifts of Patchwork and Visits to Whitehall: the British Ladies' Society and Female Convict Ships," in *Victorian Traffic Identity, Exchange, Performance*, ed Sue Thomas, Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, Newcastle, England, 2008, p 7.

<sup>7</sup> See Sian Rees, *The Floating Brothel*, Hodder Headline Australia, Sydney 2001.

<sup>8</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney, series I: vol. 9, 344.

sick list, accompanied by case notes. Until he submitted his journal to the Admiralty in London, his final pay would be withheld.

The journals kept by these surgeons superintendent constitute a remarkable archive of medical history, detailed records of health care for working-class women and their children during the first half of the nineteenth century. Members of the Female Convicts Research Centre have been transcribing the journals and adding them to the extensive collection on our website. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May we are holding a day-long seminar on the subject of the female convict voyages. From the work our members have done thus far, we are building a picture of long voyages with low morality and evidence of genuinely caring doctors. Few surgeons superintendent were motivated like John Reid by a specifically humanitarian program of reform, and yet it seems to me that the most significant legacy of reformers like Fry and Reid, together with their well-placed network in the Admiralty was to create new expectations about how transportees were to be treated. They changed the paradigm. Convicts might be social outcasts, but they were not animals to be locked into a dark den below decks, and with what Reid describes as Mrs Fry's system of "kindness and confidence" they might be brought back inside the pale. The journals of the surgeons superintendent aboard the female transports to Van Diemen's Land are proof that a new penal philosophy was in the ascendancy.