

# ESTHER DOWLING

(*Currency Lass*, 1834)

by

Don Bradmore

The story of convict Esther DOWLING is an intriguing one. When reading the story, it is not difficult to get the impression that she *wanted* to be a convict – and that she wanted to remain a convict *forever!*

Only twenty-one years of age when she arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) in 1834, Esther had had twenty-seven appearances before the courts in Sydney before her transportation.<sup>1</sup> And, in VDL, her many new offences were responsible for her original three-year term of transportation being extended five times, for a total of six years!<sup>2</sup>

Birth records in New South Wales (NSW) show that Esther was born there in 1813, the second child of Christopher DOWLING and his wife Martha<sup>3</sup>

Esther's parents both have interesting histories. Published details about their lives give conflicting information and provide confusing dates but it seems that Martha DOWLING (nee LESSLY/LESSLEY and other variants) was born in Ireland around 1790. She had first arrived in NSW as a nineteen year-old about 1809.<sup>4</sup> On 21 July 1812, she had married fifteen year-old Christopher Dowling, believed to have been born in the colony in 1797.<sup>5</sup> By that time, it appears that she had given birth to a son, also named Christopher, in 1810.<sup>6</sup> (Was Martha's husband, Christopher, the father of this child? If the dates shown are correct, he would have been only twelve or thirteen at the time of the child's conception.<sup>7</sup>) Soon after the birth of Esther in 1813, Martha is believed to have returned to England where it is thought that she might have given birth to three more children.<sup>8</sup> However, in early 1823 – ten years after leaving NSW - she was convicted at the Old Bailey, London, for the theft of three hearth rugs and ten yards of flannel.<sup>9</sup> Sentenced to transportation for life, she arrived back at Sydney as a convict aboard *Mary III* (1)

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sydney Herald* (NSW), 17 February 1834, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> TAHO: CON13/6 p300 in series CON13 ASSIGNMENT LISTS AND ASSOCIATED PAPERS

<sup>3</sup> NSW BDM: 223/1813/ V1813223 7; 3106/1813 V18133106 1A.

<sup>4</sup> <https://lists.rootsweb.com/hyperkitty/list/aus-pt-jackson-convicts@rootsweb.com/thread/7758275/>

<sup>5</sup> Marriage: Christopher Dowling-Martha Lessly, NSW BDM 1384/1812 V18121383 3A.

<sup>6</sup> Birth, son Christopher: NSW BDM 2610/1810 V18102610 1A; 5/1810 V18105 7.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Dowling's age: taken from 'Ancestry Public Trees' and not verified.

<sup>8</sup> See Public Family Trees in 'Ancestry.com.au'.

<sup>9</sup> [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) – case reference t18230219-51.

on 18 October 1823.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that she was assigned upon arrival to her husband.<sup>11</sup> Between 1825 and 1831, she gave birth to five more children.<sup>12</sup>

When Martha arrived back in NSW as a convict, her eldest daughter, Esther, was about ten years of age. As the eldest girl, Esther probably had to shoulder a lot of the burden of running the house and helping to raise her younger siblings – and it likely that she resented that! Whether that is true or not, it is clear that even as a teenager she was unhappy at home and a very troubled young person.

In August 1830, the following item appeared in a Sydney newspaper:

*Esther Dowling, an old acquaintance with the Bench, arrayed in gold bobs or pendants, leghorn hat, China shawl, and Brussels lace frills, was charged with being in George Street on the previous evening, lying on her back ... completely overcome with inebriety; it further appearing that she was a street-walker, and that although only a girl of about eighteen years of age, she would not live with her parents, she was ordered to the Factory for six weeks.*<sup>13</sup>

A very troubled young person? Yes, obviously! Dressed up in all her finery, lying on her back in the middle of Sydney's main street, totally drunk! A prostitute! And not her first offence! Far from it! Still only seventeen or eighteen, she was an 'old acquaintance' of the courts! Six weeks imprisonment at the Female Factory at Parramatta!!

Esther's gaol term on that occasion seems to have taught her little. Although not all of her later court appearances were reported in the daily papers, those that were indicate that she was on a downward spiral. In November of the following year, this newspaper report appeared:

*Esther Dowling, for having a regular set-to in front of St. James Church during service, was ordered to find bail to keep the peace, in default of which she was sent to jail.*<sup>14</sup>

And, in April of the next year:

*Esther Dowling, one of the elite, was charged with picking up a carpenter in the employ of Mr. Little, and afterwards picking his pocket of £1. 2s. 6d. Committed to take her trial at the Quarter Sessions.*<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, when Esther was taken to trial on this charge in May 1833, she was acquitted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Irish+convicts+Peter+Mayberry>

<sup>11</sup> <https://lists.rootsweb.com/hyperkitty/list/aus-pt-jackson-convicts@rootsweb.com/thread/7758275/>

<sup>12</sup> NSW BDM.

<sup>13</sup> *The Sydney Monitor* (NSW), 28 August 1830, p.2.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sydney Herald* (NSW), 7 November 1831, p.1.

<sup>15</sup> *The Sydney Monitor*, 3 April 1833, p.4.

In July of the same year, Esther was charged again, this time for the theft of a silk handkerchief from a man she happened to know - but again she was fortunate when the man failed to appear in court to prosecute. In dismissing her, the magistrate told her that it was evident that man had done wrong in failing to press the charge because, if he had not believed she was guilty, he would not have had her arrested in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

By this time, Esther was well-known to the police as ‘an idle and disorderly character’. In December 1833, in company with a female acquaintance she accosted a man as he sitting outside his workplace in full daylight. The women told him that he had just dropped something from his pocket. He immediately examined his pockets and, taking out a note of the Bank of Australia, thanked them and replied that he did not think he had dropped anything. Esther then snatched at the note, tore some of it away, and ran off. The next morning, she was apprehended presenting the torn note at a bank. At the court hearing, the magistrate ordered that she be sent to gaol for a month.<sup>18</sup>

In 1833 Esther married a man by the name of John GREEN.<sup>19</sup> Nothing is known about him with any certainty.

The marriage was not destined to last long. Within months, Esther had transgressed again, this time with even more serious consequences. In early February 1834, a constable doing his rounds saw Esther with two men and another woman acting suspiciously in the street. As he approached them, the four began to run. Seeing that they were being followed by the constable, the four separated. The constable, who had recognized Esther, chased after her. As he caught up with her, he saw her drop several articles, including clothing, a half-gallon bottle of spirits and a small keg, to the ground. The constable arrested her and took her to the watch-house. There it was discovered that the items she had dropped had been stolen from a nearby hotel the previous night. She was committed for trial.<sup>20</sup>

When Esther came to trial - on 31 May 1834 – she was convicted of theft and sentenced to transportation for three years. She arrived at Hobart aboard *Currency Lass* on 31 August that same year.

There, she was described as being five feet two and a half inches (about 158.5cms) tall, of a fair complexion with light brown hair and blue eyes. She stated that she was twenty-one years old and that she had lived away from home for only two months. She admitted that she had been ‘on the town’ – a prostitute - for two months.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Currency Lad* (Sydney), 4 May 1833, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> *The Sydney Monitor* (NSW), 20 July 1833, p.2.

<sup>18</sup> *The Sydney Herald*, 19 December 1833, p.2.

<sup>19</sup> Marriage to GREEN: NSW 100/1833 V1833100 17.

<sup>20</sup> *The Sydney Herald*, 13 February 1834, p.1; 17 February 1834, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> CON40-1-3,; CON13-1-6 via FCRC database.

Interestingly, Esther stated that she was single. Was this true? Had her marriage to John Green ended within a year or so? Had it ended when she was transported? Did she ever see him again? There is some uncorroborated evidence to suggest that she might have!

Confusingly, Esther was listed in convict records in VDL under two different surnames – Dowling and ‘GRADE’<sup>22</sup>. Rightfully, her surname after her marriage eighteen months or so earlier was now ‘GREEN’. Why, therefore, was she known as ‘GRADE’ in VDL? Was this simply a transcription error on her documents? To add to the confusion, she also seems to have been named as Esther WADE in at least one other convict document. Again, was this a transcription error? A corruption of the name ‘Grade’, perhaps?<sup>23</sup>

It was not long before Esther had committed an offence in VDL. On 23 June 1835, while in the service of a master or mistress by the name of WHITNEY, she was found late at night in the streets of Hobart. She was punished by being sent to gaol for six days where she was fed only on bread and water.<sup>24</sup>

That was to be the first of Esther’s many transgressions in VDL. In total, she was charged with offences in the colony seventeen times. In all of these instances, she seems to have been known to her employers and the authorities as ‘Esther Grade’.

It should be said, however, that none of Esther’s transgressions were vicious. She did not murder, or kidnap, or burn, or bash, or assault with violence. But, taken together, her continual offences suggest that she was always a troublesome nuisance, insolent and ill-disciplined. They appear to show that she cared little about being punished for her actions - or for her eventual release.

On six occasions, Esther was charged with absconding from the households to which she had been assigned. On the first occasion, in February 1836, her original term of transportation was extended by two years. That did not deter her. On the second occasion, in March 1836, her original term of transportation was extended by another year and, in addition, she was punished by being sent to gaol in the notorious ‘C’ (Crime) Class section of the House of Corrections for three months. Again she was not deterred! On the third occasion, in May 1837, another year was added to her original term of transportation. On the fourth occasion, in October 1837, yet another

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<sup>22</sup> Index No: 27480 and 19796; Record ID: 1396278 and 1388369; Other Records: 13/1/6, Page 300, via ‘Libraries’ Tasmania, Tasmanian Government @ [https://libriariestas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en\\_AU/names/search/results?qu=NI\\_NAME%3DEsther&qu=NI\\_NAME%3DGrade](https://libriariestas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/search/results?qu=NI_NAME%3DEsther&qu=NI_NAME%3DGrade).

<sup>23</sup> CON13-1-6, via FCRC website.

<sup>24</sup> CON13-1-6.

year was added. On the fifth occasion, in May 1838, she managed to escape with a sentence of three months, twenty-one days of which were to be spent at the washtubs in the 'C' Class laundry and/or in solitary confinement, again fed only on bread and water. On the sixth occasion, in September 1838, her original term of transportation was extended by another year.<sup>25</sup>

When apprehended after her sixth and final absconding, *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston) informed readers that she had been 'apprehended at George Town, dressed in men's clothes'!<sup>26</sup>

Absconding was not Esther's only offence. In August 1836, she was sent to 'C' Class for being 'absent without leave' and 'drunk'. In July 1837, she served another ten days in solitary confinement for being 'found in the company of a runaway'. In October 1837, while still a prisoner, she spent a month at the 'C' Class laundry washtubs for 'refusing to attend religious instruction in the chapel'. In February 1838, while in the service of BRIGGS, she was sentenced to seven days solitary confinement on bread and water for being 'out after hours'. In October 1838, while again a prisoner in 'C' Class, she spent another fourteen days in solitary confinement, again on bread and water, for 'disorderly conduct in concealing meat in her pocket'. In April 1839, employed in the FLETCHER household, she was charged with 'insolence' but, on this occasion, simply 'admonished'. In September 1839, she was charged with 'misconduct when out of hours' but the charge was not sustained and she was dismissed without penalty.<sup>27</sup>

It is possible that Esther's charge of being out after hours in September 1839 had something to do with a man she had met at about that time. As it happens, on 15 October 1838, she had applied for permission to marry Isaac (also known as James) MILLS, a former convict who had arrived in VDL on *Lady Castlereagh* twenty-one years earlier – but approval to marry was not granted until July 1839.<sup>28</sup>

On 20 August 1839, Esther and James married at St Luke's Church, Campbell Town. Esther's surname is shown on the marriage entry as 'Grade alias Dowling'. Her age is shown as twenty-four but she must have been at least a year, and possibly two years, older. James's age is shown as thirty-five but could that be correct? If he had arrived on *Lady Castlereagh* in 1818, he would have been only about fourteen at that time!. His occupation is shown on the marriage entry as 'brick maker'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CON40-1-3, via FCRC website.

<sup>26</sup> *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 September 1838, p.2

<sup>27</sup> CON40-1-3, via FCRC website.

<sup>28</sup> Permission: CON52/1/1/, page 120.

<sup>29</sup> RGD37/1/1 469/1839, Avoca, Tasmania.

However, perhaps of even greater interest is that the names of the witnesses to the marriage of Esther and James are shown as John and Mary GREEN. Could that possibly be the John Green whom Esther had married in Sydney in 1833? Or is it just a strange coincidence?

After the marriage Esther seems to have settled down a little but her new life did not bring about an end to her troubles with the law.<sup>30</sup>

In July 1840, Esther was granted a ticket of leave.<sup>31</sup> But even now, she was still proving troublesome to the authorities. On 15 July 1842, presumably working on her own account, she was charged by her employer with 'gross misconduct in abusing her mistress and with using indecent and slanderous language'. As a consequence, her ticket of leave was suspended and she was sentenced to another three months imprisonment with hard labour.<sup>32</sup>

Within months of her release, Esther was charged again. On 17 December 1842, now assigned to the MALCOLM household, she was charged with 'insolence'. This time she was given an even harsher sentence - imprisonment for six months, with hard labour.<sup>33</sup>

That was to be Esther's last known offence. On 17 January 1843, she was granted a certificate of freedom.<sup>34</sup> She was a free woman again.

What happened to her after that is uncertain. Like many other convict women who have disappeared from the pages of history after their release, she seems to have vanished completely. The Tasmanian Pioneers Index ('Digger') has no listing of the death of an Esther Mills or Esther Dowling or Esther Grade or Esther Wade.

Did she change her name? Did she remarry? Did she leave the colony? There are no answers to these questions yet.

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<sup>30</sup> CON40-1-3, via FCRC website.

<sup>31</sup> *Hobart Town Gazette*, 17 July 1842; *The Hobart Town Courier and Van Diemen's Land Gazette*, 24 July 1840, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> *Hobart Town Gazette*, 12 August 1842; *Colonial Times*, 16 August 1842, p.4.

<sup>33</sup> CON40-1-3, via FCRC website.

<sup>34</sup> CON40-1-3, via FCRC website.