

CONVICT JULIA MILLS

(*Providence*, 1826)

by

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Julia MILLS was only seventeen when she arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) as a convict on 16 May 1826.

Although there are still some large gaps in Mills's life history – which, hopefully, further research will be able to fill – her story is surely one of the most intriguing of those of the 13,500 (approx.) females who were transported to the colony between 1812 and 1853.¹

Mills was born in Ireland about 1809 – but it was at the Lancaster Assizes, Lancashire, England, on 15 May 1825, that she was convicted. Why had she left Ireland to go to England? That is still one of the unanswered questions.

The crime of which she was found guilty at Lancaster was 'stealing from a dwelling house'. A sentence of death was recorded against her but, as was the general custom at that time, it was later commuted to transportation for life.²

Afterwards, Mills was put aboard *Providence II* (2) which, with another ninety-nine female convicts bound for VDL, sailed from the Downs on Christmas Eve, 1825.³ Also on board were the wives and children of seven convicts already in the colony, as well as a number of men, women and children who were migrating to VDL as free settlers. In the cargo hold was a variety of goods sorely needed in the colony, including a quantity of iron required for government purposes.⁴

In command of the vessel, and responsible for its safe arrival at Hobart, was Captain John WAUCHOPE. The Surgeon-Superintendent, responsible for the safe arrival – morally as well as physically - of the convicts, was Matthew BURNSIDE.⁵

¹ <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/>

² CON40-1-7, Image 29.

³ <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

⁴ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 20 May 1826, p.2.

⁵ http://jenwillets.com/matthew_burnside_surgeon.html

The arrival of *Providence* at Hobart Town was greeted with considerable excitement. The *Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser* reported that, while most of the female convicts on board had been selected from London prisons, the majority were:

*... young women ... of a very superior class to those which have been recently sent... We wish them much happiness! When we consider the great disproportion that exists between the numbers of the two sexes in this Colony, which is said to be ten to one female, perhaps not a more desirable consignment could be made to this Colony than a cargo of the fair sex ...*⁶

On 20 May 1826, a Government Notice published in the *Hobart Town Gazette* advised readers that ‘such Persons as may be desirous to obtain Servants are requested to apply forthwith, by Letter, to the Principal Superintendent.’⁷ A week later, the same paper reported that ‘half the women by the *Providence* have been assigned to settlers ... They appear in general a healthy and useful class.’⁸

However, the *Hobart Town Gazette* was apparently unaware that things were not all they appeared to be.

To begin with, quite a number of the convict women were far from being of ‘a very superior class’. Some of them had been very troublesome indeed, both in gaol before being shipped out to VDL and on the voyage itself. In his report to the Admiralty, Surgeon-Superintendent Burnside had been scathing in his remarks about several. For instance, of convict Julia MULLINS, he wrote:

*She is a notorious strumpet and a dangerous girl. The trouble which she gave me is immeasurable. Repeatedly I have been obliged to put her into irons and confined her in the Coal-Hold. Hard labour or solitary confinement ought to be assigned to her.*⁹

Of convict Jane McDONALD, he wrote:

Was rather given to plunder by night and at all times studious to promote discord among her fellow prisoners with intention to incite tumult ...

And of convict Ann CLANCEY, he wrote:

⁶ Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser, 19 May 1826, p.2.

⁷ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 20 May 1826, p.3.

⁸ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 27 May 1826, p.2.

⁹ See Tardif, P. (1990). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson for brief biographies of all women transported to VDL, 1803-1829 including Julia Mullins and Jane McDonald, Ann Clancey.

... she is truly notoriously bad; seldom is never without fighting by day or night with one or other of her fellow prisoners. Had her twice imprisoned in the Coal-Hold with both legs in irons for threatening expressions and most disgusting language unbecoming woman-kind, and in my opinion I quite believe her to be capable of committing the worst of crimes.

There were more reports in this vein. However, the majority of the convict women received very favourable reports from Burnside. For instance, Mary WARREN had ‘conducted herself with credit. Never at any time incurred my displeasure or the ill-word of any of her fellow prisoners.’ Lucy TIBBETTS had ‘conducted herself very properly. Of a quiet disposition, never having once had occasion to find fault with her.’ And Elizabeth STENSON had ‘conducted herself in a proper manner highly creditable to her youth, among so many given up to all vice.’¹⁰

Of Julia Mills, in whom (it was to emerge later) Burnside had taken a special interest during the voyage, he was equally commendatory - if somewhat ambiguous! He had found her to be:

‘Mild and tractable. Conducted herself with becoming decency. Is a girl of superior feeling to most on board. Has preserved a gentle uniform temper during the passage, and only associated with two or three of the prisoners whose actions were a moral recommendation to her. Her conduct deserves great approbation.’¹¹

What soon became known, however, was that it was more than special interest that Surgeon-Superintendent Burnside had taken in Mills. He had not only cohabited with her during the entire voyage but he had also frequently lured others into his cabin to drink with them.¹²

According to historian Joy Damousi, details of Burnside’s scurrilous behavior were soon brought to the attention of the Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, George ARTHUR, and Burnside’s conduct on *Providence* was to become the subject of an official enquiry which was ultimately to cost him his job, his pay and his reputation. The enquiry also found that Wauchope, the master of the vessel, had ‘in no way exerted himself in an earnest manner to prevent the improprieties’.

Expressing his alarm at these findings and declaring that Burnside had proven himself to be ‘most unworthy of the trust reposed in him’, Arthur relayed the information to the New South Wales Governor, Sir Ralph DARLING who, on 26 July, 1826, wrote to the Commissioners of the Navy in England:

¹⁰ Tardif, P. (1990).

¹¹ Tardif, P. (1990).

¹² Damousi, J. (1997). *Depraved and Disorderly*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press. See also Tardif, P. (1990), Frances, R. (2007). *Selling Sex*. Sydney: UNSW Press; Stone, G. (2009). *Beautiful Bodies*. Melbourne: Pan Macmillan.

*Gentlemen, I have the honor to transmit, for Your information, the Report, which the Quarter Master of the 57th Regiment has made of the highly improper and indecorous conduct of Mr. Burnside, Surgeon Superintendent of the Female Convict Ship the Providence, on his arrival here from Van Dieman's Land. I have been informed by the Lieutenant Governor of that Colony that the Behaviour of Mr. Burnside on the Passage out was so extremely unbecoming his character, as a Married Man and inconsistent with his duty, that he had felt himself called on to represent it to You.*¹³

Burnside was banned from further transport service immediately. This was not the outcome that Burnside would have expected when appointed to the *Providence* less than twelve months earlier.

Still in his early thirties, he had been included in the Navy List of Medical Officers since 1814. He had served as surgeon aboard the convict ship *Regulus* to Canada prior to his appointment to *Providence* and the medical journals he kept aboard both vessels clearly show him to have been a skilful and caring doctor. Nevertheless, he now had no choice but to return to England. There, despite some serious financial difficulties that he suffered between 1846 and 1862, he and his wife raised eleven children. Although he was still on the list of Surgeons of the Royal Navy who were fit for service in 1841, he never recovered his former standing. In the 1861 census, his occupation was given as Half Pay Officer of the Royal Navy. He died on 7th July 1869 at the age of seventy-four.¹⁴

Julia Mills seems not to have been censured in any way for her part in the *Providence* affair. Described upon arrival as being five feet and two inches (152.4cms) tall, with brown hair and dark grey eyes, she was a nursery maid and house servant by trade. She was appropriated immediately to a Mr. HAYES.¹⁵

After that, all that is known with certainty about Mills is that her behavior in VDL was exemplary. Not a single offence was recorded against her in the colony. In 1831, she was given a ticket-of-leave. In 1836, she received a conditional pardon. In 1840, she was granted a free pardon.¹⁶

Before this, on 15 September 1829 at St. David's Church, Hobart, Mills had married a man

¹³ HRA., Series 1, vol., XII, p.451.

¹⁴ https://www.jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_providence_1826.html

¹⁵ CON40-1-7, Image 29. Hayes has been referred to by some researchers as a 'surgeon' – See <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/> - but this has not been verified. No record of a surgeon Hayes in VDL at that time has been found.

¹⁶ CON40-1-7, Image 29; ToL: *The Independent (Launceston)*, 6 August 1831, *Hobart Town Gazette*, 7 February 1840. p.4; CP: *Bent's News and Tasmanian Three-Penny Register* (Hobart), 1 October 1836, p.3.

whose name is shown on the marriage entry as John HAYS (*sic*), a widower. Was that the Mr. Hayes to whom she was assigned in 1826? That is still an unanswered question.¹⁷

But what happened to Mills after that is an even bigger mystery. She appears to have simply vanished. No record of her giving birth in VDL, or of a remarriage or death, has been found. Nor has any remarriage or death been located for John Hays. Did they leave the colony?

¹⁷ RGD 36/1289/1829, Hobart.