

SUSAN CORFIELD

[*Mary III*, (1) 1823]

by

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Convict Susan CORFIELD had been in Van Diemens Land (VDL) for only a little over seven years when she was brutally murdered at Hobart by a jealous lover.¹ She had just received her certificate of freedom after having completed her term of servitude. She was twenty-eight years old and single.

Of course, Susan did not ask, or deserve, to be murdered. She was the victim of a monstrous attack by an enraged, vicious killer. It was he who was solely responsible for her death and he was executed for his crime. However, based on evidence presented at his trial, some would think that Susan's behavior in the years before her death had been imprudent, rash and duplicitous.²

This is the tale of her short, pathetic life:

Susan - whose first name is also seen in some early documents as 'Susanna' and 'Susannah' and surname as CAULFIELD - was born at Bristol, England, around 1801.³ Her father, Richard CORFIELD, was an Excise Officer – a collector of the taxes on imported goods such as tobacco and liquor – for more than twenty years but had passed away before Susan was transported. From the little that is known of her mother, Ann (nee GREEN) CORFIELD, she seems to have had a big family and to have been a woman of good character.⁴ Records show that Susan could both read and write and so she may have received some basic education.⁵

Nevertheless, Susan appears to have been a wayward young lady – and, on 18 July 1822, at the age of twenty-one, she was found guilty at the Bristol Quarter Sessions of the theft of twenty-two yards of cotton print and was sentenced to transportation for seven years.⁶ She departed England aboard the convict vessel *Mary III* on 10 June 1823 and by 5 October that year she was at Hobart Town.⁷

¹ CON40/1/1, Image 261; Police Number 53; Susan's burial: 17 February 1830 – RGD34/2149/1830, Hobart.

² *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 February 1830, p.2.

³ Year of birth calculated from age on arrival at Hobart.

⁴ See Ann Corfield's petition requesting that her daughter be imprisoned in England rather than transported: HO17/117/XN21, via FCRC website.

⁵ CON40/1/1, Image 261.

⁶ CON40/1/1, Image 261.

⁷ <http://members.iinet/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

Upon arrival, Susan admitted that she had been ‘on the town’ – that is, a prostitute - for at least eight months before the conviction that had led to her transportation. Although no details are given, her convict documents seem to indicate that she had had a previous conviction. The report from the English gaol where she was held while awaiting transportation describes her as ‘bad’.⁸

Unfortunately, Susan’s convict documents do not include a physical description of her but it seems likely that she was a bright, healthy, active and appealing young woman, the kind that was in great demand by free settlers as domestic servants. This is attested to by the ‘quality’ of the settlers to whom she was assigned during the years of her servitude. These included Dr. Edward Foord BROMLEY (Colonial Treasurer, 1820-1824), Mr. William SORELL Jnr. (son of William SORELL, Lieutenant-Governor of the Colony, 1816-1824), and Mr. BOYD (Chief Clerk at the Police Office.)⁹

She was also the kind of young, single woman keenly sought as wives and paramours by the many unmarried men in the colony!

Despite these advantages, Susan was a troublesome prisoner. During the seven years of her servitude she was charged with offences on twelve occasions: ‘absconding’ five times (1825, 1826, 1827, 1828 1829); being ‘absent’ from her place of service twice (1826, 1828); ‘disobedience of orders’ (1824); ‘insolence’ (1827); ‘disorderly behavior in the street’ (1827); and ‘drunk and disorderly’ (1829). On a number of occasions, when apprehended by the police after she had absconded or absented herself, she had been located in a tavern of some kind – once in bed with a lover! For some of these offences, she was punished severely. For instance, after absconding from the service of her mistress, Mrs. WOODS, in April 1827, she was sent to prison where she was confined to a cell and fed only on bread and water for three days and then, after that, forced to spend two days of public humiliation in the stocks. On other occasions, she was sent for short periods to the Female Factory, usually confined to ‘C’ (‘Crime’) Class, the section of the prison reserved for the worst offenders.¹⁰

It was while she was confined at the Cascades Female Factory in 1828 that she committed one of her most outrageous offences. On 20 December that year, she was charged with writing two letters and throwing them over the wall of the gaol, presumably to someone waiting outside. For this offence, she was sentenced to spend seven days in a cell within ‘C’ Class, again to be fed only on bread and water.¹¹

⁸ CON40/1/1, Image 261.

⁹ Convict documents via FCRC website.

¹⁰ Convict documents via FCRC website

¹¹ Convict documents via FCRC website.

Eventually, however, Susan had completed her seven year term of transportation. On 1 August 1829, she was issued with her certificate of freedom.¹² She was a free woman again. But, sadly, she had only a few more months to live!

On 19 February 1830, the following article appeared in the Colonial Times:

*A most barbarous murder was committed on Saturday night last, on the body of Susan Corfield, a young woman who had become free by servitude, and had for some time past cohabited with a Mr. REED, who was about to marry her. It appears that John OXLEY, formerly a Constable, had been long an intimate acquaintance with the unfortunate woman, and he had several times before threatened to do her some personal injury. There is every reason to believe, from expressions that he had recently used, that he had heard of the intended marriage, and it seems he took the opportunity of [re-introducing] himself to her at a time when she had been drinking, to which she was much addicted. She was found with her throat cut, her head nearly severed from her body ...*¹³

John Oxley, the man believed to have murdered Susan, was a former convict. Twelve years earlier, he had been convicted of house-breaking in England and sentenced to transportation for life. His gaol report while awaiting transportation described him as ‘bad’. He had arrived at Hobart per *Lord Melville* in December 1818.¹⁴ In 1824, after having received his ticket of leave, he had been appointed a constable at Hobart.¹⁵ His conduct record shows that, prior to the murder of Susan, he had committed only one offence in the colony – but it was a significant one! On 10 October 1826, he had been charged with an assault on Susan but had been excused, subject to his keeping the peace for six months.¹⁶

On the day following Susan’s death, the Coroner, Mr. HONE, investigated the facts surrounding it. He heard that just before Susan was found dead, Oxley had been seen calling to her from across the street and then standing near her door. No other person had been seen in the vicinity. Afterwards, Oxley had returned to his own lodgings where he had burnt the clothes he had been wearing that day. Mr. Boyd, Chief Clerk at the Police Office, for whom Susan had worked for quite a long time in her early days in VDL, told the coroner that he was aware that Oxley had threatened to harm her on at least three occasions previously. The coroner also heard that Susan’s dead body had been discovered by her lover Mr. Reed (seen as REID in some reports) when he had returned home that day. For this reason, Reed had also come under some suspicion but two respectable witnesses, Mr. WINTLE and Mr. OLDING, told the coroner that Reed had been elsewhere and could not possibly have been near Susan’s premises for some hours before she was slain. These circumstances left no doubt in the mind of the coroner that Oxley was

¹² *Hobart Town Courier*, 1 August 1829, p.2.

¹³ *Colonial Times*, 19 February 1830, p.3.

¹⁴ CON31-1-29, Image 335.

¹⁵ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 20 August 1824, p.1.

¹⁶ CON31-1-29, Image 335.

responsible for Susan's death and, at the conclusion of the inquest which had lasted for three days, he was ordered to stand trial for 'wilful murder'.¹⁷

Accordingly, on 22 February 1830, Oxley stood in the Supreme Court at Hobart charged with the horrible murder of Susan Corfield. He told the court that he wanted to plead guilty but the judge had 'humanely recommended him to re-consider that plea' and stand trial. As it happens, however, the trial was a brief one, 'evidence being given of the clearest nature'.¹⁸ As expected, Oxley was found guilty and given the death penalty. The court recorder entered the verdict into official court documents in these words:

*The said John Oxley was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead next Wednesday at the time and place of execution and when dead his body to be dissected and it is ordered that his body be delivered to the principal surgeon for dissection.*¹⁹

Oxley was hanged on 1 March 1830. He was thirty-eight years old.²⁰

As he stood limp, ashen-faced and trembling on the scaffold, with his arms pinioned, Oxley confessed to the Rev. William BEDFORD who had attended him in gaol, that he had cut Susan's throat - but he claimed it to have been an accident! He told Bedford that Susan had never intended to go through with her planned marriage to Reed and that they had hatched a plan to murder Reed so that they could resume their former relationship. Together, they had sharpened a razor in preparation for their terrible deed.²¹ The idea was for Susan to get Reid intoxicated at her house and then for Oxley to enter the room and cut his throat. However, their plan came unstuck when, on the night they planned to murder Reed, Oxley was late in arriving at Susan's house and their evil deed could not go ahead. The next day, however, Susan and Oxley spent hours drinking together discussing what they might do next. When they arrived back at Susan's house - both very drunk - Susan had sat on Oxley's knee, telling him that she still wanted to carry out their plan - and at the next possible opportunity! To prove her determination, she produced the open razor from her pocket. In the moments which followed, however, an argument had broken out between the pair and, in the scuffle that ensued, Oxley had accidentally cut Susan's throat.²²

Could this story have been true? Bedford seems to have been in two minds. In relating it, he was left to wonder whether a man about to be executed would want to stain his soul with a downright lie as he prepared to come face to face with his maker.

¹⁷ *Colonial Times*, 19 February 1830, p.3.

¹⁸ *Colonial Times*, 26 February 1830, p.3.

¹⁹ <https://stors.tas.gov.au/SC32-1-1p405jpg>

²⁰ *Colonial Times*, 26 February 1830, p.3; Oxley, death: RGD34/2156/1830, Hobart.

²¹ *Colonial Times*, 26 February 1830, p.3.

²² *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 February 1830, p.2.

Newspaper reports of these events did not share Bedford's wonderment. Railing against the evils of alcohol, most argued that Oxley had 'evidently perpetrated his crime in the height of passion, heated by drink' and deserved his fate.²³

Of Susan's role in the affair, reports were even less sympathetic, perhaps. There were frequent references to her fondness for drinking. 'Here was a woman', one newspaper thundered, 'who had just completed the period of her sentence' and was 'once more enjoying the sweets of liberty'. Had she not 'led an abandoned life', had she not yielded to 'vicious propensities and solicitations of the devil' and 'sunk into the abyss of wickedness', she might have married respectably and become a useful member of society'.²⁴

²³ *Hobart Town Courier*, 27 February 1830, p.2; see also Philip Tardif's story of 'The Murder of Susan Corfield' in his authoritative *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990). Tardif's account is simply a compilation of newspaper articles about the murder.

²⁴ *Hobart Town Courier*, 27 February 1830, p.2.