

Bunters, Mollies and Sable Brethren

OF THE PEOPLE transported to the antipodes between 1788 and 1852, about twenty-four thousand were women: one person in seven. Many Australians still think their Founding Mothers were whores. Undoubtedly some were prostitutes in the real sense of the word—that is, they survived by selling their sexual services, casually or regularly, without sentimental attachments. A commonly quoted figure, though a somewhat impressionistic one, is one woman in five.¹ When a woman at her trial described herself as a prostitute—"on the town" was the usual phrase—one can assume that she was telling the truth. In the mouths of Authority, the word "prostitute" was less a job description than a general term of abuse.

What is quite certain, however, is that no women were actually transported for whoring, because it was never a transportable offense. The vast majority of female convicts, more than 80 percent, were sent out for theft, usually of a fairly petty sort. Crimes of violence figured low among them, as one might expect—about 1 percent.² Sentences of more than seven years were exceedingly rare. None of this, given the severity of the English laws, suggests at the outset a very high degree of moral profligacy.

And yet there was rarely a comment on colonial society, scarcely a passage of evidence to the various Select Committees on Transportation, hardly a tract or a diary or a letter home, that missed the chance to describe the degeneracy, incorrigibility and worthlessness of women convicts in Australia. Military officers believed this, and so did doctors, judges, parsons, governors and, of course, their respectable wives. Convict men might in the end redeem themselves through work and penance, but women almost never. It was as though women convicts had passed the ordinary bounds of class and become a fiction, not far from pornography: crude taucous Eve, sucking rum and mothering bastards in

the exterior darkness, inviting contempt rather than pity from her social superiors, rape rather than help from men.

Australian historians once swallowed this stereotype whole. "Even if these contemporaries exaggerated," wrote A. G. L. Shaw, "the picture [that women convicts] presented is a singularly unattractive one!"³ Some later feminist historians, led by Anne Summers and Miriam Dixson, have striven to retain the picture while dismantling the biases, arguing that many or even most convict women became whores but that their fate was foisted on them by a tyrannous male power structure. The most influential statement of the case was made by Anne Summers:

It was deemed necessary by both the local and the British authorities to have a supply of whores to keep the men, both convict and free, quiescent. The Whore stereotype was devised as a calculated sexist means of social control and then . . . characterised as being the fault of the women who were damned by it.⁴

The classic double-bind, in short. The problem is the quality of the contemporary opinions on which the Whore stereotype, accepted by Reverend Samuel Marsden and feminist historians alike (though for very different motives), was based.

The British Government did not send women to Australia to keep men "quiescent" in any political sense; the lash could do that. But the presence of women, considered as carrot rather than stick, did have its uses in social control. Eve the Whore would keep Adam the Rogue from turning homosexual, an important consideration: William Pitt would underwrite a colony of thieves, but not one of perverts. The government did not, of course, announce in so many words that female convicts were sent to Australia as breeding-stock and sexual conveniences. Indeed, the original plan of settlement drawn up by Lord Sydney in 1786 spoke of enslaving women for this purpose

from the Friendly Islands, New Caledonia, Etc., which are contiguous thereto, and from whence any number may be procured without difficulty, and without a sufficient proportion of that sex it is well-known that it would be impossible to preserve the settlement from gross irregularities and disorders.⁵

Arthur Phillip rejected this idea, of course, for kidnapped Tahitian women would only "pine away in misery." He asked for more women convicts to be sent out, not for their labor but because he wanted the felons to marry one another and so raise a native-born yeomanry—the genetic equivalent of his hope for an economic base of agriculture run by

small-farming Emancipists. [He offered rewards of land or free time [an extra day a week for raising their own crops for sale or barter] to convicts who married.] Some of these hastily legitimized unions proved bigamous, since a number of the newlyweds were, in fact, already married but had left their husbands or wives behind them in England. From a "respectable" viewpoint, this policy seemed a farce, and the matrimonial rush only a scramble for gubernatorial favors.⁶

The Scottish forger Thomas Watling, himself a convict, sniffed that "little I think could reasonably have been expected from the coupling of *whore* and *rogue* together." "Prostitution" and "concubinage" flourished in early colonial Sydney, as marriage did not. On this, the respectable convict, the respectable officer and the respectable cleric all agreed, because their terms of judgment were exactly the same. "There is scarcely a man without his mistress," Watling complained, adding with sublime ignorance of the sexual habits of English working people that "the high class first exhibit it; the low, to do them justice, faithfully copy it." The officers, being officers, got first pick of the women; and a female convict soon learned that her best chance of survival in New South Wales was to give herself over to the "protection" of some dominant male. In a tone of resentful irony, Watling advised "ladies of easy virtue" to get transported if they possibly could:

They may rest assured, that they will meet with every indulgence from the humane officers and sailors in the passage; and after running the gauntlet there, will, notwithstanding, be certain of coming upon immediate keeping at their arrival. . . . Be she ever so despicable in person or manners, here she may depend that she will dress and live better and easier than ever she did in the prior part of her prostitution.⁷

Watling's prejudices were genteel. He believed he was writing as a "respectable" person (forgers always did) and his opinion of women convicts exactly reflected the attitudes of the middle class from which he had fallen. Respectable people in London—let alone in the chilly latitudes of John Knox, north of the Scottish border—saw little moral difference between prostitution and cohabitation. Patrick Colquhoun, as we have seen, included the female half of all unmarried couples in his attempts to guess the number of "prostitutes" in the "criminal class" of London. Before long the word "prostitute" came to be used of anyone promiscuous, paid or not. Eventually the distinction was so worn down by the weight of moral disapproval bearing upon the lower classes from the middle classes that Henry Mayhew, that indefatigable reporter, could claim that "prostitution . . . does not consist solely in promiscuous intercourse, for she who confines her favors to one may still be a prosti-

tute," even if her motives were "voluptuous" and not mercenary. In short, the moral vocabulary of the English middle classes enabled the free in Australia to speak of "prostitution" among convicts when they meant any extramarital relationship. And as neither the penal system nor pioneer life favored marriage (official policy always encouraged it, but such encouragement was more than offset by the general poverty of small settlers and the uncertain, bush-wandering nature of an Emancipist worker's life), the respectable saw "prostitution" everywhere, even in sturdy matches that had lasted years out of wedlock and produced broods of children.⁸ As the historian Michael Sturma points out, the idea that convicts shared the same ideas about sexual behavior as their superiors is very dubious:

Working-class mores [in England] differed markedly from those of the upper and middle classes. . . . [A]mong the British working-class, cohabitation was prevalent. It is highly unlikely that working-class men, and in particular male convicts, considered the women convicts to be in some way sexually immoral. . . . The stereotype of women convicts as prostitutes emerged from . . . an ignorance of working-class habits.⁹

One notorious result of such thinking was the "Female Register" drawn up by the Reverend Samuel Marsden in 1806, an inspired piece of creative bigotry in which every woman in the colony, except for a few widows, was classified as either "married" or "concubine." By Marsden's count, there were 395 of the former and 1,035 of the latter. The only kind of marriage he recognized was one performed by a Church of England clergyman—ideally, himself. It followed that all Catholic and Jewish women who married within the form of their religion were automatically listed as "concubines," as were all common-law wives whose relationship with their men, however durable, went unsanctified by Anglican rite. One such woman, Mary Marshall, had lived with her "husband" Robert Sidaway for eighteen years but was listed as a "concubine." Sarah Bellamy had lived for sixteen years with the colony's master-builder, James Bloodworth or Bloodsworth, the bricklayer who was transported on the First Fleet and supervised the erection of Sydney's first permanent buildings, and had borne him seven children. No relationship could have been more respectable, devoted or tenacious than theirs. It ended in 1804 with Bloodworth's death from pneumonia. In gratitude for his services to the infant colony, Governor King buried him with military honors. Nevertheless, Sarah Bellamy went down on Marsden's list as "concubine," along with a twelve-year-old girl and a sixty-four-year-old widow. Yet when it reached London, this absurdly pharisaical document was read and apparently believed by Lord Castlereagh and William Wilber-

force, and it became an authoritative text on colonial morality. As the historian Portia Robinson comments:

That few women were legally married did not necessarily imply that the conduct of the remainder made New South Wales "a sink of infamy." It simply meant that the standards of morality and the definitions of marriage familiar to the women concerned did not agree with those imposed on society by Samuel Marsden. Contemporaries accepted his conclusions as to the nature of the women of Botany Bay and modern historians have continued to perpetuate this view.¹⁰

Marsden was not alone in his prejudices, and as people are named, so they will be treated. While one may doubt that the British Government set out to create special forms of humiliation and degradation for women in Australia, there is no doubt that the whore-stereotype, accepted by the upper layers of a rigid little colonial society, wielded immense power. Indeed, it would remain, though gradually fading, as part of the design of Australian sexual politics for a century after transportation was abolished. The attitudes behind the stereotype can be seen clearly in the private journal of Ralph Clark (?-1794), marine officer on the *Friendship* in the First Fleet.

When Lieutenant Clark sailed for Australia in 1787 he left behind his wife Betsy Alicia Trevan, a pretty Devon girl from a landed family, and their chubby firstborn son, Ralph Stuart Clark, aged not quite two. As the First Fleet rolled southward, Clark was tortured by remorse and nostalgia. Was a promotion worth this sundering? Betsy Alicia fills the journal as he pours forth his grief in ink, trying to conjure up the family he might not see again:

Dear good woman I did not know thy worth . . . Alicia, my friend, my dear wife, and beautiful little engaging son, Oh sweet boy, what would your father give for a kiss of your mother and you, oh I think I hear him cry Papa, Papa, as I am taking my hat to go out, dear sweet sound, music to my poor ears, the only happiness that I have is the kissing of my Betsy's dear picture and my little boy's hair that she sent. I would not part with them for a Captain's commission.¹¹

Clark devises a small ritual with the "dear picture," a miniature under a hinged glass lid. Each morning, Monday to Saturday, he kisses the glass. On Sundays he raises the tiny oval pane to kiss "my dear Alicia's picture out of the case," the image symbolically laid bare, a little closer to flesh. This act is both a denuding and a prayer, as to the effigy of a female saint. Holiness and sexuality are intertwined through the knot of marriage. Sometimes his dreams of Alicia are sexual ("Dreamt

last night of seeing my dear beloved Alicia in bed and I pulled her towards me"), but usually they reflect his guilt at leaving her and his fear of losing her. He cannot quite make sense of his dreams, but they seem ominous; he is unhappy

from dreaming that my Alicia took a dead louse from herself and gave it to me, oh unlucky dream, for I have often heard her say that dreaming of lice was a certain sign of sickness.¹²

Alicia is the fixed star of well-being in Clark's emotional universe. Her name summons up what he left behind: security, fidelity, licit sexual delight, social continuity, maternal tenderness. The conventional form in which he phrased these feelings belies their intensity. He never meant to publish his journal; he was not a writer but a miserably homesick young marine trying to set down his deepest emotional engagements in a language of sensibility derived from the genteel culture of the day:

Read the remainder of the *Tragedy of Douglas* this day, oh it is a sweet play . . . [W]hat are the emotions in the breast of Lady Randolph when she sees the features and shape of her lost and stained husband Douglas in that of young Norval, little does she know, fond mother, that it is her long lost son . . . but still I cannot think that she loved as my Betsy, my virtuous Alicia does.¹³

To say that Ralph Clark idealized his wife would understate his feelings: She monopolized his image of women. If another woman misbehaved, her violence or immorality became a slur on Alicia, suggesting to him on some less-than-conscious level that she too might fall from grace. Hence the vindictive contrast Clark drew between Alicia and the female convicts over whom he was placed in authority. He was being punished for their sins by losing his adored wife. "I could never have thought that there were so many abandoned wenches in England, they are ten thousand times worse than the men Convicts, and I am afraid we will have a great deal more trouble with them," he wrote while they were still in the English Channel. In July, when four of *Friendship's* sailors were found at it with four female convicts in the 'tween-decks, the captain had the men flogged; but, Clark added, "if I had been the Commander I would have flogged the four whores also."¹⁴ The Whore was typically foulmouthed:

Elizabeth Barber one of the Convict women abused the doctor in a most terrible manner and said that he wanted to f--- her and called him all the names she could think of . . . She began to abuse Capt. Merideth in a much worse manner, and said she was no more a whore than his

wife. . . . In all the course of my days I never heard such expressions come from the mouth of a human being. . . . She desired Merideth to come and kiss her cunt for he was nothing but a lousy rascal as were we all. I wish to God she was out of the ship, I would rather have a hundred more men than have a single woman.¹⁵

The gulf between such "damned bitches of convict women" and distant Betsy, "surely an angel and not a woman," is absolute, and his hatred of the debased lower orders for taking him away from his wife leads to fantasies and dreams of violence. "If they were to lose anything of mine that I gave them to wash I would cut them in pieces," he writes of women doing laundry duty on board; and later he dreams that "I was going down to Tregadock to take leave of [the family] before I went to Botany, but was assaulted by a great mob, whom I was obliged to handle rather roughly with my sword." Three years later, suffering the rigors of Norfolk Island duty after the wreck of the *Sirius*, he pens a brutally dismissive epitaph on the first person to die a natural death there, a convict woman named Ann Farmer: "She was better than half dead before they sent her from England, by all accounts she was a most wicked woman having been the occasion of more than twenty men and women coming to untimely ends, but she is now gone where she will be rewarded according to her merits." Soon he was wishing death on other women convicts as well. "I wish the Almighty would be so kind to us as to take a few of them, for we could do much better without them at present."¹⁶

Clark got away eventually and was briefly reunited with his Betsy Alicia in June 1792. After that, his diary ceases before he could see his ideal again. In December 1792, he returned to service in the war against France. Early in 1794 Betsy Alicia died in childbirth, and the child was stillborn. A few months later, Clark's darling boy, Ralph, then a nine-year-old midshipman, died of yellow fever on board ship in the Caribbean, during a fight with a French ship. Clark was on board, too, and was killed in battle the same day. However, that was not quite the end of Clark's line, for at the time of his death he had a three-year-old daughter, whom he scarcely knew. She had been born to a convict woman, Mary Branham, on Norfolk Island in July 1791. At Clark's insistence, she had been christened Alicia. There is no reference to her mother in his journal.

[THE WOMEN in the First Fleet were picked haphazardly, ranging from old crones to mere children. There was more system on the next female

transport, *Lady Juliana*, which brought young women of "marriageable" age, "the colony at that time being in great want of women." A few of them were hardened professional criminals, like Mrs. Barnsley, a shoplifter who boasted that her family had been swindlers and highwaymen for a hundred years, her brother, a highwayman, often visited her on board before the fleet sailed, "as well-dressed and genteel in his appearance as any gentleman." At the other end of the scale was a meek little creature who bore a curiously strong resemblance to the prime minister, William Pitt, and was thought by all on board to be his bastard daughter.

Some wept and stormed, some tried to escape, and others spent the weeks before sailing hidden in corners, pale with shock and shame, their eyes red with incessant weeping; a young Scottish girl died of a broken heart before the ship left the Thames. Most of them were so demoralized by their "ruin"—the cycle of poverty, pregnancy and survival by theft or prostitution that formed the plot of a thousand melodramas and ballads simply because it was one of the commonest things that could happen to a girl—that John Nicol, a Scottish steward on the *Lady Juliana*, thought they were actually glad to be on board. "When I inquired their reason," he recalled,

they answered, "How much more preferable is our present situation to what it has been since we commenced our vicious habits! . . . Banishment is a blessing to us. Have we not been banished for a long time, and yet in our native land, the most dreadful of all situations! We dared not go to our relations, whom we had disgraced. Other people would shut their doors in our faces. We were as if a plague were upon us, hated and shunned."¹⁷

Such sentiments, whatever their literary garnish, remind one how the morale of female convicts, never very strong, must have broken down on the way to Australia. London or Botany Bay: both poles of the world were, to many, equally alien and empty of hope. "Harmless unfortunate creatures," Nicol called them, "the victims of the basest seduction . . . a troublesome cargo, yet not dangerous or very mischievous, as I may say more noise than danger."

As soon as the Second Fleet was at sea, the seamen of *Lady Juliana* began to pair off with their cargo, thus starting the almost invariable pattern of later voyages. Doubtless some of the tars felt like pashas, lording it over a seaborne seraglio. Yet Nicol's phrase is significant: "Every man on board took a wife from among the convicts, they nothing loath." Offensive as such pairings were to later middle-class morality they were simply taken for granted among workers in villages, in ports and in London itself. Certainly Nicol did not regard his "wife," Sarah

THE FATAL SHORE

Whitlam, transported to Australia for seven years for stealing a cloak, as a whore. He remembered her with respect and tenderness as

a girl of a modest reserved turn, as kind and true a creature as ever lived; I courted her for a week and upwards, and would have married her on the spot, had there been a clergyman on board. . . . I had fixed my fancy on her from the moment I knocked the rivet out of her irons upon the anvil, and as firmly resolved to bring her back to England, when her time was out, my lawful wife.¹⁸

He could not get her released, however, and he sailed back to England alone, leaving Sarah Whitlam and their son, born on shipboard, in Sydney.

One may doubt, however, that all sailors showed convict women as much respect as Nicol claimed he showed his Sarah. Lord Auckland, the chairman of the 1812 Select Committee on Transportation, visited a brig loaded with women convicts that lay in the Thames in the summer of 1812 [well after the committee's work was done] to question its skipper "as to the means of preventing improper intercourse between the sailors and the women." The captain told him that

every sailor was allowed to have one woman to cohabit with him during the voyage.—Had information of this practice been laid before the Committee . . . it would have been marked with the strongest reprobation as likely to lead some and confirm others of these unfortunate women in habits of prostitution and disorder.¹⁹

Clearly, such "unfortunates" were not being sent to Australia to drain England of some social purulence. Even if they all had been prostitutes, their banishment would have made no difference to English crime, but it would mean a great deal to an infant colony troubled by sexual starvation. The policy was reflected in the the age of transported women—"marriageable age," as the 1812 Select Committee on Transportation was told:

Q. To what ages are women limited?—We generally confine it, as near as possible, to about 24 and not more than 45. . . . [T]hey are very young that go out, from London in particular.²⁰

"A lonely woman is a poor thing in a Country where there are so many villains," wrote one of the officers of the female transport *Britannia* in 1798.²¹ When a ship bearing women anchored in Sydney Cove, its upper deck became a slave-market, as randy colonists came swarming over the bulwarks, grinning and ogling and chumming up to the captain

with a bottle of rum, while the female convicts—washed for the occasion and dressed in the remnants of their English finery—were mustered before them, trying as hard as they could "to set themselves off to the best advantage." Military officers got the first pick, then non-commissioned officers, then privates, and lastly such ex-convict settlers as seemed "respectable" enough to obtain the governor's permission to keep a female servant. (Such permission was a very great favor before Macquarie's day, and it was stingily given, as an unusual reward, by the governors after Phillip, Grose, Paterson, Hunter, King and Bligh.) According to one former convict, not all the women assigned to officers were made their mistresses (some men, after all, were married and had brought their wives). In fact, "there were several women who were rather taken by the officers as prostitutes than as servants";²² most of the convict women in the colony cohabited with men and the fitful attempts to curb this did not really apply to officers. Thus, Bligh had forbidden women to be "taken off the store, without being married, unless it was as servant to an officer." Bligh himself declared, bluntly enough, that "it was impossible to prevent prostitution" (but here he clearly means cohabitation), "and therefore there was no necessity for any regulations respecting it. . . . [S]ettlers wanted female servants, and pitched upon particular women for whom they applied, who perhaps cohabited together; these things could never be prevented."²³

Some witnesses found this spectacle morally barbarous, "rendering the whole Colony little better than an extensive Brothel,"²⁴ but the governors were slow to discourage it because it got the women—whose labor was not much use—"off the store," so that they did not have to be fed and supported at government expense. It petered out during Macquarie's administration, after some harsh injunctions from London.²⁵

It was the sense of helplessness, above all, that ground the women prisoners down. Reflecting on the regular shipboard slave market, "a Custom that reflects the highest Disgrace upon the British Government in that Colony," one observer noted that all the women were not equally "depraved" on arrival, but they were driven down by "Jealousy Vexation & want." "All have not run to the same Excesses of Iniquity; some occasionally are found better disposed, and perhaps their number would be much increased if they were not, on their first arrival, promiscuously thrown into such difficulties and temptations."²⁶

Since the liaisons were free of legal ties, a settler could simply throw a convict woman out when he was tired of her. This caused a troublesome floating population of whores and unattached "disorderly women" to accumulate around Sydney Cove, whose westerly arm, "The Rocks," soon acquired a well-deserved name as the rowdiest and most dangerous thieves' kitchen in the colony. As early as 1793, these women were

that all was quiet among the women. One of these incumbents, an oily Emancipist named Durie, went so far as to admit in 1811, after a testy memo from Macquarie, that he had let women sleep outside the Factory; but now he had abolished "this indulgence" and in future they will all sleep inside the Factory walls. Actually, it had no "walls," except the ones that held up its roof, and convicts of both sexes came and went as they pleased.³⁵

In 1819 Macquarie had his ex-convict architect Francis Greenway design a new Female Factory, a pretty three-story Georgian structure complete with clock, cupola and security wall. But the social structure inside it were still imperfect. Thomas Reid, surgeon on the female transport *Morley*, visited his former charges there early in 1821 and found it hard to describe their "miserable state." They gathered around him weeping incoherently, and he learned that when they had arrived there the previous evening they had been surrounded by hordes of idle fellows, convicts . . . provided with bottles of spirits . . . for the purpose of forming a banquet according to custom, which they assured themselves of enjoying without interruption, as a prelude to excesses which decency forbids to mention.³⁶

In the new Factory, the women were sorted into three classes: "general," "merit" and "crime." The "crime" class of incorrigibles wore no badge, but their hair was cropped, as a mark of disgrace. The "merit" class was made up of those who had sustained six months' good behavior. The "general" class was by far the largest, and it resembled a nursing-hospital, being mainly composed of unlucky girls who had been sent back to the Factory when they got pregnant on assigned service. They were not compelled to reveal the father's name, and when asked they usually said he was the Reverend Samuel Marsden.

(The Female Factory was the colony's main marriage-market and settlers took themselves to Parramatta to find a "Factory lass" (the Australian equivalent of the mail-order bride). All it took was a written permit from Marsden, written notice to the matron and enough phlegm to endure the teasing and taunts of the women. "It requires the face of a Turk to come on such an open and acknowledged errand." A bizarre scene: The women lined up in their coarse flannel dresses, some scowling and others hopefully primping, the "Coelebs" or bachelors, often an elderly and tongue-tied "stringybark" from the back country, hesitating his way along the rank; the matron reeling off the women's characters and her orders. "After uttering the awkward 'yes,'" recalled one witness to this colonial mating ritual in the 1820s,

the bride-elect flies around to her pals, bidding hasty adieus, and the bridegroom leads her out. "I'll give you three months before you're re-

turned!" cries one, and "It's a bargain you've got, old stringy-bark!" cries another. Hubbub and confusion mark the exit of the couple. . . . (The clothes of the convict are returned to her, and dressed again like a free woman she lies with her suitor of an hour to the church. Government gives her a "ticket of leave" as a dower, and she steps into her husband's carriage to go to his farm.³⁷)

These unions were not guaranteed to last. The "Factory lasses," one ex-convict thought, only wanted to get back to Sydney and "dress themselves up and go to the flash houses, and at night to the dancing houses, then they are happy".

I have known . . . very nice young women as you could wish to see, actually marry an old man, as ragged as possible, and perhaps he lives 20 or 30 miles up in the country, and no house within 5 or 6 miles of him, right up in the bush, where you can see nothing but the trees; but there is a policy in that, this man is a free man, and when they are married it makes her free, then after she has stop'd a day or two she will make some excuse which a woman is never at a loss for, to come down to Sydney; she will get what money she can of him (the Old Fool!) but she don't return again.³⁸

Punishments for the "crime" class at the Parramatta Factory—and at its no less disagreeable southern cousin, the Female Factory in Hobart, which was built in 1827 and was so overcrowded that it stank like the hold of a slave ship—were not as severe as for the men. By the 1820s, female convicts in New South Wales could no longer be seen hauling big baskets of earth for bridge construction; nor, as a rule, did "refractory" women have to wear spiked iron collars, or be whipped to the beat of a drum. However, a treadmill was put in the Parramatta Female Factory in 1823, and in 1837 another was installed in Hobart; women condemned to it suffered "a very horrible pain in the loins."³⁹ And there was punishment by humiliation, whose most hated form was shaving the woman's head. This could produce rebellions, as the superintendent of the Hobart Factory found in 1827 when he told the assigned convict Ann Bruin that she was to be shorn for spending a night away from her master's house.

She screamed most violently, and swore that no one should cut off her hair. . . . She then entered my Sitting Room screaming, swearing, and jumping about the Room as if bereft of her senses. She had a pair of Scissors in her hand and commenced cutting off her own hair. . . . Coming before the window of my Sitting Room [she] thrust her clenched fist

through three panes of glass in succession. . . . With a Bucket [she] broke some more panes of glass and the Bottom Sash of the Window Frame.⁴⁰

Naturally, this was seen as the action of a crazed termagant, not the protest of a woman whose physical rights were brutally transgressed. There were several riots and near-breakouts at both factories, including one in 1827 when the soldiers had to be brought in because the "Amazonian banditti" stood together, "declaring that, if one suffered, all should suffer." In 1829 the women in the Hobart Factory tried to burn the whole place down with "Parcels of fire" thrown through their ventilation-hatches.⁴¹

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"WHORE" AND "PROSTITUTE," then, were banded about to serve the moral views of middle-class ideology; and neither the male nor the female convicts thought it disgraceful, or even wrong, to live together out of wedlock. However, female convicts in Australia were all to greater or lesser degrees oppressed as women—as members of an inferior sex. The sexism of English society was brought to Australia and then amplified by penal conditions. A convict woman needed unusual strength of character not to be crushed by its assumptions. Language itself confirmed her degradation, and some sense of this may be gleaned from the slang and cant words applied to women in Georgian times—a brusque, stinging argot of appropriation and dismissal.

A woman was a *bat*, a *crack*, a *bunter*, a *case fro*, *cattle*, a *mort*, a *burick*, or a *convenient*. If she had a regular man, she was his *natural* or *peculiar*. If married, she was an *autem mott*; if blonde, a *bleached mott*; if a very young prostitute, almost a child, a *kinchin mott*; if beautiful, a *rum blowen*, a *ewe*, a *flash piece of mutton*. If she had gonorrhoea, she was a *queer mort*. This language was the lower millstone; the upper was the pompous moral phraseology of the Establishment, the good flogging Christians. Ground between the two, a woman would need unusual reserves of tenacity and self-esteem to resist the pressure of the stereotype. The pervasive belief in their whorishness and worthlessness must have struck deep into the souls of these women. The double-bind to which they were condemned was piercingly illustrated by the remark of one Scottish settler, Peter Murdoch (who had more than 6,000 acres in Van Diemen's Land and had helped set up the penal station on Maria Island), to the 1838 Select Committee in London. "They are generally so bad," he said, "that the settlers have no heart to treat them well."⁴²

The brutalization of women in the colony had gone on so long that it was virtually a social reflex by the end of the 1830s. The first full account of it was given by Robert Jones, Major Foveaux's chief jailer on Norfolk Island in the early 1800s, who thought the lot of the women prisoners there "must surely have been greater than the male convicts. . . . Several have not recovered yet from their treatment at the hands of the Major." Passages in Jones's memoir show how absolute the chattel status of women was: "Ted Kimberley chief constable considered the convicts of Norfolk Island no better than heathens unfit to grace the earth. Women were in his estimation born for the convenience of men. He was a bright intelligent Irishman."⁴³ Jones's sentiments are echoed in a fragmentary letter from a free settler on Norfolk Island, an ex-missionary turned trader named James Mitchell. "Surely no common mortal could demand treatment so brutal," he wrote around 1815.

Heaven give their weary footsteps their aching hearts to a better place of rest for here there is none. During governorship of Major Foveaux convicts both male and female were held as slaves. Poor female convicts were treated shamefully. Governor King being mainly responsible.⁴⁴

The rituals of courtship on Norfolk Island were, to put it mildly, brusque. We see the "bright intelligent" Kimberley pursuing a married convict woman named Mary Ginders with an axe, shouting that "if she did not come and live with him he would report her to the Major and have her placed in the cells." Major Foveaux got the woman of his choice, Ann Sherwin, away from one of his subordinate officers by throwing him in jail on a trumped-up charge "so that," claimed the Irish rebel leader Joseph Holt, a Norfolk prisoner at the time, "the poor fellow, seeing the danger he was in, thought it better to save his life, and lose his wife, than to lose both."⁴⁵ (At least their union lasted: Foveaux married Ann Sherwin in England in 1815.)

In such a moral environment, although male convicts had some rights (however attenuated), the women had none except the right to be fed; they had to fend for themselves against both guards and male prisoners. "England for white slaves, why were they sent here," Jones scribbled in one of his outbursts of delayed guilt, while reflecting on the fate of three women sent to Norfolk Island for the "crime" of abortion,

for crimes that required pity more than punishment. Heaven forbid [sic] England if that is her way of populating her hellholes. What would our noble persons think of our virgin settlements and their white slaves. In every case the women treated as slaves, good stock to trade with and a convict having the good chance to possess one did not want much encouragement to do so.⁴⁶

Thus the women were prisoners of prisoners. The price of a young, good-looking girl, fresh off the ship from Sydney, was "often as high as ten pounds." The island's bellman or beadle, Potter by name, had acquired the right to sell them. The same woman might be sold several times during her Norfolk Island sentence, with Potter "in most cases reselling them for a gallon or two of rum until they were in such a Condition as to be of little or no further use." The sales would be held in an old store where the women had to strip naked and "race around the room" while Potter kept up a running commentary on their "respective values."

The regular social pleasure of Norfolk Island under Foveaux, however, was the Thursday evening dance in the soldiers' barracks where, Jones wrote,

all the women would join in the dances of the Mermaids, each one being naked with numbers painted on their backs so as to be recognized by their admirers who would clap their hands on seeing their favorite perform some grotesque action . . . with the assistance of a gallon or two of Rum. Such amusements were the talk of the soldiers for days before and after the performance.⁴⁷

Such dances commonly took place in London brothels, where they were known in flash-talk as "ballum rancums." In these scenes, with the drunken, lurching bodies of women numbered like sides of beef, we see the epitome of sexual politics in early Australia. Women had to adapt as best they could, and they would fight like cats to stay in with the guards. Mary Ginders, the chief constable's woman, was "the leader of all the dances in the barrack Room and was well liked among the soldiers"; when Bridget Chandler, another convict woman, challenged her as favorite, Ginders broke her arm. James Mitchell, despite his moral disapproval of Norfolk Island promiscuity, gave up his missionary work and acquired a mistress, rather to Jones's envy,

a beautiful young woman named Liza McCann who was as cunning as himself, who could drink more rum than most of the Hardened Soldiers, and took every opportunity to make herself disagreeable to the other females who would never dare venture within her store. Her greatest pride was to be clothed in silk and a bonnet with feathers.⁴⁸

Women on the mainland or in Van Diemen's Land were rarely flogged, but such punishment was common on Norfolk Island and, in-

deed, appears to have been Major Foveaux's special treat. "To be remembered by all there," Mitchell alleged, "was his love for watching women in their agony while receiving a punishment on the Triangle. . . . [I]t was usual for [him] to remit a part of the sentence on condition that they would expose their nakedness it being considered part of the punishment. And poor wretches were only too glad to save their flesh and pain."⁴⁹ With his pistol in one hand and cutlass in the other, Foveaux would muster the male convicts in a semicircle; the naked woman was compelled to walk past them, before she was trussed up to the triangle and the "skinner" or "backscratcher" (Norfolk Island cant for the flogger) went to work. (The usual sentences were 25 lashes, the "Botany Bay dozen," but they could go as high as 250.) The last Norfolk Island woman to be flogged on Foveaux's orders, in 1804, received such a sentence, but the flogger was squeamish about it; he said he was sick and Kimberley had to take the cat-o'-nine-tails, "upon which," as Jones described it, "[he] cried out that he did not flog women. This reply made the Major furious. He then asked one of the soldiers, Mick Kelly by name, to take the tails and go on with the punishment, which he immediately proceeded to perform in such a manner that not one mark was left on her back. This made the Major so wild that he ordered the woman to be placed in the dark cells for a fortnight."⁵⁰

This was the man whom Ellis Bent, Macquarie's deputy judge-advocate, found "attentive and obliging." Foveaux's amusements may suggest how much of the true nature of the British regime in early Australia lies hidden under the smooth language of administration. Crimes die with their witnesses, and so, no doubt, did most of the crimes against women in the early colony. Yet there is no lack of evidence that women continued to be treated as a doubly colonized class throughout the life of the penal system. Almost four decades later, the fate of women excited the horror and contempt of François-Maurice Lepailleur, one of the fifty-eight Canadian *patriotes* who had been transported for political rebellion against the English colonial authorities in "Lower Canada" (Quebec). Arriving in 1840, these Canadian exiles were confined on a penal farm in the forest at Longbottom, halfway between Sydney and Parramatta. All of them, and especially Lepailleur (who was able to keep a journal in secret), were disgusted by the way the local free men, Emancipists, guards and police treated their women. "A farce," Lepailleur called the New South Wales police force. "Drunks and scum."⁵¹ At night, the huts around the stockade would resound with the shrieks of women being thrashed. The forest warden at Longbottom, a man named Rose, tied his wife to a post and gave her 50 lashes with a government cat-o'-nine-tails; another settler, a Portuguese, stabbed his wife and hung her on a gum

tree, with complete impunity. Not surprisingly, most of the women Lepailleur encountered in his Australian exile were alcoholic sluts, broken down by abuse, wife-beating and rum.

During the afternoon a drunken woman, just come from the factory at Parramatta, began to abuse the woman who lives in the small cabin in front of the gate. After she had sworn a lot, cursed and blasphemed, . . . [she] turned her back to us, lifted up all her clothes and showed us her bum, saying that she had a "Black Hole" there and slapping her belly like the wretch she was. Nothing more vile than that tribe; animals are more decent than they. I would say much more but it would dirty my little journal to go on. It is incredible to see so many drunken women in this country. The roads are full of women drunkards.⁵²

Thus it would seem that some prisoners—especially those who, like Lepailleur, believed themselves to be the respectable victims of tyranny and hence a cut above the "real" criminals—had exactly the same contempt for convict women as the free witnesses who discoursed so unambiguously on their evils to the Molesworth Committee in 1838. "More irreformable than the male convicts," opined Bishop Ullathorne, declaring that "when a woman is bad, she is generally very bad." "I do not believe that one woman in a thousand has the moral energy to resist the temptation [to promiscuity]," Peter Murdoch testified.

Religious authorities and social workers claimed that convict women, in and out of the Female Factory, responded eagerly to any gesture of compassion or attention. But such assertions were rarely unbiased. The Roman Catholic prelate William Ullathorne (1806-1889), who had been appointed vicar-apostolic for New South Wales in 1834, never missed an opportunity to assert the success (and hence the necessity) of Catholic missionary work among the convicts (and hence the need) out a large contingent of Catholic clergy to Australia in 1838, including the first nuns ever seen in the colony—five Irish Sisters of Charity. Ullathorne described how these devoted women would go and visit the prisoners of the Female Factory at Parramatta five evenings a week. About a third of the factory women, he said, were Catholics, and most of them were desperate to pour their hearts out to a friendly ear. "It was sometimes difficult to prevent these poor creatures from making complete confession to the nuns. They wanted to unburden their minds, and said they would as soon speak to a nun as to a priest. The reverence with which the Sisters were regarded by all these women was quite remarkable, and the influence they exercised told . . . throughout the Colony."⁵³ If one has difficulty swallowing this, it can only be because Ullathorne's

sentimental picture of women convicts begging to be shriven flies in the face of most other evidence about them; there is not much reason to suppose that they were any less tough or any more pathetic than their male equivalents—which is not, of course, to say that they were the degenerate creatures some authorities made them out to be. Clearly, it was in Ullathorne's interest to increase the Catholic clergy in Australia, and his testimony on the moral iniquities of transportation must be seen in that light.

Yet some were certainly grateful for a kindly ear. The prison reformer Caroline Anley visited the factory in 1834 and met two "young and extremely pretty" women who, while drunk and in a desperate outburst of temper, had attacked their tyrannous master—a Captain Charles Waldron of the 39th Regiment—and killed him. For once, popular sentiment intervened (and none of the other assigned convicts would give evidence against them), so that their death sentence was commuted to three years. Nevertheless they were regarded inside the factory as incorrigible "demonesses, and Caroline Anley was the first prison visitor ever to ask for their side of the story. "If I had always been kindly treated," one of them told Anley, through the first tears she had shed since her conviction, "I wouldn't be as I am."⁵⁴

Life in the factory—whether in New South Wales or in Van Diemen's Land—was a vegetative misery for all who led it. The minds of the women convicts rotted through lack of anything to do, although most of them preferred this stagnant leisure, punctuated by bouts of inefficient taskwork at the hand-loom, to being "treated like dogs and worked like horses" by some abusive master. The steadily growing population of freemen and colonial-born Australians objected to the Female Factories on more pragmatic grounds. By cloistering women in a colony short of females, it slowed down the birthrate. Their main mouthpiece, *The Australian*, editorialized at length on this in 1825, defending traditional "colonial marriage"—living together out of wedlock—as a great civilizer of the bush, a stypic against "dissoluteness and crime".

How many parties are living to this day together by virtue of no other bond? How many . . . are there who, after conducting themselves in an exemplary manner in that state of "resemblance to marriage," have been made honest women, and who, but for the forming of this species of obligation, would have been vagrants in the streets? How many by mutual industry have rendered miserable hovels comfortable homes? How many families have sprung up where nothing but a wilderness would have been seen? Had this order of things continued, even in this objectionable shape, many a vagabond, who had been lost to Society, might have been reclaimed; might have become a decent Settler. . . . But we live in an age,

when it is fashionable to assume a demureness of manner, an extraordinary degree of godliness, and lay claim to an uncommon share of holy endowment.⁵⁵

Here spoke the voice of rough-and-ready sense, but it was not one that penal officials, imprisoned by their own moral stereotypes of convict evil and female whoredom, were disposed to believe. The barrier of class thinking—of judging the social behavior of working-class convicts in terms of the desiderata of the English and colonial middle classes—was too strong for that; and ecclesiastical witnesses, from Quaker missionaries to Catholics like Ullathorne, were never slow to produce the bogey of convict sexual depravity when they needed to raise funds and muster support for their own evangelical programs in Australia. It was also, as many pages of the Molesworth Committee's evidence record, an incomparably useful weapon for Abolitionists. To show the vileness of the System they had to emphasize its power to degrade. Hence the additional emphasis, in the English reformers' decade of the 1830s, on something even less discussable: convict homosexuality.

iv

ONE WOULD naturally suppose that, in a remote colony whose proportion of men to women varied between 4 to 1 in the city and 20 to 1 in the bush, homosexuality would have flourished. So it did, especially on the chain gangs and in the outer penal settlements; but it did not leave much official evidence behind.

This was not only because sodomy was a capital crime. In the eyes of the law, sodomy deserved death; but in the eyes of social custom, especially the customs of English and Irish working people, it was more than ordinarily loathsome—"the crime whose name cannot be uttered," the phrase that Oscar Wilde would later soften into "the Love that dare not speak its name." Arthur Phillip, the first governor, was not by the ordinary standards of his time and calling a harsh man; indeed, he generally acted with humane decency. "I doubt if the fear of death ever prevented a man of no principle from committing a bad action," he noted before the First Fleet sailed. But in his code there were two exceptions: murder and sodomy. "For either of these crimes I would wish to confine the criminal until an opportunity offered of delivering him to the natives of New Zealand, and let them eat him. The dread of this will operate much stronger than the fear of death." Thus the sodomite, "violent against Nature," would be erased from society, denied even the small social niche that burial affords. This draconic idea was not carried out, or even

mentioned again—there were no spare ships to ferry the "madge culls," "mollies" and "fluters," as homosexuals were known in Georgian cant, across the Tasman Sea to enrich the Maori diet.⁵⁶

Buggery, it has been said, is to prisons what money is to middle-class society. It was as utterly pervasive in the world of hulks and penal settlement as it is in modern penitentiaries. "The horrible crime of sodomy," reported the convict George Lee from the *Portland*, a hulk in Langston Harbor, in 1803, "rages so shamefully throughout that the Surgeon and myself have been more than once threatened with assassination for straining to put a stop to it. . . . [I]t is in no way discountenanced by those in command." Jeremy Bentham claimed that prisoners entering the Woolwich hulks were raped as a matter of course: "An initiation of this sort stands in the place of garmish and is exacted with equal rigor. . . . [A]s the Mayor of Portsmouth, Sir John Carter. . . very sensibly observes, *such things ever must be.*"⁵⁷

Not until 1796 was anyone in Australia charged with a homosexual offense. This pioneer was Francis Wilkinson, accused (but acquitted) of bugging a sixty-year-old settler named Joseph Pearce. The first forty years of the colony provide scattered mentions of homosexual acts, routinely listed in the magistrates' bench-books and remarked on, in a general way, by lay and church authorities.⁵⁸ Nothing in the reports of the Select Committees on convict establishments and transportation for 1798 or 1812 can be construed as a reference to homosexuality. But after 1830, the documents are full of references to it—for that was the decade in which the movement to abolish transportation, dormant since the protestations of Jeremy Bentham, began to gather steam. Abolitionists like Lord John Russell and Sir William Molesworth wanted to show that transportation to Australia deprived most of its victims and reformed non-Australian landowners, who stood to lose their assigned labor if convictry was abolished—did not want convict homosexuality discussed; but its opponents did. Mentioning the unmentionable would complete the picture of Australia sketched by William Ullathorne as a polity of fallen souls whose "otherness" was all the worse because they were white, not black. "The eye of God," Ullathorne feelingly declared,

looks down upon a people such as, since the deluge, has not been. Where they marry in haste, without affection; where each one lives to his senses alone. A community without the feelings of community; whose men are very wicked, whose women are very shameless, and whose children are very irreverent. . . . The naked savage, who wanders through those endless forests, knew of nothing monstrous in crime, except cannibalism, until England schooled him in horrors through her prisoners. The removal of such a plague from the earth concerns the whole human race.⁵⁹