

Convict Probation Station Libraries in Colonial Tasmania

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In 1803, Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was known for the first half-century of its occupation by Britain, was founded as a penal colony. This paper discusses the provision of books and libraries for convicts under the probation system. I first discuss the circumstances surrounding the study, then offer a brief description of prison practices as a result of convict transportation, drawing on government correspondence and reports relating to convict books and reading. Finally, I examine extant volumes provided for convicts by the colonial authorities under the probation system.

While conducting doctoral research on books and reading in colonial Tasmania,¹ based on library borrowing by the free community, I came across two intriguing extracts on convict reading. The first was a request by Alexander Maconochie, commandant at Norfolk Island from 1840–44, for books to form a prisoner's library. In addition to religious and moral works, and works of practical instruction on topics such as gardening, agriculture, cottage architecture, brewing and baking, he named *Robinson Crusoe* as an example that taught "energy, hopefulness in difficulty, regard and affection."² He requested Scott's *Waverley Novels*, and works by Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen. Clearly he sought to speak to both the heart and mind of man, through instructive and creative literature. Maconochie was dismissed in 1844, his superiors seeking rather to instil punishment, wanting Norfolk Island to breed fear in the minds of the criminal classes of Britain. The second reference that intrigued me was that of Ian Brand in his study of the convict probation system on the Tasmanian mainland between 1839 and 1854. Brand noted that in 1844 "there were 6,087 men in first stage probation gangs [and that] each station had a library, school, religious instructor and schoolmaster."³

In the course of my research Tony Marshall alerted me to the contents of a letter discovered in a small volume of religious tracts held at the State Library of Tasmania. The letter, written in 1944 by Dr. Clifford Craig to Dr. William Crowther, reads in part:

I went out to Evandale the other day. Apart from a few books signed by [John] Glover, there is nothing of Australian interest. I got a couple of early catalogues

¹ Keith Adkins, "For the Best of Reasons: The Evandale Subscription Library 1847–1861" (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2004). This paper was originally presented at the BSANZ Conference in Hobart, Tasmania, 8–9 November 2007.

² *Historical Records of Australia*, ser. 1, vol. xx (February 1839–September 1840) (Commonwealth Parliament, Government Printer, 1924), 535–37.

³ Ian Brand, *The Convict Probation System: Van Diemen's Land 1839–1854* (Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1990), 28.

however, one of which I am sending down. I am enclosing in the parcel a little book you may like in your 'Library library'. It's from the prisoners' library at Port Arthur. If you don't value it or if you have one similar I would be pleased to have it back as to my mind it is absolutely typical of the age, representing two of the main means used by the upper classes to keep the lower in their place. First of all there were the too severe, not so say savage, penal laws. Then there was the use of religious tracts ... but it can be supposed that they knew what they were about with a simple minded population that had hardly barely learned to read.

In the 1840s Government policy in regard to detained convicts altered markedly. When established in 1830, the Port Arthur convict settlement continued the longstanding policy of assigning convicts to work for settlers. However, in 1838 the Select Committee on Transportation in the Australian colonies headed by Sir William Molesworth recommended to the British Parliament that the system be discontinued. In conjunction with the colonial government and the military, a plan was devised that set up convict probation stations throughout the island, where prisoners were confined and engaged in public works. Following an 1847 report by Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe, identifying problems with administration and with sexual liberties among convicts housed in poorly supervised dormitory conditions, the station system was gradually dismantled. Transportation of convicted criminals to Australia ended entirely in 1854.

Books and Libraries

From the outset it was apparently customary to provide prisoners with books. In 1834, the Quaker missionary James Backhouse reported that a small library for prisoners had been established at Port Arthur from donations from private individuals. He recommended that the government make a large addition to the library as well as establishing a similar library at Point Puer, the neighbouring settlement for juveniles.⁴ Unfortunately we do not know the titles of any of these books.

When Tasmania's Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Franklin, requested books for the use of the probation gangs in the colony, his superiors directed the chaplain of Parkhurst Prison to provide a list of the books in use at Parkhurst. The Parkhurst list, taken from the publications of the Religious Tract Society and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, includes tracts and sermons, biographies, trade manuals, natural and social histories, voyages and travels, including *Robinson Crusoe* and *Cook's Voyages*.⁵

Standing orders published 1841 for the regulation of the probation system in Tasmania required that punishment took preference over rehabilitation:

⁴ See Ian Brand, *Penal Peninsula* (Hobart: Jason Publications, 1978), 24.

⁵ Tasmania. Original Correspondence. Secretary of State. CO280/148 (AJCP reel PRO514), The National Archives (UK). Unfortunately, only titles (rather than editions) are noted in the correspondence. I am grateful to Tony Marshall for his assistance in clarifying these matters.

The discipline, therefore, must be rigorous and uncompromising, but at the same time tempered with judicious advice, and instruction moral and religious; and it will be the duty of those in charge of the Convicts to treat them as fellow-men, although suffering a just punishment for their crimes against society. They must endeavour to direct their minds to better things; but they will not suffer any relaxation of punishment.⁶

The regulations suggest that books were deemed both a reward and a means of self-improvement in the Christian sense:

The Superintendent will issue the Books in his charge, at discretion, to the best-conducted Convicts of each class, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons; taking great care that they are returned to him through his Assistants on each evening in a proper state. So, upon days upon which the usual labour cannot be performed, owing to the state of the weather; and on these days, in addition to the Saturday afternoons, such Convicts as are desirous of obtaining instruction in reading will be allowed to attend in a hut set apart for that purpose. Upon all these occasions the Superintendent will read a moral lecture and an evening prayer to the Convicts in the Gang.⁷

The regulations of 1843 suggest that it may not be assumed that all stations were provided with libraries; they also show that the books were for the use of both the convicts and their gaolers:

The libraries established at the several stations are to be under [the religious instructor's] care and management.... The officers of the station will be allowed the use of the books from the library; care being taken that no more than one volume be given out at a time to any individual.⁸

Evidence of book titles comes from the few surviving volumes; research is yet to uncover library lists or correspondence to indicate the books shipped and received from Britain for this purpose. A possible exception is the parliamentary list of 10,949 books held in the Queen's Asylum store in Hobart in 1865, stated as "not now in use." This list gives the titles of 2353 school books, 3678 Protestant religious books and 4918 Roman Catholic religious books.⁹

Of the books held in convict libraries just sixty-four have survived in Tasmanian public collections,¹⁰ with one other auctioned in Sydney in 2007 to an unidentified

⁶ *Standing Orders for the Regulation of the Probation System of Convict Labour in Van Diemen's Land* (Hobart: James Barnard, Government Printer, 1841), 6.

⁷ *Standing Orders*, 14–15.

⁸ *Regulations for the Religious and Moral Instruction of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land*, 1 December 1843, reproduced in Brand, *Convict Probation System*, 240–41.

⁹ *Journals of the House of Assembly, Tasmania* (Hobart: James Barnard, Government Printer, 1865), vol. 12, report no. 92, 13. I am indebted to Kim Simpson of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG) at Launceston for this reference.

¹⁰ QVMAG (24); Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (17); Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, Hobart (18), Launceston (1); Port Arthur Historical Site (4).

buyer. In addition, approximately forty books believed to have come from convict probation stations were salvaged privately from the upper-storey of Government buildings at Salamanca Place, Hobart when the buildings were being vacated. It is likely that others were destroyed at this time. Regrettably these volumes were lost in a house fire in Hobart in 2004. No record was kept of titles, but their owner recalls that the Broadmarsh Probation Station was named among the inscriptions in the volumes and that the titles included both youth and adult literature.¹¹

Of the sixty-five identified survivals, one half are Bibles, prayer books, religious tracts or books with a Christian message, and one quarter are school books, while the remainder include books of practical instruction, natural history, history, poetry and fiction. Some surviving volumes preserve prisoners' efforts at writing their names and alphabets or copying printed words.

Works of fiction include Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham; or, Adventures of a Gentleman*, published in London in 1854. Bulwer Lytton was one of the most popular authors in the colony: his novels were among the most borrowed from the Evandale Subscription Library in the 1850s.¹² In Launceston, F. M. Innes argued that the Mechanics' Institute should promote general literature, citing *Pelham* among works that presented "vivid pictures of the state of real life which it is important for us to know something of, and of which we cannot learn anything so well as by this mode of writing."¹³ However, there is nothing to suggest that the present copy was intended for the prisoners. It carries the Port Arthur Subscription Library and Reading Room bookplate with the Port Arthur stamp on the title page. Its publication date of 1854 coincides with the end of convict transportation. Its popular nature and its well-worn but clean condition suggests it was well read, but clearly it was for general borrowing and likely by prison officials and their families.¹⁴

Natural history included *The Natural History of Reptiles and Serpents*, published in Dublin in 1824, now in the collection at Port Arthur. Inscribed on the inside cover is "Prisoners Library Norfolk Island," later crossed out and replaced with the inscription and stamp of the Public Library Port Arthur. It is likely that when convicts were finally moved from Norfolk Island to the Tasmanian mainland between 1854–56, the books moved with them.¹⁵

Poetry included *The Banks of Wye*, by Robert Bloomfield, published in London in 1823. The book, in clean condition, with fine woodcuts, describes a ten-day excursion by a party of friends, in Gloucestershire, along the River Wye and

¹¹ In conversation with the author, September 2006.

¹² Adkins, "For the Best of Reasons," Table 3, p. 281 and Table 6, p. 287.

¹³ Stefan Petrow, *Going to the Mechanics* (Launceston: Historical Survey of Northern Tasmania, 1998), 77.

¹⁴ The Port Arthur convict settlement also operated a subscription library, to serve the free community. The settlement remained open following the end of transportation, allowing convicts to complete their sentences.

¹⁵ Enquiries have failed to locate other Norfolk Island convict books.

through part of South Wales, in the summer of 1807. A small, modestly-bound volume of 109 pages, the book is inscribed, "Salt Water River Station Nov. 1853" and "Impression Bay." A further inscription, "Hospital," indicates its provision for reading by patients. Given its publication date and subject it is likely the result of a personal donation rather than Government issue. It was most likely to have appealed to nostalgic English military officers.

Among the more interesting of the religious works is a Bible published in London in 1840, inscribed on the inside front cover: "No. 5 Hut 3 yards[,] July 21st, 1845. Issued by Rev. E. P. Durham B. A., Chaplain Port Arthur." The inscription although imprecise, suggests that Bibles may—in some instances—have been shelved in the prisoners' living quarters. The following year Durham questioned the choice of books provided for convict reading: "As to the library which has been formed by Mr Manton I beg to say that the great majority of the works are better adapted for a Methodist preacher's library than for the instruction of prisoners." Durham stated that the Port Arthur library contained "391 vols[,] more than the 2/3 of which are strictly religious. On Saturday last there were 107 books issued and amongst them there were not more than 3 religious works chosen by the men. This fact confirms my observation that the great majority of the books are not suitable for the prisoners."¹⁶ Durham, an Anglican appointed by Bishop Nixon to replace the Wesleyan Rev. Manton, was likely asserting his authority. The Commandant rejected Durham's proposition and recommended that Durham confine himself to religious duties.

In 1855, James Boyd, commandant at Port Arthur since 1853, reported that a new room "for containing the prisoners' library, and to answer as a reading room for the officers" had been approved and was shortly to be commenced.¹⁷ In 1858 Boyd reported arranging individual instruction for the prisoners in reading, writing, arithmetic and general instruction on history, geography, mechanics, pneumatics and hydraulics.¹⁸ He stated: "Books are ... supplied to the out-stations and detached posts, the invalids, and Such, the inmates of the Separate prison, and some of the Lunatics have books issued to them."¹⁹ Although most of the probation stations closed by the 1850s, as late as 1869 there remained nineteen outposts of the Port Arthur convict settlement on Tasman's Peninsula, including Impression Bay and Salt Water River. Port Arthur continued as a penal settlement until the late 1870s.

The surviving volumes and supporting data suggest that in the transportation period, the majority of books provided for probation stations and convict reading

¹⁶ See Commandant to Comptroller General, 29 March 1844, Records of the Comptroller-General of Convicts. A1087/1128, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (copy at MM62/1/1, Archives Office of Tasmania). I am indebted to Julia Clark for this reference. I am also indebted to Andrew Piper, late of the Port Arthur Historic Site, for information relating to the period.

¹⁷ *Penal Peninsula*, 128.

¹⁸ *Penal Peninsula*, 140.

¹⁹ *Penal Peninsula*, 141.

generally were Bibles, prayer books and books of Christian instruction, many published by the British religious publishing societies. The prisons clearly attempted to improve literacy and numeracy, particularly for children. There is nothing to suggest that Maconochie's plan to provide prisoners on Norfolk Island with creative literature as a means of human betterment was attempted on the Tasmanian mainland, if in fact the requested books arrived. It would seem from inscriptions and reports that Port Arthur and its out-stations on Tasman's Peninsula were the main repositories of books, though too little is known about the availability of books at the smaller, outlying stations. It is hoped that by describing these known prison volumes, present readers will be alerted to their significance and more such books will be found, to enrich our understanding of print's contribution to the social rehabilitation of nineteenth-century transported felons.

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