

Damned whores or founding mothers? Representations of convict women in Australian literature

Lou Drofenik

La Trobe University, P.O. Box 298, Wandong Victoria 3758, Melborn, Australia. E-mail: loudrof@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT. When writing about European settlement in Australia, nineteenth and early twentieth century writers focused on the lives of the male convicts and on the English middle class who were in charge of the colony. It was only in the latter part of the twentieth century that Australian feminist writers started to take an interest in the lives of women convicts. Working from different theoretical perspectives, feminist writers patiently unraveled the lives of convict women hidden within layers of archival material. Thus started the debate of whether convict women should be regarded as Damned Whores or Founding Mothers. Were these women all prostitutes transported for their vices? Or were they women, who struggling for survival in their native land were transported for trivial crimes in order to populate a country which had long been settled by Aboriginal nations? Were these women Founding Mothers who left a legacy not only of Australian born children but also of values embedded in Australian culture? How does Australian literature represent these women? This essay deals with female convicts transported to Australia from Great Britain and Ireland. In this essay I will look at the way writers have depicted their lives and I will examine the way their narratives helped to shape the culture in which they lived and if their legacy lives in today's Australia.

Key words: Australian fiction, female convicts, female representations.

RESUMO. Prostitutas amaldiçoadas ou mães fundadoras? representações de mulheres detentas na literatura australiana. Quando os autores do século XIX e do início do século XX começaram a escrever sobre a colonização europeia na Austrália, focalizavam a vida dos detentos do sexo masculino e da classe média britânica que administrava a colônia. Foi apenas na segunda metade do século XX que as escritoras feministas começaram a se preocupar com a vida das detentas britânicas enviadas para o continente. A partir de várias perspectivas teóricas, as escritoras feministas, com muita paciência, fizeram emergir a vida das detentas, oculta ou suprimida dos arquivos da colônia. Iniciou-se então o debate: seriam as detentas Prostitutas Amaldiçoadas ou Mães Fundadoras? Será que todas estas mulheres eram prostitutas enviadas à colônia pelos seus vícios? Ou eram mulheres que lutavam para sobreviver na Inglaterra e na Irlanda e, acusadas de crimes triviais, foram transportadas à colônia para povoar o continente que por muitos séculos havia sido povoado por nações aborígenes? Foram estas mulheres Mães Fundadoras que contribuíram, com o nascimento de seus filhos, para consolidar os valores inerentes à cultura australiana? Como a literatura australiana representa tais mulheres? O ensaio analisa as detentas britânicas e irlandesas que foram transportadas à Austrália, examinando como vários escritores descreveram a sua vida e como suas narrativas ajudaram a moldar a cultura em que viviam e como sua herança cultural persiste na Austrália contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: ficção australiana, detentos femininos, representação feminina.

Damned whores or founding mothers

Past Australian writers have focused on the themes of mateship, on the difference between the city and the bush, and what it means to be Australian. More recently, writers, especially those of Aboriginal descent, have focused on telling the story of the decimation of Aboriginal languages, culture and people thus bringing into the Australian consciousness the long legacy of injustice meted out

to the first inhabitants of this land. Australia's first years of settlement, when England emptied its jails and sent its miscreants on long journeys away from its shores have been well documented by historians, novelists and biographers. Apart from very few works this documentation places the male character (be it a free settler or a convict) at the heart of the writing leaving the female in the periphery.

Skewered in favour of the male character, Australian early convict literature authored by male

writers not only gives women a minor role in the settlement story but it paints the female convict as a degenerate harridan, committing acts of abominable debauchery, taken straight out of Marcus Clarke's novel. *For the Term of his Natural Life* (1977):

Of the social condition of these people at this time it is impossible to speak without astonishment. According to the recorded testimony of respectable persons — Government Officials, free settlers — the profligacy of the settlers was notorious. Drunkenness was a prevailing vice. Even children were to be seen in the streets intoxicated. On Sundays men and women might be observed standing round the public-house doors, waiting for the expiration of the hours of public worship in order to continue their carousing (CLARKE, 1977, p. 89).

Male writers unite when talking about female convicts in the early years of settlement and while Marcus Clarke talks of 'the vilest abuses' that were being committed in the female prisons, later historians such as "Lloyd Robson (1965), Alan Shaw (1966) and more recently Robert Hughes (1987) have tended to accept the judgments of contemporary officials who condemned the female convicts generally as 'damned whores', possessed of neither 'Virtue nor Honesty'" (FRANCES, 1994).

Colleen McCullough, Babette Smith and Bryce Courtenay are three novelists who paint a different picture of convict women. Babette Smith (1991) is a novelist who places women at the very centre of her novel. And while both Colleen McCullough's (2000) and Bryce Courtenay's (1995) very successful novels have at their core the stories of male convicts — Richard Morgan and Isaac (Ikey) Solomon — respectively, they have both succeeded in letting us see their female convict characters in a more favourable light so that rather than seeing them as whores we start thinking of them as individuals who managed to redeem themselves in this outpost of the world, individuals who have left a legacy of values which are present in the Australian way of life to this day.

Damned Whores or Founding Mothers? How are we to know the truth about these women convicts since their voices are not heard? Were they Whores? Were they Founding Mothers who left a legacy not only of descendants but also of values, which are seen, as particularly Australian? Do Australian novels tell us what we're looking for?

Building a profile of the women during the first years of settlement

There were four distinct groups of women in Australia during the first years of settlement. First of all, there were a considerable number of Aboriginal

women who lived in small groups and who had a spiritual attachment to the land, which the white invader, intent on its possession, could never comprehend. There were a handful of middle class English women, wives of those in authority, who brought with them their middle-class English prejudices and who either wanted to reform convict women or to exploit them as a free labour force. Then there was a small group of free women who came to Australia accompanying their convict husbands, as was the case of Sal Thornhill in Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River*.

'I am Mrs. Thornhill, she called above the din [...] He is not assigned to me, he is my husband. The man gave her a sardonic look. He might be the husband but you are the master now, dearie, he said. Assigned, that is the same as bound over. Help yourself dearie, do what you fancy with him' (GRENVILLE, 2005, p. 77).

There was also an ever-increasing number of convict women who were outnumbered by men. Writers such as Marcus Clarke (1977), Lloyd Robson (1965), Alan Shaw (1966), Robert Hughes (1987) and more recently Patricia Shaw (2002; 2005) centre their work around the achievements, trials and tribulations of the male members who arrived in Australia in the first years of settlement giving female convicts minor roles in their writings, thus rendering them almost voiceless and therefore invisible. What is the reason they were left out of the Australian settlement story? This is definitely not because there isn't any information about them. On the contrary, their lives are minutely documented within the colony's records of Musters, requests for permission to marry, marriage and death certificates and the birth certificates of their children. Various details of their lives are also documented in requests for pardons and in the wills they made. Their names are repeatedly mentioned in the letters and diaries written by those in authority. In their book, *The Convicts of the Eleanor: Protest in Rural England, New lives in Australia*, David Kent and Norma Townsend (KENT; TOWNSEND, 2002) state quite clearly that a great deal was known about the women sent to Australia.

Convicts in Australia were perhaps the most fully documented individuals in the British Empire. The creation of increasingly detailed records in the colony was part of the evolution and closer regulation of the convict system in New South Wales [...]. At the shipboard muster clerks recorded each convict's name, age, literacy, religion, marital status, number of children, place of birth, occupation, previous convictions and physical descriptions including moles, scars and tattoos (KENT; TOWNSEND, 2002, p. 155).

In his novel *The Potato Factory*, (1995) Bryce Courtenay describes Mary Abacus on her arrival in Van Diemen's Land.

'Mary's description was accordingly written down: - Light straw coloured hair, green eyes - placed wide apart, scar on left cheek, Brow high, hands badly deformed - black/blue in colour, height 5 feet and 2 inches, skin fair, face clear - no pox pitting, comely in appearance' (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 418).

From shipping records and censuses we have a clear picture of these women's backgrounds. Many came from Great Britain with a larger number coming from Ireland. There were those who were single and those who were married with children they had to abandon, for women convicts were not allowed to take their children with them. Other women were listed as widows. Of these women convicts, there were those who were both literate and numerate. All of the women came from the lower classes and poverty was a common factor in their lives. In their essay *Female Immigrants Compared*, Richards and Oxley (1995) give an overall description of female convicts that shatters the mental image we have built of these women from past narratives, which depicted them as old 'lags'.

Convicts were at their peak age for physical fitness and young enough to adjust to a new environment, climate and social setting. Around 27 years — the average age of convict women — probably also represented the optimum balance between training and future practice, meaning female convicts were old enough to have acquired skills yet young enough to have a long working life in front of them (RICHARDS; OXLEY, 1995, p. 19).

In her novel, based on her researched publication of the same title, *A Cargo of Women – the Novel*, Babette Smith (1991) paints a picture of a different kind of convict women from the pock-marked harridans of 19th century literature. The description of her female characters taken out of the muster notes, paints them as young and often beautiful women. Susannah Watson is a beauty and so is Sarah Bryant. We can imagine what Martha Turner would have looked like with her light coloured hair and blue eyes. "Martha Turner was a pretty girl whose full, pouting lips meant she always looked sulky" (Smith, 1991, p. 128).

We therefore know who these women were and we can also build a mental picture of what they could have possibly looked like. We also know their criminal background. Many had been in service working as maids, cooks or seamstresses, their crimes against their masters minutely detailed, often involving theft of clothing, food or money. In her book *Convict Maids*, Deborah Oxley has this to say about female crime,

More typical than money, women snatched clothes. Clothing was particularly coveted. In 555 cases, convicts had stolen 'clothes'; when all other items of wearing apparel from frocks to socks are included, it transpires that 1394 items of clothing were purloined. Twenty percent of transportees had earned their sentences for such thefts. Deirdre Beddoe in her study of Welsh convict women commented on the considerable irony that, journeying to the colony, 'the women were provided with more and better clothes than they had ever owned in their lives and many of them were being transported for stealing old garments of less value!' (OXLEY, 1996, p. 49).

This is not to say that thefts of garments were the only offences these women committed. Women were transported for a wide variety of serious offences, murder and arson being two of them.

Some of the transportees were prostitutes but prostitution was not an offence. Prostitutes transported to the colonies were convicted for theft and other acts of violence. In her book *The Hatch and Brood of Time*, Portia Robinson (1985, p. 81) says: "Prostitution itself was not an indictable offence and crimes linked with this 'profession' usually involved some form of theft".

So young enough to start a new life, judged by the laws of the time which were above all concerned with protecting the assets of those in the Establishment, laws which enforced a moral order on the lower classes through severe punishment; these women set off towards a distant land to work out their sentence, be it for seven years, fourteen years or for the term of their natural life. And there, according to past literature they sit, stigmatized by their criminal actions into posterity, silently waiting for other women, their female descendants perhaps, to unravel their lives and give voice to their achievements and courage.

Deportation to a distant land

It was not until feminist researchers working from different theoretical perspectives, patiently lifted the layers of archival material and, unraveling the lives of convict women hidden inside, heard their voices and positioned the women in a different narrative to the one we have heard in the past. From this research we learn that the cargo of convict women, despised though they were, was a valuable one. Their choosing was of a careful nature and judges knew when they passed sentence for deportation that women had to be healthy in order to make the long journey safely and to be fit to work when they arrived in the colony. A private

contractor was in charge of the women on board and was paid according to how many women arrived safely; therefore it was in his interest that they would be looked after on the journey. That's not to say that a sea journey of over a hundred days was easy and without its hazards whether from the elements or from the men on board, be they ship officers, sailors or free men.

Bryce Courtenay paints a picture straight out of hell of the transport ship *Destiny 11* which took Mary Abacus and other female convicts to Van Diemen's land.

The *Destiny 11* was a 'wet' ship, that is to say, when the huge waves washed over the decks the water poured down into the prison quarters so that not a single flock mattress, pillow or blanket or anything contained within the female prison, including the convicts themselves, remained dry (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 292).

and

By midday, when the heat was at its zenith, the heat upon the blazing deck would cause the pitch between the deckboards to melt. This molten hell would drop onto them in the prison below where it would bubble upon their flesh [...] (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 297).

Lizzie Lock in Colleen McCullough's novel *Morgan's Run* (2000) tells Richard Morgan about her journey on board the 'Lady Penrhyn', a ship with only women convicts on board.

'Can you imagine, Richard? They gave us no rags for our bleeding courses, so we had to start tearing our own clothes - slops like this... When we stole the sailors' shirts to use as rags they flogged us, or cut off our hair and shaved our heads. Those who gave them cheek were gagged. The worst punishment was to be stripped naked and put inside a barrel with our heads, arms and legs poking out [...]' (McCULLOUGH, 2000, p. 363).

But quite remarkably, few deaths were recorded while they were at sea. "Of all the women sent to New South Wales between 1826 and 1840, 6812 made it alive. Sixty-four deaths. A sad number but a remarkably low one" (ROBINSON, 1985, p. 20).

How does the literature see women convicts?

From letters and diaries written by the men in charge of the colony and their wives, writers have had a clear picture of how convict women were perceived and what their treatment ought to be. Rev. Samuel Marsden (called *The Flogging Parson*) in charge of the colonial committee to the colonial secretary had this to say after a disturbance where

convict women refused to have their hair shorn: "It will never do to show them any clemency – they must be kept under" (SMITH, 2005, p. 55).

The Establishment was made up of English middle class who came to Australia with dreams of bettering their prospects in a new environment. They brought with them the middle class philosophies and prejudices of the day against the lower classes. These prejudices, which were freely expressed in their diaries, documents and letters, found their way in early Australian literature. As Portia Robinson says in her book *Women of Botany Bay*,

The opinions on women convicts were influenced by preconceived expectations as to their behaviour and moral standards based very largely on their known characteristics of the convicted women felons who were transported to Botany Bay. First, they were convicted felons, guilty of major statutory offences for which the punishment was usually death but sentenced instead to a term of transportation with penal servitude. Second, as convicts they were not only criminally inclined but must necessarily be morally tainted so that wanton, degraded, dissolute and abandoned behaviour was expected from them. Third, as illiterates, unskilled girls and women from the lower orders of British Society, they formed the lower rank of social hierarchy (ROBINSON, 1985, p. 76).

This was the generalised view, found within the pages of diaries and letters of the Establishment regarding women transported to Australia. Past writers accepted this view and promulgated the idea that convict women were inherently incorrigible and wanton, thereby embedding this notion in Australian mythology. By doing this, past Australian writers confirmed the view that all women convicts were nothing but prostitutes. Babette Smith in *Cargo of Women* has this to say about the generalised view Australians have been fed about the women who were sent by Great Britain.

Drunks, whores, pickpockets, burglars, paupers, misfits. Genetic criminals. Moral degenerates? Survivors or victims? The opinion of Australia's women has veered from criminal whore to helpless victim. They have been used to make a case in black and white — damn the women and uphold the Establishment. Damn the Establishment and uphold the women. They have been vilified, lionised, statisticised and generalised, but no one has yet asked: What were they like as human beings? (SMITH, 2005, p. 1).

Indeed what were they like as individuals? Past literature ignored these women's individuality and focused mainly in recording their crimes and their debauched natures; early writers of Australian

convict history ignored the part they played in the development of a new social order away from British shores. They also ignored women's contribution to the economy of the day, as Oxley states:

Convict women had arrived from Great Britain and Ireland bearing economic luggage loaded with substantial skills, social baggage well packed with experience of ordinary working life, and a conducive age distribution which should have served colonial development singularly well (OXLEY, 1996, p. 238).

It took female researchers to start delving into the layers of individual women's lives, breaking past silences and giving them credit for their work.

Convict women found a blind-spot in historians' and economists' field of vision [...] Who bore the children? Who suckled them and coddled them? Who worked the big and little houses? Who made the meals? Who worked the nurseries? Who spun the fibres? Who made the clothes? Who laundered them? Who battled at the frontier? (OXLEY, 1996, p. 239).

Biographer Nance Donkin traces the lives of two female convicts, Mary Reibey and Margaret Catchpole in her book, *The Women were there: Nineteen women who enlivened Australia's History* (1988). According to Donkin, Margaret Catchpole became a successful woman in Australia and worked as a midwife: "She grew herbs and brewed potions and salves for her continuing work as a district nurse. At one time she also opened a shop in her front room" (DONKIN, 1988, p. 57).

Mary Reibey was transported to Australia for stealing a horse when she was 14. She married at 17 and by the time she was widowed at 34 was a rich woman, mother of seven children and owned ships, farms and a warehouse.

She was a shrewd, extremely successful business woman who owned properties in town, farms along the Hawkesbury River, a shipping line, cottages here and there. Her children had married well and her grandchildren were bright and well-educated fitting easily into polite society (DONKIN, 1988, p. 40).

Only a few female writers, among them Kay Daniels (1998), Babette Smith (1991) and Joy Damousi (1997) have placed convict women at the centre of their work, thereby eliciting new narratives, which place convict women in a completely different space from that which had been previously allocated to them. Both Maria Lord in Kay Daniel's book (1998) and Susannah Watson in Babette Smith's novel (1991) were convict women who prospered. Writer-historian Babette Smith follows Susannah Watson's life journey through the letters she sent her daughter in England and says this about her: "On the evidence of Susannah

Watson and her shipmates from the Princes Royal, transportation for most of the convicts was not the fatal shore at all but a second chance" (Smith, 2005, p. 174).

Kay Daniels reveals that Maria Lord's life (who prospered in Tasmania and who does not feature in Australian history) could provide future authors with more ideas around which future more complex narratives about female convicts can be written. Her life could show different aspects of how society treated women depending on "the ideas the historian wishes to mobilise around her" (DANIELS, 1998, p. 29).

[Or] she may be used to demonstrate how colonial society opened up new opportunities for women, how it was a society of upward mobility through both marriage and employment, a society which moved quickly towards establishing 'civilised' social structures and domestic arrangements which worked to the advantage of women [...] the narratives her story reveals are the major narratives in the history of convict women in Australia (DANIELS, 1998, p. 30).

In her novel *Morgan's Run*, Colleen McCullough (2000) does exactly this and depicts her convict women more favourably than previous writers have done. Though they are not the main protagonists in her story, McCullough sees them as individuals who fought for what they believed and gives them an assertiveness, which contradicts what other writers have written about them. Speaking of Ann Smith who absconded as soon as she arrived, Lizzie Lock has this to say: "She swore she would go, the fiercest monsters and Indians held no terrors for her after Lady Penrhyn and Englishmen, she said. No matter what they did to her, she would not truckle" (McCULLOUGH, 2000, p. 363).

Young Kitty Clark speaks confidently of giving birth to her first child when she was on her own with no one to help her,

It happened all in a muddle, I had no warning. My water broke, I had a gripey pain, and then I felt her head. So I spread a clean sheet on the floor, squatted down and had her. The whole did not take above a quarter of an hour, As soon as the afterbirth came I found some thread, tied the cord and cut it with my scissors (McCULLOUGH, 2000, p. 585).

Bryce Courtenay, whose central character in the novel *The Potato Factory* is Isaac Solomon, (Fagin of Charles Dickens's fame) gives Mary Abacus a strong character and endows her with leadership qualities, which the other convict women recognise.

Mary was like themselves, hardened by the vicissitudes of a poverty-stricken life, though unlike themselves, not beaten by it. She was a woman who spoke her mind, had a tongue as harsh and foul as

many, but who could not be easily led and who intuitively knew her own mind at all times (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 324).

Sal Thornhill in Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (a free woman whose convict husband is assigned to her) is also an assertive woman who's able to use the love her husband has for her as a tool to manipulate him. Though Will carries the main role in the novel, Sal is the one who plans the life course they'll take. She's the one who opens a grog shop when they arrive and makes enough money to start their own business. She is the one who urges Will to borrow money to buy Tom Blackwood's boat. And it is because of Sal's reluctance to settle on the hundred acres her husband loves, that he makes a most terrible decision, which irreparably damages his moral self.

'He told her the story: the parley-voo, the showing of the guns, the dispersing. She listened in silence. *There won't be no more trouble, Sal*, he said at last. *As God is my witness [...] They gone for good and all this time*, he said, as casual as could be. *No need for us to go anywhere just yet awhile*.

[...] *I hope you ain't done nothing*, she said at last. *On account of me pushing at you*. He could hear her recoiling from the words even as she spoke. He rushed in full of cheer: *What are you on about, Sal?*' (GRENVILLE, 2005, p. 323).

When Sarah Bryant, in Babette Smith's novel of women characters, was let down badly by Martin Fogarty, the convict she fell in love with, she didn't mince words when she told him what she wanted him to do in order that she keep her daughter Meg.

'Hello Sarah', he said, and smiled at her.

The smile made Sarah angry. He hasn't changed, she thought. Still thinks he can charm his way out of everything. Well, he can put it to good use this time and save Meg. She began to talk fast and pouring out the details of her situation, demanding that he do something about their daughter and telling him how to go about it. 'First, a job,' she said. 'And lodgings. Then you must get us both back. They'll take Meg if you don't hurry' (SMITH, 1991, p. 366).

Babette Smith lets us again hear the voice of one of the convict women. No namby-pamby voice this one, but the voice of a woman who can look after herself. Picture her on board the transport ship waiting her turn to be measured and recorded, with all the women hanging about watching what's going on and then Mr Roberts trying to take liberties with her. "Fuckin' little runt," she growled furiously to the female gathering. 'Tried to pinch me tits. Won't do that again in a hurry'. She beamed. 'Knead him in the balls. Did you 'ear 'im yell?'" (SMITH, 1991, p. 97).

What do the female convict novels reveal or lack to reveal?

Looking at convict narratology, historical, biographical or fiction, we could say that the human condition and the human connection of those foundation years have seeped down the generations into the Australian psyche. When we read about the dark side of transportation, full of cruelty and inhumanity against Aboriginal people, we know Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Aboriginal Nations was long overdue. Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) forces us to stop in our tracks and reflect on the present debate about Aboriginal deaths in custody and Aboriginal dispossession. It stops us to reflect on our inability to fully understand Aboriginal culture and reminds us that the inhumanity of past years has not disappeared altogether but is still with us in another form. The stories of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children, which took place within our lifetimes turn our stomachs the same way as Flanagan's and Grenville's descriptions of what white settlers did during the first settlement years;

Some time later Old Man Palmer had to take his horse as soon as the servant returned from one of his hunting forays. Upon halting at a creek, he reached into his saddlebag for his pannikin to fetch a drink, but instead pulled out a black child's head & three flyblown black hands (FLANAGAN, 2001, p. 213).

and

Smasher Sullivan reached for some things in the bottom of his boat and held them up. *Look what I done*, he called. Thornhill thought for a moment it was fish he had caught and was showing them, or was it a pair of gloves? Then he saw that they were hands cut off at the wrist. The skin was black against the white of the bone.

Last time that bugger thieves from me, Smasher called, and gave a harsh high-pitched laugh (GRENVILLE, 2005, p. 103).

Implicit also within both Flanagan's and Grenville's novels are the messages that Australia was never a *Terra Nullius* and that we did not need the High Court of Australia to tell us that. That Australia had always been inhabited, that this land did belong to Edy Mabo and his people, and that after many years of an obdurate government refusing to utter words of reconciliation, it was with great joy that in February 2008 Australia heard Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's speech to the Aboriginal Nations saying 'we are sorry'.

Besides the displacement of Aborigines, convict narratology also reveals the workings of an

intractable British justice system, the wretchedness of an interminable sea journey, the cruelty of the lash, the prostitution, the beatings and the drunkenness. They reveal a male dominated world of injustice and self-seeking dominance of everything Australia had to offer, a great hunger for power and a silencing of women's contribution, especially convict women's contribution to the settlement of this land. And trickling down the generations to our present time we feel the legacy of those distant times when we see vast land holdings cleared in order to extract as much wealth as we can out of the earth's bountiful ores and minerals, when we read about another creature or botanical species biting the dust of extinction and when our young grow up in a drug and alcohol culture we find impossible to change. And above all convict narratology shows us that the recent policies of incarcerating within heavily fortified detention centres erected in the middle of the Australian nowhere, refugees, (male, female and children) who sought a new life in Australia, are not much different from the penal settlements those long dead convicts experienced.

And if within these convict novels we read of a deeply dark side which makes our hearts turn in despair, we also read that within the horrors of a convict colony there are also embedded aspects of a brighter side, the side of light, the positive side of the settlement story. Novels such as those of Colleen McCullough, Babette Smith and Bryce Courtenay manage to give us glimpses of this positive side. Their narratives open up the lives of individual women, embodying them, giving them a voice, endowing them with feelings with which we can empathise and above all giving them agency in their own destiny.

In Colleen McCullough's novel we follow Lizzie Lock's life as a convict, in Botany Bay and on Norfolk Island. When her job in the Commandant's house is terminated she tells Kitty Clark her plans.

'I am thinking of Thomas Sculley, a marine just arrived back to take up land here. Not far from Morgan's Run. Quiet sort of man, a bit like Richard in that respect. Don't want no children, but. He ain't got a woman, and he made me an offer after tasting my banana fritters in rum. I turned him down, but now that the Commandant says I have to go, I may as well move in with Sculley' (McCULLOUGH, 2000, p. 578).

And though Colleen McCullough's Kitty has not reached Lizzie's maturity, we can see her thought processes starting to develop as she sits with Lizzie over a cup of tea in a fine china cup, she sorely

admires, and compares the life of a convict woman with that of Mrs. King the Commandant's wife.

[...] Mrs. King has never been a convict woman and Mrs King will never be as admirable in my eyes as Lizzie Lock. Or Mary Rolt. Or Kitty Clark. So there, Mrs. King! Said Kitty to herself. Drink your tea from your fine china cups after the convict servant girl has made it and served it to you! Pin on your course clouts after the convict servant girl has washed your blood from them and hung them out to dry! You may be everything a prison commandant's wife should be, but you are not *our* equal (McCULLOUGH, 2000, p. 578).

We never visualise Mary Abacus in Bryce Courtenay's novel as a victim, not when she is condemned to transportation, not when she is on board the ship nor when she is dehumanised at the Female Factory. She is a woman who speaks her mind, a woman of action, who finally risks her own life in order to save her son Hawk and becomes a hero. "We owes you, Mary Abacus. You be a legend from now among the timber getters, accepted as one of our own kind and welcome to return any time you wishes, even though I daresay you be a bloody Protestant!" (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 638).

Babette Smith brings Susannah Watson to life when we hear her reflecting on her past, which despite the horrors, she can look back upon with pride and some kind of longing.

'Respectable, thought Susannah with unexpected nostalgia. We're all so respectable nowadays. She remembers Samuel Marsden's face as the Factory women bared their bums. Catherine Donahue's 'fuckin' whores. Outrageous language, lewd behaviour. But *honest*. Suddenly she missed those roaring days with deep longing. Then she chuckled. Half the town would faint if they knew what I'd seen. And the other half would pretend to be shocked (SMITH, 1991, p. 429).

McCullough, Smith and Courtenay depict various female characters in their novels, seamstresses, maids, cooks, and mothers, women who were able to housekeep, cook, sew and rear children, skills they took with them in their new land. This ties with what Richards and Oxley state in their essay *Female Immigrants Compared*: "Transportation delivered to the colony a healthy group of women capable of participating in the full range of human endeavour, be it as domestics, artisans, sex workers, wives, lovers or mothers" (RICHARDS; OXLEY, 1995, p. 21).

In Bryce Courtney's novel *The Potato Factory*, Mary Abacus takes her skills as an accountant with her and these serve her so well in the colony of Van

Diemen's land, where learning to be a brewer and opening her own brewery she becomes a very wealthy woman. Furthermore, Courtenay takes us inside Mary's head and lets us see how this individual worked this out.

'The world is not short of dreamers, but to the dreamer in Mary was added a clever, practical and innovative mind which once committed would never surrender. All grand schemes, she told herself, may be broken down to small beginnings. Each step she took, no matter how tentative it might seem, would be linked to her grand design and would always be moving towards it, if only a fraction of an inch at a time' (COURTENAY, 1995, p. 487).

Conclusion

A search through twentieth century Australian novels dealing with the first years of settlement reveals that despite there being a wealth of primary sources relating to female convicts' lives, few writers of fiction have focused solely on these women's lives. This exclusion is indicative of the roles women are allowed to take in public life. After three decades of active feminism, only a handful of women make it to the top echelons of governance. It has taken until 2008 for Australia to have its first female Governor General, an occurrence heralded with almost messianic approbation. When female politicians make it to the top, (as is the case of Julia Gillard Deputy Prime Minister) the media still has a field day as it did thirty years ago when Joan Kirner became the first female Premier of Victoria, discussing their hairstyle, their make up and their idiosyncratic way of dressing.

On the other hand, the few novels which depict the lives of convict women, show that despite unbelievable odds stacked against them these women managed to become agents of their own destiny. It is through these novels that we start viewing them as women who were able make a break with their past in order to start a new life. Through these novels we're therefore able to see them as human beings, visualise their daily lives, listen to their talk and watch the way they survived a brutal penal system. We're able to see them as wives and mothers, midwives and nurses, shopkeepers and businesswomen. We watch them as they make this new strange land their home. We start thinking about the feelings they had, and wonder, if like us they felt the same pain when a child drowned, when a neighbour was crushed when a gum tree dropped a branch on top of him, when a husband ran off with another woman. We will think about the minutiae of their day-to-day lives and wonder which values

they kept and which they discarded. Perhaps thrift and hard work became part of their beings. We know that material goods were scarce and expensive to obtain so perhaps the Australian notion of 'making do,' would have come from those times. Or were tolerance and fairness, so valued in Australian society, values that convict women passed down the generations? After all they knew best what it felt like to be discriminated against and to be unfairly treated. Resilience and resourcefulness would be assets they would have carried with them and passed down to their children, for they needed to be resilient and resourceful to overcome the overbearing rules and sadistic punishments of a penal colony.

But perhaps, these convict women who became mothers of large families or wealthy businesswomen or who succeeded in some other kind of endeavour were the ones to lay the foundations of an Australian culture which prides itself in being egalitarian, a belief that background is irrelevant to social acceptance and success. I believe that the convict women's defiance, their individual and collective subversive actions while they were serving their sentences were strong indications that these women were not the whores male authors made them out to be but the Founding Mothers who imbued their children and grandchildren with a sense that this is a new country, a good country, a country where titles don't matter and where an individual, no matter the creed, language or skin colour can be accepted as being 'Australian'.

References

- CLARKE, M. **For the term of his natural life**. Melbourne: Rigby, 1977.
- COURTENAY, B. **The potato factory**. Australia: William Heinemann, 1995.
- DAMOUSI, J. **Depraved and disorderly**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- DANIELS, K. **Convict women**. Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1998.
- DONKIN, N. **The women were there: Nineteen Women Who Enlivened Australia's History**. Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1988.
- FLANAGAN, R. **Gould's book of fish**. Australia: Pan Macmillan, 2001.
- FRANCES, R. The history of female prostitution in Australia. In: PERKINS, R.; PRESTAGE, G.; SHARP, R.; LOVEJOY, F. (Ed.). **Sex work and sex workers in Australia**. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994. p. 27-52.
- GRENVILLE, K. **The secret river**. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005.

- HUGHES, R. **The fatal shore**: a history of the transportation of convicts to Australia 1787-1868. London: Vintage, 1987.
- KENT, D.; TOWNSEND, N. **The convicts of the Eleanor**: protest in rural England: New lives in Australia. Australia: Pluto Press, 2002.
- McCULLOUGH, C. **Morgan's run**. Sydney: Random House, 2000.
- OXLEY, D. **Convict maids**: the forced migration of women to Australia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- RICHARDS, E.; OXLEY, D. Female immigrants compared. In: RICHARDS, E. (Ed.). **Visible women**: female immigrants in colonial. Australia: Canberra Division of Historical Studies Research School of Social Sciences; Australian National University, 1995. p. 10-25.
- ROBINSON, P. **The hatch and brood of time**: A study of the first generation of native-born white Australians 1788-1828. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- ROBSON, L. L. **The convict settlers of Australia**: an enquiry into the origin and character of the convicts transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen's 1787-1852. Carlton Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1965.
- SHAW, A. G. L. **Convicts and the colonies**: a study of penal transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and other parts of the British Empire. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
- SHAW, P. **Emerald shore**. London: Hodder, 2002.
- SHAW, P. **Storm bay**. London: Hodder, 2005.
- SMITH, B. **A cargo of women**: the novel. Australia: Pan Macmillan, 1991.
- SMITH, B. **A Cargo of women**: Susannah Watson and the convicts of the *Princess Royal*. Dural: Rosenberg Publishers, 2005.

Received on November 5, 2008.

Accepted on November 28, 2009.

License information: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.