Australian Convict Sites
World Heritage Nomination

Introduction

Australia has led the way in applying new directions, advocated by the World Heritage Committee, to the analysis of potential World Heritage places in a thematic global context. This approach has indeed been pioneered by Australia, with the work of Joan Domicelj, Helen Halliday and Peter James setting the framework followed and developed further in later World Heritage work.

The Australian Convict Sites nomination has been developed in that context, and was based on extensive global context-setting and comparative assessment.

Duncan Marshall and Michael Pearson were engaged by the Department of Environment to investigate the global context for the Australian convict experience, and then to produce a draft World Heritage documentation for a series nomination of convict sites. This was subsequently re-edited by Jane Lennon. This process started in 1995, and resulted in a draft nomination in 1999. The nomination has not as yet (January 2001) been submitted to the World Heritage Committee.

Global Context for evaluating the Australian Convict Experience

The international context has previously been described in Historic Environment for those with a particular interest in the subject.

The initial study looked at the theme of forced migration, which included slavery, convict transportation, exiled and indentured labour, in world-wide context. Many of the New World's colonies (now become nations) and the European settlement of north-eastern Asia (Siberia) were founded on forced migration. While in absolute numbers, free migration became by far the most dominant form of mass migration, the various forms of forced migration acted as catalysts, opening up new areas to the global economy, and establishing the economic and infrastructure base for the free migration that usually followed.

The forced migration of convicts began in Europe. Until the sixteenth century, criminals were usually penalized by corporal punishment, fines, recruitment to the armed forces, or sentences to slavery. From the sixteenth century onwards, the populations of many European countries started to escalate. The population of Europe has been estimated to have increased from 95 million in 1600 to 130 million by 1700. This rate of increase was stimulated even further by the Industrial Revolution that followed. The social upheaval generated by this massive increase was immense, and the control of law and order and the punishment of criminals, as broadly defined by the mores of the time, became major issues of public policy.

Spain sent its convicts to 'Presidios', or military colonies, in North Africa, then to the Caribbean and to Mexico. Britain sent many of her convicts to the North American colonies as forced indentured labour. After the American Revolution had
restricted British access to America, convicts were sent to Australia as government-controlled convicts, some of whom became available to free settlers as a labour force. Britain's Indian convicts were sent to colonise the Andaman Islands; a convict establishment was set up under Raffles at Bencoolen (Bengkulu) in Sumatra, as were others in Burma, Mauritius and the Nicobar Islands. The Straits Settlements were established largely with convict labour to control that key sea route. Russia sent her convicts and exiles to Siberia to tap the natural wealth of that underpopulated extremity of her empire, and France, the late-starter in the transportation of convicts, sent hers to South America and the Pacific.

Global Themes in Forced Migration

Two themes run through the history of global convictism:

- the use of convict labour to develop colonies for the economic benefit of the home nation (and the colony itself), or as strategic tools in global politics,
- the use of transportation of convicts to relieve the home state (and sometimes its colonies) of unwanted people, and as a deterrent to others.

It is these themes that have guided the analysis of Australian convict places in relation to the World Heritage draft nomination.

In Australia convicts were used to construct buildings, roads, bridges and harbours, and to produce wealth through mining, manufacturing and agricultural production for the government, companies and free settlers.

Often the colonising of new land also had a strong element of strategic positioning, as in the establishment of Russian settlements on the Pacific shores of Siberia, Britain's settlement of Norfolk Island, Bermuda, Singapore and the other Straits Settlements, Spain's fortification of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and France's colonisation of New Caledonia, all of which were based on convict labour. The benefit to the home state through the establishment of these colonies was in reality sometimes minimal, at least in the early years when the convict infrastructure had to be supported by the state, but such realities are only able to be seen in hindsight.

The other theme running through the convict story was the use of transportation of convicts to relieve the home state (and sometimes its colonies) of unwanted convicted people, and as a deterrent to others. Britain, Spain and France all used transportation both as a way of supplementing their colonial military forces during times of war, and of putting out of harm's way those who turned to petty crime or rebellion. Having to deal with bulging prisons was one of the key reasons for establishing a penal colony in New South Wales.
Endnotes


The final selection of places in the nomination is a balance between assessed significance and political and management issues. Some important sites, such as the Cockatoo Island convict complex, had major management problems, which meant that their long term conservation could not be guaranteed. Some major historical themes, such as the Assignment System in NSW, were not well represented by a single site or sites and were therefore not included in the final nomination. There was much debate about the Ross Female Convict Station, with the Hobart Female Factory being proposed as an alternative site. At the time of our report there were management issues that favoured the Ross site, but this may have changed since then.

The Norfolk Island convict settlement, recommended by our report, has been dropped because of local opposition. The First Government House Site has been added, presumably to make up for the gap left by Norfolk Island in terms of strategic use of convictism.

The Current Status of the Draft Nomination

The Minister responsible, Senator Robert Hill, made the convict nomination one of his election commitments, and is reported to be keen to see the nomination proceed. Progress depends on reaching agreements with the states involved (New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia) about management and funding, and these negotiations have been in train, on and off, for several years.

The nomination currently includes the following places:

- First Government House Site, NSW
- Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania
- Coal Mines Historic Site, Tasmania
- Hyde Park Barracks, NSW
- Darlington Probation Station, Tasmania
- Ross Female Factory, Tasmania
- Great North Road Complex, NSW
- Fremantle Prison, Western Australia.
The rejection of any agreement by the Territory of Norfolk Island has already led to the Kingston convict settlement being deleted at present from the nomination, a loss that I regard as a major if not fatal gap in the nomination. It is understood that negotiations concerning, among other things, Norfolk Island control of Commonwealth reserves on the Island, may lead to the eventual inclusion of Kingston in the nomination.

If the Minister is to submit the nomination in the current term of the government, he has until June 2001 to reach the necessary agreements over management, and to get the nomination lodged with the World Heritage Committee.

**Monitoring**

There is as yet no formal and consistent monitoring applied to the places making up the nomination. Individual places may have reporting processes, linked to the requirements of State legislation under which they are reserved, but these could not be regarded as providing a regular and reliable monitoring and reporting of current condition and pressures on the conservation of heritage values.

There are no guidelines developed by Environment Australia to set the framework for monitoring of cultural World Heritage places. Such guidelines are needed as a basis for agreeing conservation standards and the monitoring of listed places during the negotiations between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories over World Heritage nomination. Monitoring guidelines should address, among other things:

- the clear identification of fabric, buildings, spaces, landscapes and intangible associations that form part the cultural significance of the place;
- the clear statement of the optimum and minimum level of integrity and condition those elements of the place need to have in order to retain significance;
- the identification of indicators that would show change in the condition and integrity of the elements of significance;
- the agreement of a program of regular or ongoing information gathering to inform each of the indicators, and the agreement of frequency of reporting on the indicators.

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xii ibid: Table 5