Convict transportation  
- Australia in a global context

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Australia has taken the first moves in complying with the new directions advocated by the World Heritage Committee by analysing potential World Heritage places in a thematic global context. This approach has, in fact, been pioneered by Australia, with the work of Joan Domicelj, Helen Halliday and Peter James setting the framework followed and then developed further in later World Heritage consideration in Australia.

The following article presents a summary of part of the work undertaken by Duncan Marshall and Michael Pearson, first to investigate the global context for the Australian convict experience, and more recently to produce the draft World Heritage nomination documentation that is currently (April 1998) being discussed by the Commonwealth and the States and Territories involved. While it is premature to discuss that draft nomination in detail, it was considered useful to present a condensed view of the global experience of convictism, and how Australia fits into that pattern.

Global context for evaluating the Australian convict experience

The migration of human populations has been a process reaching back into prehistory. However, the scale of migration increased markedly from the 17th century onwards, and in the 19th century the movement of people around the world became a flood. In the period 1800 to 1920, an estimated 41 million Europeans migrated to the Americas, two to three million to colonies in south Asia and the Pacific, and one million to Africa. Over one million Asian and Pacific Islander people moved to South Africa and the island colonies of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and an estimated two million Russians migrated eastward to Siberia. Between 1492 and 1888 an estimated 10 million African slaves were taken to the plantations of tropical and sub-tropical America. This mass migration was both a matter of free choice, and the result of varying degrees of coercion and force.

Many of the New World's colonies (and now nations) and the European settlement of north-eastern Asia 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.

A number of the republics of the Americas were thus established on the forced migration of slaves or the labour of transported convicts. Plantation economies on the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Ocean rims were based on the migration of slave or contract labour and the first European settlement of Australia was based on the forced migration of convicted criminals – the convicts.

Slavery

By far the most massive and devastating experience of forced migration was the African slave trade. Slavery is of profound importance in human history, and deserves to be studied globally in terms of its World Heritage manifestations. Several sites related to slavery have already been placed on the World Heritage List: These are the Forts and Castles of Ghana, and Goree Island in Senegal. However, a systematic study of places related to slavery has not yet been undertaken.
There is an important distinction between the processes of slavery and those of convict transportation. Slavery was a private commercial enterprise, and generally not one directed and instigated by nations (though certainly condoned by them). Convict transportation was entirely a tool of government policy.

**Contract labour**

Contract labour (also called indentured labour) had one characteristic that distinguished it from slavery and convict transportation - it was, at least in theory and in most cases in practice, voluntary, and in the overwhelming proportion of cases was for a fixed period of time. If truly voluntary, contract labour is not strictly 'forced labour', but to the extent that it might not be entirely 'voluntary' and in terms of the living and working conditions, it often equated to a form of semi-slavery. By far the greatest trade in contract labour was from India, South-East Asia, Japan, China and the Pacific, commencing in the mid-19th century and continuing until the 1920s. It has been estimated that the number of people migrating as contract labour in this period was over 2.3 million, of whom over 1.5 million were Indians. The main markets for contract labour from China, Japan and India were the plantation economies of the Caribbean and South America, and the colonies established by European powers on the rims of both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The European expansion in these areas coincided with the active suppression of the slavery trade, and contract labour was seen as a morally acceptable and cost effective alternative to slavery.

**Convict transportation**

The forced migration of convicts commenced in Europe. Up until the 16th century criminals were usually punished by corporal punishment, fines, recruitment to the armed forces, or sentences to slavery. From the 16th century onwards the populations of many European countries started to increase at an accelerated rate; developments in both agricultural and industrial technology progressively supported more people and correspondingly required the labour of more people to exploit these developments. 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 then followed. The social upheaval generated by this massive increase was immense.

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Figure 1: Convict labourers on Norfolk Island. (Uncredited, Australia's Heritage, The Making of a Nation, Part 5)
In this climate of social change the control of law and order and the punishment of criminals became major issues of public policy. The old methods of dealing with those who broke the law in a relatively small and stable population could not cope with the growth of the rural and urban populations in a climate where social and economic pressures on the individual were increasing and 'criminal' activity was very broadly defined.

Prisons, which had previously scarcely existed, became a more common feature of government control. Overcrowded prisons, and the potential of using the manpower they contained, lead to the use of convicts on public works, often directed towards preparing a country for the next inevitable war. This led in turn, when war broke out, to their impressment as soldiers or sailors, or as rowers for the galleys which maintained the essential seaways of many Mediterranean countries.

Spain took the next step in this process by sending convicts to its 'Presidios', or military colonies, in North Africa. The power and wealth of the major European nations increased, partly through colonial expansion. The use of convicts as the labour force for such expansion was a natural progression from their use for domestic public works and military duties. Britain sent many of her convicts to the American colonies as forced indentured labour. Then, after the American Revolution had severed Britain's access to America, they were sent to Australia as government-controlled convicts, some of whom became available to free settlers as a labour force. Spain sent her convicts to the Caribbean and Mexico. Russian convicts were sent to Siberia to tap the natural wealth of that under-populated extremity of her empire, and France, the late-starter in the transportation of convicts, sent hers to South America and the Pacific.

Britain also used convict labour from its colonies to further extend its control of outlying areas. Indian convicts were sent to colonise the Andaman Islands; a convict establishment was set up under Raffles at Bencoolen (Bengkulu) in Sumatra; others were also established in Burma, Mauritius and the Nicobar Islands, and the Straits Settlements to control that key sea route.

The numbers of convicts sent to the colonies, as best can be estimated, are set out in table 1.

Some of the works produced by convict labour have been entered on the World Heritage List. Old Havana and its fortifications in Cuba, and La Fortaleza and San Juan Historic Site in Puerto Rico (USA) were built using Spanish convict labour.

Other convict-related sites have been cited in the literature, but little information is available on their survival or management status. These include:

- harbour works in Bermuda (British)
- fortification works at Gibraltar (British)
- Andaman Island penitentiary and convict settlement, Port Blair (British-Indian)
- harbour and city works, Melaka and Pinang (formerly Malacca and Penang) in Malaysia, and Singapore (British-Indian)
- convict prison, French Guiana (French)
- series of convict prisons and settlements, New Caledonia (French)
- exile prisons and settlements, Siberia (Russian)
- presidios at Oran (Algeria) and Ceutra (Morocco) (Spanish)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Total number sent</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>1788-1840</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tasmania (Van Dieman’s Land)</td>
<td>67–69,000</td>
<td>1801-52</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>1846–50</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>9700</td>
<td>1850–68</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>161,700</td>
<td>1788–1868</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Bermuda</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1824–63</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Gibraltar</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1842–75</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>American Colonies (Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, Pennsylvania)</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>1640–1776</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Caribbean Colonies (Barbados, Jamaica, Nevis)</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>1640–1700</td>
<td>3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>West Africa (Cape Coast Castle)</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>1755–76</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Sumatra (Bencoolen)</td>
<td>4–6000</td>
<td>1787–1823</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, Malacca)</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>1788–1860</td>
<td>2, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1815–37</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India and Burma</td>
<td>Andaman Islands (Port Blair)</td>
<td>30,000+ up to 14,000 at any one time</td>
<td>1789–96, 1858–1920, 1930s–1945</td>
<td>2, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Nicobar Islands (Nancowry Harbour)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1869–88</td>
<td>2, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Burma (Arrakan, Ternatgirn, Moulmein)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1826–?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Straits Settlements</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1847–56</td>
<td>2, 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ceylon</td>
<td>Malacca</td>
<td>1–1500</td>
<td>1849–73</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>French Guiana</td>
<td>58,000?</td>
<td>1796–1852-1920</td>
<td>2, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>New Caledonia</td>
<td>24,000?</td>
<td>1865–97</td>
<td>2, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>4–5000</td>
<td>1850s</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Morocco and Algeria (Galleys and Presidios)</td>
<td>c. 1500 p.a. (Galleys), 3000+ p.a. (Presidios)</td>
<td>16th C – 1748 (Galleys), 16th C – 19th C (Presidios)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>American Colonies (Havana, San Juan, Pensacola, New Orleans, Pedroas Negros, Veracruz, Mexico City, Acapulco)</td>
<td>2000+ p.a. after 1767</td>
<td>16th C – 19th C, especially 1766–86</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Russia</td>
<td>Siberia (out of a possible total of 9–14 million exiles)</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>1820–1920</td>
<td>2, 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Global overview of convict transportation.
Global themes in forced migration

The themes arising directly from the study of forced migration, and particularly of slavery and convict transportation, are sombre ones. The forced migration of people has more to do with punishment, pain and the subjugation of one part of humanity by another, than it does with the enlightening and uplifting aspects of the human experience. The long-term outcome of forced migration, on the other hand, was often a broader free migration and the development of subsequently independent nations. In the case of convict transportation, the convicts sometimes went on to live a free life with opportunities not available to them in their home land.

Slavery usually involved the forced removal of indigenous peoples to a foreign country, almost always to provide the abundant labour needed for the development of plantation economies. Contract labour often replaced slavery when slavery became politically and socially unacceptable. Convictism could not be relied upon to provide labour on the scale needed to operate plantation production, and was hence seldom used for that purpose.

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 or as strategic tools in global politics;
- the use of transportation of convicts to relieve the home state 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.

The theme of economic and strategic motivations for establishing colonies is often difficult to unravel, being so intertwined in the political decision making process. The use of forced labour with the intention of developing the wealth of the colonising nation could take several forms – for example, through the development of plantations using slave labour, or through the development of colonies using convict labour. Russia’s settlement of Siberia, for example, provided it with access to the resources of that vast region through the labour of its exiles and convicts. In Australia convicts were used to construct buildings, roads 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, and 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, with hindsight, sometimes minimal, at least in the early years when the convict infrastructure had to be supported by the State.

The other theme running through the convict story was the use of transportation of convicts to relieve the home state of unwanted convicted people and as a deterrent to others. It was a tool for the imposition of law and order. At times the prisons of Europe bulged with criminals, and the streets and countryside were roamed by unemployed vagrants, ‘rogues’ and ‘vagabonds’. Britain, Spain and France all used
transportation, both as a way of supplementing their colonial military forces during times of war, and of removing to a distance those who turned to petty crime or rebellion. Dealing with bulging prisons was one of the central reasons for establishing the penal colony in New South Wales.

Comparative assessment of convict sites as World Heritage

Relatively little work has been done internationally to establish the history of convictism, or the presence or nature of convict sites. The international examples of convict places listed in table 1 were able to be identified through documentary research, but little detailed information was available for these sites. This created a difficulty in making direct comparisons between Australian convict sites and those in other convict-based colonies.

Within Australia, however, there has been a wealth of research on the history of the convict era, as well as numerous site surveys and site-specific conservation programs. The research involved in developing the draft nomination identified over 200 convict sites in Australia. This does not include those sites associated with convicts once they left government control. The comparative assessment took into account the relevance of the identified places to the global themes, their relative intactness, and their likelihood to satisfy the World Heritage Operational Guidelines and Criteria. The sites making up the draft Australian Convict Sites nomination currently being negotiated are the best examples of their type in Australia, and are of outstanding universal significance when considered in the light of the World Heritage Criteria and the global context outlined above.

endnotes

5 Ibid., pp. 3-15.


Ibid., Table 5.