Islands of vanishment, islands of emergence

James Semple Kerr

The poster image for 'islands of vanishment' was nicely ambiguous. While it appeared to be a view looking out to a seascape, it is also a view looking in through a façade. As an antipodean native, my purpose is to turn the 'vanishment' theme round and see it as 'islands of emergence'. Our convict ancestors may have 'vanished' from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but they certainly 'emerged' in Australia – most of them to begin a new life. For them the shore was not fatal. They were not slaves but transportees sentenced for finite periods under the control of the imperial administration in the colonies. As such, the majority were only occasionally subject to the consequences of middle, cruelty and greed. Most discovered they had a future and set about making the best of what seemed to be a bad job.

Many writers have dwelt on the more spectacular twists and turns of the convict system in Australia. As the text of the poster states, the story 'resonates with strong emotional themes of tragedy, injustice, endurance and, sometimes, redemption.' Most accounts relate to places of secondary punishment (for repeat offenders) and embrace a wide range of disciplinary systems, whether as brutalising as the reign of John Price or as humanitarian in intent (and as ill fated) as that of Alexander Maconochie. Yet even these real islands and peninsulas (Sarah, Maria, Norfolk, Cockatoo and Port Arthur) were not so much 'islands of vanishment' as places from which most convicts were expected to return, more or less intact and, hopefully, chastened, to resume their chequered place in society. They brought with them a strongly developed and peculiar ethos which, while by no means unique, would continue to influence Australian attitudes well into the twentieth century. The conflicts between the idea of removal as a punishment and deterrent on the one hand and as programs of individual reform on the other were never resolved. Although there were dramatic swings in the approach to penal discipline, little changed. The same swings were still continuing at the end of the twentieth century.

Systems of penal discipline do not evolve in a linear fashion – always progressing towards an ultimate goal. Instead they tend to move in an erratic cycle of 'reform' and 'regression'. The cycles are slowed down by competent administration and political and public inertia (anything running without hiccups is left unchanged) and are speeded up by scandalous happenings. The colonial press liked to label most such happenings as 'gross offences against morality' and brought them to public attention with sufficient colour to stimulate political reaction. Revealing evidence of prisoner enjoyment ('mollycoddling') was often an even more effective catalyst for change than prisoner ill treatment.

An example of this came as a consequence of the Queen's birthday (24 May 1840) shortly after Captain Maconochie took command at Norfolk Island. He proclaimed the next day, Monday, a public holiday in which all could participate. The gates were thrown open and the 1800 prisoners set free to join in sports and amusements. Fresh, not salted, pork was provided and Maconochie himself paid for spirits so that all could drink a tot to the Queen. This was followed by theatrical performances and fireworks. At the appointed hour every man retired quietly to his ward. There were no incidents.1

When the news of the festivities reached Sydney, John Vincent Barry in his biography of Maconochie reported, the reaction varied from shocked astonishment to vigorous disapproval and from derisive mirth to hostile indignation. Satirical and grotesque descriptions of the events, many merely imaginary, found their way into the colonial press, and Maconochie was injured beyond remedy by the pitiless barrage of ridicule.2

From that time Maconochie with his system of incentives and absence of 'stern severity of punishment' was a marked man, although it was to be over three years before he was relieved and the island returned to a proper regime of 'firm and resolute discipline'.3 Politicians (and governors) have always been nervous of cultural events in penal establishments or of happenings that do not accord with the public perception of what a penal regime should be like. Governor Gipps disapproved and disowned Maconochie's proceedings and he sent the Castle of Andalusia playbill to the Secretary of State, Russell, as an example of what had stirred loud expressions of dissatisfaction in the colony.4

In 1890, Commissioner Tony Vinson's provision of bras and panties for transsexuals at Long Bay men's prison complex received a reception in the Sydney media that echoed the events of 1840. It was a reminder that relatively trivial happenings have often made good copy for the reptiles of the press and helped drive a not so subtle edge between penal administrators and their masters. The innovations of both Maconochie in 1840-43 and Vinson in 1980-82 were subsequently abandoned or watered down.

Maconochie's successor, Major Joseph Childs, returned Norfolk Island to 'firm' but 'unintelligent' discipline. Two years later, on 1 July 1846, he was rewarded with a bloody uprising. Its purpose was to regain the cooking utensils that Childs had seized from the prisoners. In one of the few authentic but anonymous depictions of convict events of the period, William Westwood (Jacky Jacky) leads the mob from the timber yard with the words 'come on – we'll kill the ***'.5 The sketch actually compresses a sequence of events into a single picture and internal evidence suggests it was done from memory by an eyewitness. The cooking pots, the trigger for the riot, are on the left.

One of the facts suggested by the anonymous sketcher and made clear by the evidence given at the subsequent trial, is that most convicts were uninvolved or were simply passive onlookers. However it was to be tough on those caught up in events. Both the administration and the prisoners knew that the trial would be a bloody expression of judicial retribution and that degrees of involvement would not be weighed too nicely in...
sentencing. At the first sitting the fourteen prisoners charged
took care to exhibit 'no concern' but 'laughed and jested
through the proceedings'.  Twelve were sentenced to death
and all went calmly to their end. They were part of a well
established and proud tradition of 'pobbies' or 'hard men'.
Honour demanded it. Childs' replacement, John Price, called it
'being able to meet it' and he both detested and respected
them for it. The mixed feelings were mutual. Westwood made
a dying deposition that four of the twelve men were not involved
in the uprising.  Although probably true, it was disregarded and
all were hanged in two batches before the assembled prisoners
—as Voltaire said of Admiral Byng's execution, to encourage the
others ('pour encourager les autres').

The Norfolk Island uprising was a relatively modest event in our
history but it was one of many underpinning an ethos that was
to continue to influence a substantial part of the Australian
population for generations to come. Loyal to one another and
defiant in the face of adversity, egalitarian but not classless,
iconoclastic but still with its heroes, it was an intensification and
flowering of nascent attitudes brought to the new land by its
involuntary invaders. It was all part of the emergence of an
Australian identity of which the penal system was an early and
important (but not sole) incubator.

Such attitudes were not peculiar to Australia, but they were
developed here to a remarkable degree in the penal
settlements, gaols and among bush workers, many of whom
had convict or army and navy backgrounds. Lower-rank
discipline in regiment and ship was not at the time greatly
different from that imposed on convicts and all were drawn
from a more or less common stock. Once released from
servitude or service into a community so much less
constrained than in the old world, the ex-convicts and ex-
service men and their descendants developed a fierce
independence and a strong desire not to be told what to do.
These attitudes were to continue to influence a large proportion
of Australian males (and some females) of whatever
background, well into the twentieth century.

Their heroes, when they had them, were anti-heroes – almost
all with a contempt for persons dressed in authority.
Remember Ned Kelly in the 1880s, Breaker Morant in the new
century and the lower orders of the AIF in the First World War.
The non-saluting or, worse, the two-finger-saluting proclivities
of the diggers in France were incomprehensible and
insufferable to the gentlemen of the British officer corps. Were
these rank weeds the flower of colonial manhood? What had
happened to John Dunmore Lang's vision of a 'contented
tenantry' in the antipodes.

That Christian gentleman, Field-Marshals the Earl Haig of
Bermersyde, known to my father's generation as the 'Butcher of
the Somme', contrasted the ill-disciplined and disrespectful
Australians with the splendid example of the British, Canadian,
New Zealand and South African troops. He claimed that 'nearly
one Australian in every hundred men' was 'in prison' – nearly
six times the rate of the other colonials and nine times the rate
of the British troops. 'This' he said 'was greatly due to the fact
that the Australian [government] refuses to allow capital
punishment to be awarded to any Australian'.  Had he
understood something of the way the Australian character had
been developed over the previous century he might have come up
with an even more cogent reason. Haig lamented that he
had even been forced to separate the Australians when in
convalescent camps out of the line because they put
revolutionary ideas into the heads of his own men.

Sister Mummery, a Second World War Australian army nurse
with experience of both the North African and Pacific
campaigns, told Donald Friend of the 'instinctive revolt against
all authority, which is almost peculiar to Australians' and that in
her view this characteristic was 'an inherited tradition from the
convict period'.  Although a more understanding and
perceptive observer than Haig, she went on to speak of
'Australian soldiers as a tribe.' She said:

At Kantara, we dreaded their coming. They were quite
unmanageable. We used to have every nationality under
the sun coming through – English Tommies, Ghurkhas,
Canadians, Italian prisoners, Negroes, South Africans. But
none of them were like the Aussies. No one could do
anything with them. They did the most dreadful things. I
was thoroughly ashamed to bear the rising sun. Then
they'd turn round and so something so marvellous you
wanted to yell for joy."

The other side of the coin was shown by the actions of the
Australians in the line. They could both 'dish it out' and 'meet
it' or, in the vernacular of the time, 'take it'. The ultimate image
of the latter is the grand and grotesque, partly fictional,
dramatisation of the Australian charge on the Turkish trenches at Gallipoli in the final episode of the TV series 1915 and in the film Gallipoli.

My father was a third-generation Australian with Scottish ancestry and three years service in France with the first AIF. Aspects of the ethos of being able ‘to meet it’ reached me through his example – but not precept. It was not any less real for being unspoken and unwritten. To me as a child it meant: never explain, never offer an excuse, and, above all, no sob stories to avoid punishment. At school in Queensland during the 1940s, I learned quickly that any display of enthusiasm, affection, overt intelligence, fear, anger or acknowledgment of pain made you vulnerable and despised. Also that wounds received, both physical and psychological, had to be met with indifference. The famous story of the Spartan youth (who remained impassive while clawed by a wolf cub hidden in his tunic) was one of several role models I encountered. Even more powerful, though not part of the syllabus, was the detestation for anyone seen to be too compliant to, or approving of, authority. Instead, loyalty to one’s fellows and, in the words of John Price, ‘ability to meet it’ were respected. Accompanying this heritage were habits of speech that were sparse, ironic, understated and even inverted – saying the opposite to what was meant, confident that your fellows would understand the nuance.

During the 1970s I spent three years reading evidence given by convicts and penal staff as well as reports and reminiscences of the convict period. It was uncanny how close aspects of the convict ethos were to the heritage in which I had been brought up, despite the fact that neither my family nor, probably, most of my schoolmates had convict ancestry. So what had emerged by the 1840s was still lingering strongly in the 1940s – at least in some areas. However during the next half of the twentieth century this ‘ethos’ underwent an erratic but definitely incomplete ‘vanishment’. Less discriminating immigration, cultural globalisation through the new media and, to some extent, popular world travel, tertiary education and even the feminist revolt against blokey philosophy helped dilute, but not eliminate, our convict and military heritage.

Whether this is a good thing or not is irrelevant to my argument. The point is that such ideas and attitudes have been longstanding characteristics of Australia and Australians since early European settlement. To suppose that they are now culturally and politically insignificant is to forget our past and misunderstand our heritage. It will certainly impoverish our heritage – a heritage that should be remembered as it was, rather than as it has often been reconstructed.

One way of reinforcing this heritage is through the unembellished retention of the physical features of our convict and military past together with an accurate understanding of their genesis and use. All the old colonies have substantial penal, agricultural, pastoral and industrial works and sites of varying authenticity and intactness. Penal settlements, fortifications, harbours, dams, tanks, roads, bridges, docks, wharves, grain storage, kilns, salt works, dykes, sewers, barracks, hospitals, prisons, churches and burial places – in fact a complete colonial infrastructure – were erected by, and sometimes for, convicts. It is the surviving evidence of these features and their stories that help keep our past from slipping into the limbo of islands of ‘vanishment’ and ‘romance’.

Take, for example, my earlier story of Norfolk Island’s infamous ‘twelve’. They lie at the bottom of an old saw pit in unconsacrated ground immediately east of Kingston Cemetery. They are not forgotten because the unmarked swell of earth above their pit has ever since been known as ‘murderers’ mound’ and every islander and most tourists know the story. The combination of the physical feature and the associated tale keep the memory of the men alive and make a distinct contribution to the location’s sense of place.

Not all aspects of the past left physical remains and here the documentary record is especially important. There is still an extensive body of evidence in English and Australian archives. It makes clear the attitudes of convicts and staff, as well as administration attempts to devise equipment to accommodate changing systems of control and discipline.

Two examples of this no-longer-extant equipment are worth citing. Both arose from the need to isolate individuals and preserve them from contamination. One sprang from humanitarian impulses and was derived from institutionalised homophobia. Both were devised by Royal Engineers acting on the instructions of administrators.

The first was Alexander Maconochie’s outré, and unapproved, obulleted cell ‘chapel’ block at Longridge, Norfolk Island. It consisted of a raised ‘chapel’ above twelve cells. The only access to each cell was by being dropped through a trap door in the floor of the chapel. Each trap had an inbuilt shutter which allowed the inmate to hear continuous readings from improving texts by a religious instructor. Maconochie said the idea was inspired by reading Jeremy Bentham, but it also had features of the recently fashionable ‘separate system’. Maconochie, however, was entirely opposed to Bentham’s panopticon concept of constant unobserved inspection and gave each prisoner the option of closing the shutter to cut off the reading and achieve complete privacy.12 Unlike most of his contemporaries Maconochie admitted and learned from his mistakes. He later reported to a select committee:

When I went to Norfolk Island I was a good deal enamoured of the Separate System and one of the first things I did was to build a separate prison; but as I watched the effect of it my admiration very much abated... I think it weakens both the body and the mind... I kept one man in separation for 6 months, and I deeply regretted it – he became nearly helpless...13

The second example was the introduction of batten bed places or cages as sleeping accommodation on Norfolk Island and in Tasmania. It was an unenvisioned consequence of the British government’s de facto policy of transporting males convicted of homosexual crimes. By 1846 the colonial press began to bruit abroad what could no longer be covered up and the second half of the 1840s and early 1850s was devoted to attempts to convert convict sleeping accommodation to ‘separate apartments’ and batten bed places. Even the demountable road stations in Tasmania were designed with these cages rather than the existing bed shelves.14

The climactic development of these batten cages came in 1854 with the conversion of the Port Arthur waterfront store by the Royal Engineers under the general direction of the Commandant, James Boyd. The store was then Tasmania’s largest building. The upper floor was redesigned to accommodate about 426 men in three tiers of individual cages or bins flanking a wide central passage. Colonel Mundy described a similar configuration at Darlington, Maria Island. There each prisoner lay ‘with his feet to the outer wall and his historic environment volume 16 number 3 2002
head towards the centre like a bottle in its bin. (only two of the three tiers were actually built). The next floor down was devoted to a grand mess-room to seat over 300 and below that again were two tiers of 136 back to back 'separate apartments' each approximately 7ft x 4ft. They remain survive today and associated documentary evidence makes an understanding of their form and use quite precise.

As you can see outside, Port Arthur convict accommodation is substantially authentic but far from intact — fires and the attraction of easily won brick and stone have seen to that. By contrast, the Fremantle establishment is substantially authentic and intact. It was retained in this state by continued use as a prison to 1991 and thereafter by the appointment of a Trust to care for its conservation and use. All three convict establishments — Kingston, Norfolk Island; Port Arthur and the Tasman Peninsula; and Fremantle Prison are of primary significance and, together with their associated primary documentation, warrant World Heritage nomination.

Isolation has long been an essential part of the official response to those felonious or repeated offences that did not warrant the death penalty. At the end of the eighteenth century the English administrators and their masters preferred to achieve it at a bourne so far distant that few of their involuntary travellers would ever return. For them it was to be a place of vanishment as well as a place of banishment — one that might even turn out to be useful in the future. In transportation to New South Wales it was achieved by geography, but once there it was compounded by increasing classification and segregation, solitary cells and 'separate apartments', rural pastoral and agricultural work, and, at the most intimate level, by the sleeping cages just described.

What emerged in this relatively isolated Great South Land was a tribe that multiplied, incorporating new blood but passing on its attitudes to new generations — even if some recipients were unaware of (or preferred to forget) its origins. So by the time the young male members of the tribe returned to save the World and the Old Dart in 1914–1918, there had been time enough for them to have developed distinctive national characteristics, many of which came as a shock to the masters of the empire-on-which-the-sun-never-sets.

I have chosen to make a rather personal revisitation of ideas that many have covered or touched on before (notably Joseph Furphy, Russell Ward and Bill Gammage), partly because I have always been secure in the knowledge that I had been reared in, and belonged to, an Australian tradition that I later discovered was an odd fusion of convict and bush attitudes, and partly because of recent encounters with romantic versions of our convict past and interpretations that were irrelevant to my own knowledge and experience.

Vanishment is not only achieved by deliberate erasure. It is just as effectively achieved by interpreting the evidence through the distorting filters of marketing expediency, romantic embellishment and irrelevant ideological theories. It applies to traditions as much as sites.

References

[Furphy, Joseph] Such is Life: Being certain extracts from the diary of Tom Collins [1903], Sydney: Angus & Robertson Classics, 1944.

Kerr, James Semple, Design for convicts, an account of design for convict establishments in the Australian Colonies during the transportation era, Sydney: Library of Australian History with the National Trust and the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology 1984.

Morony, John Arthur, The more things change... Personal reflections on our penal system, NSW Govt. Bicentennial Secretariat, 1989.


Endnotes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.: Stanley to Gipps, 20.4.1843.
5. Evidence of Patrick Hiney, BPP Transport 7, 1847 [785J, XLVIII, p.179.
7. Ibid., 162.
9. Ibid., 290.
11. Ibid., 306 [7.10.1943].
13. Ibid.

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a licence from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)