...these women subject’d to strict separate treatment': an archaeology of penal confinement

Introduction
In her 1842 deposition to the British Parliamentary Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline, Van Diemen's Land convict Mary Haigh testified ‘I have been in the dark Cells. That is bad punishment but even there Tea Sugar etc [sic] can be obtained...'.

This article presents an archaeological interpretation of physical remains excavated at the mid-19th century female convict prison at Ross in Tasmania to question the dynamics of confinement. Through the occupation, manipulation and appropriation of institutional architecture, the supervisors and inmates of the Female Factory negotiated their relative status within the penal hierarchy. The cultural heritage remaining at this site can be interpreted as material evidence of this struggle. Convict women who were incarcerated used the surrounding environment to actively minimise their disadvantage. This article will focus on one locus of penal conflict – the solitary confinement cells.

Reading the penal landscape
The Tasmanian female factory system existed as a loose network of probation prisons from 1829, when the first site was established outside of Hobart, through 1854 when the British ceased penal transportation to Van Diemen's Land and the institutional infrastructure was dismantled. Over this 25-year period, more than 12,000 women were transported to Van Diemen's Land, predominantly convicted of petty theft from their British employers. Although convict women spent a large portion of their individual sentences assigned as domestic servants to the colonial pastoral properties, most spent a significant amount of time incarcerated within one of the female factories. These gendered institutions played a complex role within colonial society.

A female factory became the means of regulating and controlling the use and disbursement of female convicts and of punishing the recalcitrant or criminal. It was destined to become a workhouse, labour bureau, marriage bureau and regulator of morality, gaol and hospital, and at the same time, to relieve the financial burden on the administration of female convicts and their many children. This very multiplicity of roles made the administration of such an institution a confusing and difficult task.

These prisons were intended to stimulate the improvement of convict women through enforcement of morally acceptable and economically productive labour. Thus, the name ‘factory’ was an abbreviation of the institutional title ‘manufactory,' and referred to the establishments’ official role as a ‘house of industry'. Institutional architecture developed as an aesthetic and intellectually driven means to claim and create a landscape – to channel inhabitants’ experiences. The origins of this type of institution have been traced to the mid-18th century. By the first half of the 19th century, prisons had developed as the ultimate architectural expression of spatial orchestration wrought by these institutions. Fabricated by gentlemen of Britain’s emerging elite industrial class, these experimental penal designs were often first constructed throughout the Australian colonies, as the Home Government used newly appropriated southern lands to operationalise utilitarian philosophies of social reform. Female imprisonment was central to the entire development of penal institutions. Adrien Howe, a criminologist from Melbourne University, has argued:

...[T]he emphasis placed on punishing women with imprisonment positioned them closely to the development of the prison. Indeed, convict women were more ‘closely linked to the prison as an institution’ than male convicts, they were 'the first to experience nineteenth-century prison relations in the [Australian] colonies.
An appropriated place: 'strict separate confinement'

When exploring the archaeological remains of a female factory, we must understand that the lived realities diverged greatly from architecturally designed ideals. The Ross site contains material remains of places fabricated and patrolled by men, as well as places appropriated and occupied by women. Female convicts of Ross Female Factory, far from passively accepting reforms of the convict system, overtly and covertly worked that system to minimise its disadvantage. The built environment has encoded not only the disciplinary intentions of male designers, officers and guards, but also the negotiations of that power wrought by the female convicts. This process of active resistance can be interpreted from both documentary and material sources of data.

From October 1995 through August 1998, the Ross Factory Archaeology Project investigated material remains of the mid-19th century factory located on the outskirts of Ross, a rural township in the Northern Midlands of Tasmania. This research project included two excavation seasons at the Ross site, both supported by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery of Launceston, and The Wool Centre of Ross.

Figure 1 Ross Female Factory archaeological site plan. (Casella)
Within the Ross factory, female convicts were categorised into three groups: the crime class, the promoted hiring class, and the recalcitrant inmates undergoing 'separate treatment'. Since the research questions underlying this project concerned the everyday lives of female inmates, archaeological investigations were focused on living areas related to all three categories. Trenches were excavated in the crime class dormitory, the hiring class dormitory, and the solitary cells. Results from the 1997 field season suggested a pattern of insubordination within the solitary cells, with the excavated features of that built environment demonstrating both the intentional circumvention of factory regulations and a constant reciprocity of power.

A reformatory place

On 11 December 1848, Dr W.J. Irvine, Superintendent of Ross Factory, wrote to the Comptroller-General of the Convict Department, requesting the construction of 12 separate cells between the station and the outside fence. The new sandstone accommodation would 'be of great service in punishing, or what is much to be preferred' the homosexual encounters believed to be occurring between inmates of the crime class ward.12 Beyond the social stigma attached to such sexual activities, these liaisons were believed to be responsible for the procurement and trade of illicit 'luxuries' throughout the prison.13 For various political and economic reasons, work on this new structure was delayed three years. In 1851, a new superintendent had been enlisted at the Ross factory, and works on the block of 12 sandstone solitary cells was completed.14 This new structure was located outside the main penal compound, secluded from the central grounds and convict workrooms by a nine-foot timber fence, and immediately overlooked by an impressive Neo-Gothic style chapel also completed that year.15

During the 1997 seasons of the Ross Factory Archaeology Project, a four metre square trench was excavated over the solitary cells (figure 2). Two cells were sampled, and a central cell completely excavated. Structural elements of the original building were uncovered, including packed rubble foundations and courses of sandstone wall.
Architecturally, the solitary cells were designed to maximise the isolation of female inmates. Rough-cut sandstone walls, approximately 50 centimetres thick, contained women undergoing 'separate treatment', minimising sound transfer and communication between cells. Archaeological excavations determined individual cells were approximately 1.3 metres wide by 2.0 metres long (or roughly 4 feet by 6 feet) — a space just large enough to accommodate a single inmate. Documentary accounts record the purchase of window panes for factory structures; the archaeological recovery of significant window glass deposits suggests fenestrations were located on the southern exterior of the solitary cells. Extrapolating from contemporary penal designs, these apertures were probably small rectangular ventilation windows placed just below ceiling level, installed to provide necessary air circulation, while depriving cell occupants of any visual stimulation.

The cell interiors contained archaeological evidence of architectural features. Unlike structures in the main factory compound, the solitary cells contained packed earthen floors. Furthermore, these floors appear to be significantly lower than the cell doors. The absence of architectural evidence for the cell doors suggests that archaeological preservation of the structure began below entry level. However, floor features underlay 35 centimetres to 50 centimetres of demolition debris and structural collapse. This stratigraphic evidence suggests that entry into a solitary cell required a descent of more than half a metre, suggesting interior stairs once existed for each cell. Regardless of the height of the original doors, to undergo 'separate treatment', convict women descended into a cramped, darkened, silent cell for up to three weeks of isolation.

This spatial movement can be interpreted as a metaphor of punishment and atonement, with the stigmatised woman descending into her solitary cell, reforming through silent prayer and contemplation, and ascending upwards to rejoin the general penal community once her sentenced period of separate treatment had been served.

A resistant place

Power relationships always include a means for resistance. As sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued: 'all social actors, no matter how lowly, have some degree of penetration of the social forms which oppress them'.

Women transferred to the Ross Female Factory were frequently moved to this rural prison to serve secondary punishment for offences (such as illegitimate pregnancy, absconding from duty, or insolence towards an employer) committed since arriving in the penal colony. Therefore, a female convict sentenced to solitary confinement at Ross was often a tertiary offender, a women considered to be truly recalcitrant:

[A] hardened, reckless, miserable creature whom we sometimes behold raving under the impulse of ungovernable passion, and indulging without remorse, in conduct which had she witnessed it in another, she would, in the early part of her career, have shuddered to behold...[20]

Far from passively occupying the Ross solitary cells, the female convicts manipulated their cultural landscape to minimise their disadvantage. Trench profiles from inside the solitary cells support this interpretation. Beyond the presence of structural materials, including brick fragments, 19th-century wrought ferrous nails, and window glass, a surprising amount of artefacts were recovered that could only have arrived in the solitary cells through infringement of regulations. These 'illicit materials' related to both forbidden practices (items such as kaolin clay tobacco pipes and olive glass grog bottles) and to black market trade activities, indicated by the presence of very high frequencies of decorative copper-alloy, bone, and mother-of-pearl buttons or tokens for
underground trade. As further evidence for the existence of a factory trade network, a copper 1823 George IV British farthing was recovered from within the first floor of the central cell.

The archaeological data also suggests female convicts were communicating their insubordination through destruction of the building. Within all three excavated cells, the first earthen floor contained a high frequency of charcoal deposits. Further, within the central cell, there was a distinct layer of black soil and charcoal immediately overlaying the first floor. Concentrated in the southern half of the central cell, this blackened, hearth-like layer contained very few cultural materials, 58.6 per cent of which was charcoal (figure 3). Thus, it appeared that a fire had struck in the central cell, burning most intensely in the southern half of this tiny cell.

Figure 3 Detail of burn layer in central solitary cell, facing north. (Casella)

Documentary accounts suggest that female convicts frequently practised arson and vandalism to display their insubordination. In February 1829 a riot occurred at the Cascade Female Factory, five miles west of Hobart. In his 1980 report to the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, historian Tony Rayner summarised the public rebellion:

The women convicts called out to some soldiers from the 40th Regiment on the hill overlooking the [Cascade] Factory and later bread, butter and cheese were thrown over the walls. The food was confiscated by Jesse Pullen, the overseer, but he was promptly hooted from the yard. [Superintendent] Lovell restored order and put the two ringleaders, Sarah Bickley and Elizabeth Davis, in their cells. The Crime Class women, now confined to their sleeping rooms, called out obscenities for an hour or so and then began pushing burning clothing through the ventilators. Lovell put out one fire but smoke and flame erupted elsewhere and it appeared that the whole building was on fire. At this, the women in other parts of the factory began to fear for their lives and screams for help and pleas to be let out of their yards turned the smoke filled prison into a bedlam of noise. Some of the women fainted. At this stage more burning material was pushed down a stairwell made entirely of pine. However, this was eventually extinguished. At 9pm Pullen was sent to get James Gordon, the Principal Superintendent of Convicts, but did not return until midnight. Gordon and the two constables he brought with him helped Pullen and Lovell to place the worst behaved in solitary cells.

endnotes

1 AOT CSO 225/0.
5 Annette Salt, These Outcast Women: The Parramatta Female Factory 1821-1849, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1984, p. 44.
12 Archives of Tasmania MM 62/11/1037.
13 Archives of Tasmania MM 62/51/13859.
17 Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis.
In her recent book, historian Kay Daniels documented a further incident of arson at the Cascade factory. In 1832, inmate Mary Garner set the second class yard alight after tossing a 'firestick' into the wooden roof shingles. Through arson, the women incarcerated within the Tasmanian female factories gained powerful results.

**A reciprocal place**

Neither domination nor resistance can be interpreted as isolated events. Although the possibility of refusal or non-compliance exists in all social relationships, power contains both domination (forces of compliance) and resistance (abilities to refuse). French anthropologist Pierre Bordieu conceptualised power relations as an interaction of 'reciprocity,' focusing on the social advantage constantly traded between the conflicting parties.

Archaeologically, the reciprocity model of power dynamics can be evidenced through constant conflict over the solitary cells at the Ross Female Factory. Both domination of, and resistance by, female convicts is demonstrated through the material record. Although arsonist activities within the cell block probably caused a temporary cessation of 'separate treatment,' archaeological evidence suggests that Ross factory authorities eventually responded through reconstruction and re-use of the facility. A second packed-earth floor appeared to overlay the first in all three cells excavated during 1997. This upper floor consisted of an orange-brown clay silt layer noticeably different in colour, texture and composition from the natural dark-brown silt layers and the first earthen floor of the solitary cells.

As this second floor-layer also immediately overlay the burnt layer within the central cell, it appears to be a 're-flooring' of this penal structure, and probably reflects some undocumented restoration efforts by the authorities. Eventual re-occupation of the solitary cells is evidenced by the continued presence of convict-related artefacts within the second floor horizon. Although there was a decrease in the frequency of kaolin clay tobacco pipes, olive glass grog bottles and non-uniform buttons, there is still a recognisable presence of such materials within the upper floor. Charcoal deposits appear to decrease to a minimum. Most significantly, within the excavated portion of the western cell, a small semi-circular pit was recorded. This intrusive feature appeared to be dug from the upper floor, into the first floor, and contained fragments of a square ferrous container, olive bottle glass, faunal deposits, and a kaolin clay pipe stem fragment (figure 4).

**Conclusion**

The female convicts incarcerated within the Ross Female Factory inhabited a complex social world, a cultural landscape of shifting allies and enemies, of fluid opportunities, and of carefully guarded places. Experiencing degradation and isolation of enforced 'separate treatment,' female convicts minimised their disadvantage through importation of forbidden luxuries – tobacco, alcohol and increased food rations. As well, documents from other female factories suggest female convicts committed arson to create public spectacles of violent confrontation, the burning of the Ross solitary cells could be interpreted as a similar event. Provoked by such brazen disobedience, and saddled with a semi-functional cellblock, Ross factory authorities responded by restoring the structure. A reciprocity of power within the prison continued to operate. The new floors, probably accompanied by tightened penal regulations, were partially successful disciplinary tactics, and the frequency of these 'luxuries' appearing in the solitary cells decreased – although did not cease.