

The Fantasy of the Past: Women's History at the Cascade Female Factory

"I do not think we can begin to understand women's position in Australia today, nor men's attitudes to women, without at least a cursory consideration of those past events and ideas which cast shadows on the present." - Anne Summers.¹



Figure 1: Photograph of one of artist Rowan Gillespie's sculptures installed at Hobart's Macquarie Wharf in 2017. Photograph by Footsteps Towards Freedom.

The site of the Cascade Female Factory is swamped in the cold shadows of autumn dusk long before the rest of the town. An inky blue mountain and steep hillsides lined with weatherboard houses encase what remains of the site. It is situated at the bottom of a valley, alongside a creek that runs down off Mt Wellington/kunanyi, known to expand in streams of flood water to envelop the factory site itself during heavy rain. Even in drier times, a wetness lingers in the air once the noon sun passes, leaving a smell of damp sandstone, though few colonial buildings remain standing. It was here in the early 1840s a group of three hundred convict women was reported to have turned in unison to flash backsides at the most important man in Van Diemen's Land, Governor John Franklin, slapping their buttocks like bongo drums.

Hundreds of convict women mooning the Governor and Lady Franklin is a powerful image, and a brilliant leitmotif of female convict rebellion. Bristling at authority and rejecting the stringent social hierarchies of Britain, Tasmanians in particular have reason to identify with this tale of

¹ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: the colonization of women in Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1975), 60.

the criminal underclass given an estimated seventy-four per cent of us, myself included, are descended from convict stock, the highest rate in the country.² It is arguable that a Tasmanian underclass has in many ways remained, the convict stain transformed into a cultural cringe derived from Tasmania's own brand of provincialism and socio-economic depression, frequently tapped into by mainland visitors in the form of two-headed Tasmanian jokes.

That a mythology has developed around The Flashing is seemingly unsurprising given Australia's anti-authoritarian roots and long love affair with larrikinism, though for a group of women to land the starring role is unusual. In our masculinist national mythology, the larrikins are bushrangers, stockmen and military heroes. Yet the Great Mooning was repeatedly cited by historians for years and was subject to a visual depiction by local artist Peter Gouldthorpe that was widely circulated as a postcard, becoming something of a local legend. Why do we have such a collective obsession with convict lady butt?

Before considering this question, it's important to note that the event never actually occurred. If the Franklins ever did eye convict woman backside, it was not as this tale relayed it. The mooning was a myth that had taken on a life of its own. A colonial era manuscript which contained the story was mistaken for a genuine account by historians associated with the University of Tasmania in the 1950s. This manuscript was in fact a novel.

The proliferation of this tale has been used to criticise the empiricism of feminist historians, who relished its rebellion, charging them with a loose retelling of the facts to bolster partisan feminist politics and continue the infiltration of women's history into universities.³ Indeed, there has been fresh consideration of the lives and social positions of women over the past forty years thanks to feminist scholars, and convict women have featured prominently in these emergent discourses in Australia.⁴ Convict women had previously only received historical mention in relation to male convicts, colonial administrations, or in order for their sexualities and characters

² Merran Williams, 'Stain or badge of honour? Convict heritage inspires mixed feelings,' *The Conversation*, accessed 17 September 2018, <https://theconversation.com/stain-or-badge-of-honour-convict-heritage-inspires-mixed-feelings-41097>.

³ Michael Connor, "Fabricated Feminist Flashers," *The Quadrant*, (May 2010): pp.56-59.

⁴ Summers, *Damned Whores* (1975); Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Women and identity in Australia 1788 to the Present* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1976); Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: female convicts, sexuality and gender in colonial Australia* (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Lyndall Ryan, "Reconceptualising Convict Women," *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, No.1 (1998):143-144; Lucy Frost, *Abandoned Women: Scottish Convicts Exiled Beyond the Seas* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2012); Alison Alexander (ed), *Repression, Reform and Resilience: A History of the Cascades Female Factory* (Hobart: Convict Women's Press, 2016).

to be morally condemned.⁵ As Tamsin O'Connor has claimed, "The harshest criticism – at least until second wave feminists launched their attack – was invariably reserved for the female convicts."⁶ It seems we have a preoccupation with women who break the rules.

But if not rebellious bum flashers, who were the women of the Cascade Female Factory, for so long subject to moral condemnation, or erased from history all together? Why are we so obsessed with their characters, in trying to determine whether they were good or bad, Madonnas or whores, measuring their success "in terms of the establishment of the bourgeois nuclear family", as historian Joy Damousi has suggested?⁷ Do modern women look backward searching for glimpses of ourselves, projecting false feminist fantasies and falling through the looking glass? Convict women remain today a type of spectacle, as they were in the 1840s amidst media-fuelled hysteria about their behaviour.

In March 1842, the superintendent of the Cascade Female Factory, Mr Hutchinson, stood hidden in a doorway watching a group of six naked, dancing convict women. Mr Hutchinson reported that he was quite horrified by what he saw, though he observed the nude scene for several minutes before announcing himself. In his testimony to the Committee of Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline 1841 – 1843, Mr Hutchinson reported the women were "dancing perfectly naked, and making obscene attitudes towards each other; they were also singing and shouting and making use of most disgusting language".⁸ Upon Mr Hutchinson revealing himself, the women innocently claimed they were merely bathing. Mr Hutchinson was not fooled by this, arguing that there was not a wash tub in sight.⁹ The women, he stated, were making the most repulsive gestures to each other in "imitation of men and women together".¹⁰ Considered a scandalous offence by the authorities of the time, this supposed bathing ritual was one of many incidents that saw the establishment of the Van Diemen's Land government's Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline from 1841-1843. The inquiry's investigative committee was charged

⁵ Summers, *Damned Whores*, 319.

⁶ Tamsin O'Connor, "Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia", review of *Depraved and Disorderly* by Joy Damousi, *Journal of Social History* 32, No.4, 1999, 954.

⁷ Joy Damousi, "'Depravity and Disorder': The Sexuality of Convict Women," *Labour History*, No.68 (May 1995): 30-45.

⁸ Colonial Secretary, Franklin Period, Correspondence Files, *Committee of Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline 1841 - 1843*, TAHO, CSO 22/1/50, No. 169 – 208: 275.

⁹ *Committee Inquiry*: 275.

¹⁰ *Committee Inquiry*: 275-276.

with reviewing female convict behaviour inside the colony's female factories after significant media scrutiny and public pressure.

A group of convict women from the Cascade factory in the late 1830s and early 1840s, dubbed The Flash Mob by local media, become a thorn in the government's side. While the horrors of convict life are well documented in popular contemporary representations, this group of women was reported to have developed a taste for life on the inside. They dressed in "flash" (fancy) clothing and jewellery (inspiring the name "flash mob"), drank alcohol and smoked tobacco smuggled into the factory, and many had sexual relationships with each other. They were, reported the *Colonial Times*, of the belief that "they could 'bowl off' their three or four months [at the Factory] with the greatest ease; laugh at the Magistrate, and skip out of the office with the utmost nonchalance".¹¹

It was the editor of the *Colonial Times*, John Campbell Macdougall, who led the media charge against the government's handling of these women, fanning the easily ignitable flames of moral outrage. In March 1840, Macdougall released a scathing and salacious article titled The Female Factory – The Flash Mob! which made allegations of misconduct among female convicts at the Cascade Female Factory. Macdougall claimed he did not wish to sully the minds of readers with the intimate details of what had been occurring at the factory, stating, "few, indeed, of any who possess the ordinary attributes of human nature, can even conjecture the frightful abominations, which are practiced by the women, who compose this mob".¹²

However, he promptly abandons his own reservations, referring to the female convicts as "annoying and untractable animals", and divulging scandalous details of the horrors alleged to be taking place at the factory under cover of darkness.¹³ The horrors referred to were lesbian sexual activity between the women, and the consumption of the "indulgences" of tobacco and alcohol, that were easily procured at the factory thanks to the Flash Mob.¹⁴

MacDougall, in his sensationalist fervour, goes so far as to compare the daily activities of the Flash Mob to Saturnalia, an ancient Roman festival where social norms are completely, but temporarily, overturned. The article concludes by demanding an investigation into the running of the factory to address the "palpable negligence" of its operation, and boldly asks if the

¹¹ John Campbell MacDougall, "Female Servants," *Colonial Times*, 18 February, 1840: 4, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/8750507>, accessed 12 July 2018.

¹² John Campbell Macdougall, "Female Factory – The Flash Mob!" *Colonial Times*, 10 March, 1840: 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8750568>, accessed 10 September 2018.

¹³ Macdougall, "Female Factory": 4.

¹⁴ Macdougall, "Female Factory": 4.

Superintendent, Mr Hutchinson, is “(!) afraid of these harpies?”¹⁵ It is unlikely that Mr Hutchinson was indeed afraid of the women, though he did have a penchant for watching them naked while lingering unseen in doorways. His actions symbolically allude to the male sexual eye frequently cast over the lives and behaviour of convict women, and that has for the longest time played the defining role in their characterisation.¹⁶

The sexual improprieties occurring at the factory that so obsessed Macdougall in 1840 continued into 1842 and 1843. The Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Josiah Spode, submitted testimony to the inquiry in February 1843 that claimed twelve months previously two women “had been detected in the very act of exciting each other’s passions – on the Lord’s day in the House of God – and at the very time divine service was performing”.¹⁷ In addition to the excitation of the absolute wrong type of passion in church, 1842 to 1843 saw two riots and two vicious sexual assaults committed by women on other women at the factory.¹⁸ What emerges from these accounts is an at times frustratingly complex picture of convict women and their lives. This complexity derives not only from the actions of the women, but from our own expectations of them.

For the colonial authorities of the 1840s, badly behaved women presented a peculiar moral dilemma. While convict women were marked as disorderly and depraved, it was not considered appropriate for women to be physically disciplined in the same manner as men. Convict women frequently rejected the social conventions of femininity assigned to their sex, but male colonial authorities could not conceive of violating the social conventions of femininity that they held so sacrosanct. It was the women’s rejection of these conventions that necessitated their punishment in the first instance and from which the authorities wished to see them reformed. Physical violence was not a favoured option, a contradiction seemingly too vulgar, but how then were the authorities to punish such women and quell the behaviour detailed in the Inquiry? In July 1845, *The Observer* quotes a dispatch to the local government from Edward Smith-Stanley in Britain, who summarises the dilemma and suggests a solution:

¹⁵ Macdougall, “Female Factory”: 4.

¹⁶ Marilyn Lake, ‘Convict Women as Objects of Male Vision: An Historiographical Review’, *Bulletin of The Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies* 2, No.1 (1988): 40-48.

¹⁷ *Committee Inquiry*: 342-343.

¹⁸ *Committee Inquiry*: 405-509 and 423-427.

"The difficulties are greater, inasmuch as those with whom we have to deal are in general as fully depraved as the male convicts, while it is impossible to subject them to the same course of discipline, and thus no alternative seems to be left, but either to detain them in actual confinement, or to permit them to enter, in some mode or other, into the mass of the population."¹⁹

Yet the suffering inflicted by solitary confinement carried its own challenges. Many of the riots that occurred at the female factories in Van Diemen's Land were a direct response to this form of punishment. The threat of confinement of a member of the Cascade Female Factory's Flash Mob, Catherine Owens, described in the inquiry as an "extremely bad character",²⁰ led to a riot in 1842. Eighty-five women barricaded themselves inside the factory, and the police summoned were "beaten off by the women who had armed themselves with the spindle and leg, from the Spinning Wheels, Bricks taken from the floors and walls of the Building, Knives Forks &c and also Quart Bottles in which some of them had received Medicine".²¹

It is stated within the inquiry that due to the women's "excitement" the superintendent thought the best course of action would be to leave them for a time in the hope that they would calm, but instructed the keeper of the factory to deny the women food and water. Given the severity of the escalation, it is quite possible that the superintendent had no choice but to leave the women as they were. The barricade remained standing overnight, and riotous behaviour, including furniture breaking and fire setting, continued into the following morning until a large barrage of police could be summoned to put an end to the stand-off.²² Negotiations were not entered into, all the women involved were punished, and Owens was placed in solitary as promised.

While the highly restrictive and prescribed gender roles of this era had a notable impact on the lives of convict women, what is reflected is not a dichotomy of "good" or "bad" women, but a system guided by a male eye, stacked against them from the start.²³ Their attempts to navigate this system and their resistance to rigid gender prescriptions account for the borderline hysterical reaction of Macdougall in the *Colonial Times*, Mr Hutchinson's concealed doorway

¹⁹ J. F. Halles, 'The Case of Female Prisoners in Van Diemen's Land,' *The Observer and Van Diemen's Land Journal of Politics, Agriculture, Commercial and General Intelligence*, 4 July, 1845: 2-3, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62134955>, accessed 6 July 2018.

²⁰ *Committee Inquiry*: 381.

²¹ *Committee Inquiry*: 383.

²² *Committee Inquiry*: 385.

²³ Lake, *Convict Women as Objects of Male Vision*, 40-48.

observations, and Stanley's punishing moral dilemma. Convict women were seen as such horrific aberrations because they flouted a male authority that was deeply invested in the social control of women, particularly those indelibly marked as deviant who acted outside the acceptable confines of bourgeois femininity. They incited in ruling class men a subtle fear, and became a spectacle through which such men could reinforce, enact and perform their positions and power.²⁴

In light of the inquiry's evidence, the story of three hundred women flashing their backsides at the colonial authorities seems not so flagrant or misleading a fabrication. It effectively symbolises the attitudes of many female convicts and the smaller rebellions that took place at the Cascade Female Factory and the other two female factories in Van Diemen's Land, which are at least verifiable as far as the 1840s are concerned. The riots and behaviour of women at the Cascade Female Factory were bold expressions of contempt for the colonial authorities. Yet they also show how little impact such rebellions had, the immovability and power of colonial gender roles. Negotiations with the women were never entered into. Rebellion, agency, oppression and victimhood were not mutually exclusive.

More than 150 years later, we often find ourselves steeped in the muck of the Madonna or whore dichotomy in our attempts to understand convict women; the foundations remain firm even as the furniture is moved. The women of the female factory were for many years the butt of jokes, recast for modern audiences in the form of a postcard as the rebellious and "insolent hussies" they were accused of being in 1840. Now they are frequently cast as our brave foremothers, women to memorialise and be proud of. The mythology of the Great Mooning and our preoccupation with the characters of convict women has remained the only constant. We use them in the present as decorations in our chosen narratives of the past. How convict women have been written about and understood says as much, if not more, about us as it does about them. Our fantasies projected backwards bring them to life, colour them real, and mould them to fit the discussions we wish to have.

²⁴ Joy Damousi, "Depravity and Disorder," *Labour History* (1995), 32; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Catherine Hall, "Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century," in *Gender and Empire*, ed Philippa Levine (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 46-76; Philippa Levine, 'Sexuality, Gender and Empire,' (ed.) Levine, P., *Gender and Empire*, Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press: 2004), 134-155.

The darker recesses of the Australian popular imagination are often found folded into Tasmanian corners. The mass suffering of convicts trapped on an island prison, the extinction of the thylacine, the dispossession of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population, the environmental destruction of hydro dams and deforestation, have all contributed to the rise to the term “Tasmanian gothic” in recent years. The plight of female convicts now provides a source of inspiration for this flourishing cultural phenomenon. It has led to a greater sense of connection between us and them, and more sympathetic depictions of the women. Sculptor Rowan Gillespie’s 2017 rendering of Irish convict women on Hobart’s waterfront, installed at the very point where the women departed ships more than a century before, is a moving and sensitive tribute (Figure 1).

Our collective relationship with convict women, however, was not always so tender and reflective, as sources from the 1840s show. Responses to female convicts over the course of Van Diemonian -Tasmanian history have been mixed and contentious, but it is the work of feminist historians that has allowed women of the past to be imaginatively re-cast as worthy of inclusion and inquiry. They have located women in the past and re-positioned them within our national narratives, challenging the moralistic interpretations of women’s lives and behaviour that continue to impact upon women today.

Are these interpretations fact, fabrication, or fantasy? They are no more fantastical than any other historical re-telling, only this time it is women who have spoken.