

## Extract Becoming a Penal Colony

- (1) Convicts: Punishment & Transportation
- (2) Convicts: Working for Freedom
- (3) Convict Systems: Assignment, Probation & Exile
- (4) Hulks and Macquarie Harbour
- (5) Convict resistance
- (6) Port Arthur
- (7) Point Puer: boy convicts

*These extracts are from an earlier version of Becoming Tasmania. They were edited out so that the published book was a manageable size and did not become a 'general history.' However, by making these 'general' elements available online it should assist readers to further interpret the published material.*

*Please note: a 'lace doily view' of convict history is not intended, because one cannot ignore the 'drama of justice' nor the pain and punishment that operated on VDL while it was predominantly a prison island.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Background: General**

What was Van Diemen's Land's European encampment to become because of convict transportation? While this is an interesting question, its huge scope requires that the focus here is restricted to 'getting the convicts onto the island'. This is central to it's becoming a penal colony, for as Lloyd Robson noted 'at the heart of the society and economy of VDL ... was the convict labourer and his treatment, dispersal, punishment and reward.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Background: Penal Plan**

Van Diemen's Land becoming a penal colony was a matter of British political and legal policy. As a result of these repressive socio-political and legal policies John West and R. W. Giblin both suggest that by sending its criminals to the island the UK government had used VDL merely as the 'dust-hole of the Empire' and a 'dust heap'. Contradicting these widely held views, Geoffrey Blainey considered that Australia was too far away from the UK to have been used just for this purpose.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, governmental expectations of convict reform meant that the British bureaucracy hoped that the convicts would become 'peasants' after their penal sentence had expired. They were not expected, nor were many even eligible, to return to the UK.

Alternative views of convict history have stressed that trade and sea power were the vital selection factors involved not simply ridding Britain itself of convicts. K. M. Dallas encapsulated this fundamental feature of British colonial policy:

**Transportation was a mercantilist device for providing any likely colonial venture with a sufficiency of unfettered labour. Some form of slavery was essential in a civilisation which had not yet learned to respond to wage incentives.<sup>4</sup>**

‘Slavery’ and ‘Civilization’ are subjective terms, although Dallas has remarked, when discussing so-called convict slavery, that many colonial masters treated their convicts like horses to be broken in, fed and watered. Conversely, Australian masters could not legally flog their convicts: only magistrates could order the lash, although many masters were close friends of local magistrates. On balance Dallas noted that the same work practices often applied in England.<sup>5</sup>

As background, in 1803 Bowen brought only three children with him, yet as ever it was the young who would inherit what VDL had become. Two of the 1803 children were with the handful of free settlers and one was amongst the small military establishment. Besides, one of these poor children died as early as 27 April 1804.<sup>6</sup> What this means is that neither young criminals nor any children of convicts initially ‘invaded’ VDL. The young, who were frequently called ‘native-born’ came after the first convicts. VDL soon became a place for European babies though, at least two of them John Bowen’s own children.

While British prisons housing juveniles with adults had as early as 1818 been termed ‘nurseries of crime’, in May 1829 the number of boys on board the *Georgiana* shocked George Arthur. Also by mid-1830s a ‘baby boom’ in Britain had resulted in a multitude of young criminals.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, British prison administrators invoked the separation of adult and juvenile or ‘urchin’ transportees. Consequently, certain convict transportation vessels carried *only* boy convicts to VDL.<sup>8</sup>

## **Becoming Tasmania Extract (7) Point Puer**

Despite a mistaken belief that Lt-Gov George Arthur had a ‘whim’<sup>9</sup> to create an experimental separation of juveniles from adults, he was in fact required to implement the revised British practice in VDL. He had earlier once argued that boys ought to be transported quickly rather than become ‘vicious’ after years of exposure to adult criminals on the hulks.<sup>10</sup> Even so, it was hoped that separation to Point Puer (meaning boy) from adults would save the young boys from criminal or sexual corruption, or both, by the adults. On the other hand, young convict females were more often directly assigned as servants and few adult and especially not juvenile females were to be found on the Tasman Peninsula, except for those undertaking domestic duties.

After some indecision about removing 60 boy convicts (under 16 years) to Slop Main because they were ‘a dead weight upon the prisoners Barracks’, Point Puer was established in January 1834. It was expected to become a place where the boys, whom Arthur described as a ‘corrupt fraternity of little depraved felons’, were to be both confined and trained to ‘maintain themselves honestly’.<sup>11</sup> Depraved might have been partly true of the first batch of boys for Point Puer, because they stole some of Commandant Charles O’Hara Booth’s wine, or ‘Fluid’ as he called it. Therefore, all the boys and many adult convicts were drunk on arrival, which meant that they were instantly flogged.<sup>12</sup> No amount of sanitising can soften this inaugural story.

Although often ignored, the Carter’s Barracks for boys built in Sydney was a precedent for VDL’s Point Puer. While we cannot tell its whole story here, earlier attempts at separation of the young in VDL had begun in 1827 with a handful of boys being sent to Macquarie Harbour to be taught shipbuilding.<sup>13</sup> Preliminary advice was also given to Arthur about juvenile separation, but on advice from Commandant Booth, he refused to convert an old barn at Slop Main for the boys’ sole use. After this rejection, and with Booth’s active co-operation, Arthur changed his mind. Booth also saw the boys as ‘little urchins’, who needed to be separated from the adults, although they had to constantly transport water from Port Arthur proper across the Bay to their new, albeit waterless, home.

Booth not only chose the site for the boy convicts, just days before its new purpose he took his family and friends to the sub-settlement for a picnic.<sup>14</sup> Despite its theoretical aims Point Puer was never a picnic for those forced to endure its militaristic regime: one boy received three days in solitary for merely ‘throwing bread at his fellow boy’.<sup>15</sup> Stories aside, the number of convicts at penal settlements within a penal colony rose quickly. The adults at Port Arthur were in fact supplemented by the juveniles at Port Puer so relevant data is presented here. In addition, as illustrated in this Table Point Puer numbers climbed because boys began to arrive directly from the UK. Thus an additional barracks was built to accommodate them in 1837.<sup>16</sup>

**Penal Data on Port Arthur & Point Puer (from Becoming Tasmania)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Port Arthur 1830-1878 [Male and Female]</b>	<b>Point Puer 1834-1849 [Boys 9-18 years,]</b>
1831	391	-
1833	412*	-
1832	836	-
1834	-	161
1835	884	259
1836	-	271
1837	1024	315 [accommodation wing added]
1838	1044	473
1839	1495	-
1843	1100*	706 NB: henceforth under 15 years only
1845	1209	730
1846	1218	-
1847	-	189
1849	-	162 [NB: Point Puer Closed]
<b>1853</b>	<b>Year of Cessation</b>	<b>Transportation ends...</b>
1853	690	-
1859	571	-
1860	517	NB: only 50% able-bodied
1863	888 [only 100 were convicts, i.e. lifers]	NB: inc. time served invalids; Lunatic Asylum was built for them.
1867-68	122	Adult convicts removed to Hobart Gaol
1871	283 [192 were paupers]	NB: Tasmanian Govnt. assumes full control of Port Arthur
1873	156	NB: removed to Hobart Gaol etc.
1876-78	64 [and 126 paupers, 79 lunatics]	Final annual report adds 5 felons : Pauper facility temporarily reopened:

**Sources: Adapted from VDL Statistics 1838 Table 38 & PP 48/1878**

***I. Brand Penal Peninsula, and F. C. Hooper Prison Boys of Port Arthur, and***

***\* Journal O'Hara Booth p.163, where 1120 is given as peak year in 1843***

***# I. Brand Convict probation System p.86***

'Intended to reclaim and control, rather than to punish, the unfortunate youth submitted to its discipline', wrote John West.<sup>17</sup> Those who submitted or otherwise were excepted to undertake juvenile trade training as an integral part of convict administration. This significant policy change has also been seen as a forerunner to compulsory education for working class children. Yet was this the only point of the boys' isolation on the Tasman Peninsula? While there they were expected to develop, through hard work, vocational training, and education, not to forget exposure to religion, a 'sense of worth, competence and even independence'.<sup>18</sup> Except that, for example, one boy was punished on arrival for simply having a pack of cards with him.<sup>19</sup> Was this perhaps being 'cruel to be kind'?

On the other hand, even games played by the boys were frequently turned into profit. Marbles 'tournaments' meant money or goods for trade to the winner. Other 'recreational' features of Port Arthur generally included a school, with classes held in the evenings, and a church for the moral improvement of the convicts. However, it must be noted that compulsory church attendance cannot ensure enlightenment. Indeed, on a wider basis that just for boys, nine clergy wrote to Denison in October 1847 to complain that they had trouble applying attendance at services with alternative 'punishment.' This because the 'rule which exist that all passholders in private service residing within two miles of a place of worship should attend divine service is practically null and void'.<sup>20</sup>

For John West it was 'refreshing to find that kindness and coercion were united in the discipline of Point Puer; an oasis in the desert of penal government'.<sup>21</sup> John Montagu also recorded that boys were mainly 'sent there for improvement in trades, and not under punishment'.<sup>22</sup> Not denying the horror of countless case studies of harsh treatment, approximately 3500 boys passed through Point Puer, although definite occupation data is hard to obtain. Given the constant discussion on convict origins it is worth noting that Lempriere records that some 165 boys out of 375 at Point Puer during June 1838 were from London districts. He also noted that 325 were only sentenced to 7-year terms, which meant that if they were well behaved their terms of incarceration there might cease within three years or less. Another 36 boys must serve out sentences of 14 years while just 14 boys were to endure life sentences; that is 14 years minimum.<sup>23</sup> Did the outcome of such a sentence mean a life of crime or a life as a criminal? Either way, young male criminals stayed at Point Puer until they were 'reported fit to obtain their own livelihood'. According to La Trobe, 'not for any definite period, but until such time as were ready to maintain themselves'.<sup>24</sup>

## Terry Newman

<sup>1</sup> 'Lace doily' is Richard Bladel's appellation cited in 'Scrub-bashing through the past' *Mercury* 12/4/2003 p.38. For a history of prisons see N. Morris & D. J. Rothman [Eds] *The Oxford history of the prison: the practice of punishment in western society* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 p.47.

<sup>2</sup> L. Robson, *History of Tasmania* Vol. 1 p.118

<sup>3</sup> J. West *History of Tasmania* p.298, and 'dust heap' R. W. Giblin 'History of Tasmania p.5.92; dust may also be interpreted as a polite 19<sup>th</sup> century term for excrement. G. Blainey *Tyranny of distance* Melbourne: Sun books, 1966 p.24 and S. Macintyre *A concise history of Australia* Cambridge University Press, 1999 p.37.

<sup>4</sup> K. M. Dallas 'First settlement of Australia; considered in relation to sea-power in world politics' *THRA* P&P 1952 No. 3 p.12.

<sup>5</sup> K. M. Dallas 'Slavery in Australia – convicts, emigrants, Aborigines' *THRA* P&P Vol 16 No.2 September 1968 p.63

<sup>6</sup> Statement of Inhabitants HRA SIII Vol I p.200, and List of Deaths p.264. See P. Buddee *Fate of the artful dodger: Parkhurst boys transported to Australia and New Zealand 1842-1852* Perth: St George Books, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> 'nurseries' Philanthropic Society London 'Report of the committee of the society for the improvement of prison discipline, and for the reformation of juvenile offenders' 1818 p.24. For *Georgiana* see HRA SIII Vol VIII passim.

<sup>8</sup> K. Humphrey 'Objects of compassion; young male convicts in VDL, 1834-1850' *Australian Historical Society* Vol 25 p.13 and A. Kyle 'Little depraved felons' *AHS* Vol. 25 pp.319-324

<sup>9</sup> R. Graeme-Evans *Tasmanian rogues and absconders 1803-1875; Vol III A passing trade 1830-1875* Launceston: Regal Press 1994 p.36.

<sup>10</sup> 'vicious' Arthur 13/8/1828 HRA SIII Vol VII pp.470-471

<sup>11</sup> Cited in several places; see Brown, J. C. Poverty is not a crime Hobart: *THRA*, 1972 p.24

<sup>12</sup> D. Heard, D [Ed] *The journal of Charles O'Hara Booth, commandant of the Port Arthur penal settlement* Hobart: *THRA*, 1981 p.168.

<sup>13</sup> G. Dow & I. Brand 'Cruel only to be kind'? Arthur's point Puer' *History of Education Review* Vol. 15 No.1 1986 p.24.

<sup>14</sup> Paucity of data on child convicts confirmed by Port Arthur Research Centre staff

<sup>15</sup> D. Heard [Ed] *The journal of Charles O'Hara Booth* 'water boys' p.49, 'urchins' p.168, and H. Maxwell-Stewart & S. Hood 'Pack of thieves? 52 Port Arthur lives' Port Arthur: Port Arthur Management Authority, 2001 p.34 and P. Hilton & S. Hood 'Caught in the act: unusual offences of Port Arthur convicts' Port Arthur: Port Arthur Historic Site management Authority, 1999 p.16

<sup>16</sup> O. MacFie & N. Hargraves 'The Empire's first stolen generation: the first intake Point Puer 1834-39' *Tasmanian Historical Studies* Vol. 6 No.2 1999, pp.142-3.

<sup>17</sup> J. West *History of Tasmania* p.449.

<sup>18</sup> G. Dow & I. Brand 'Cruel only to be kind' p.24

<sup>19</sup> F. J. Gray. 'What leisure? What Pleasure' *THRA* P&P Vol 49 No. 2 June 2002 p.120

<sup>20</sup> Clergy of Longford district Fitzsymonds, E [Ed] 'Mortmain' Hobart: Sullivan's Cove, 1977 pp.174-5.

<sup>21</sup> J. West *History of Tasmania* p.395.

<sup>22</sup> J. Backhouse *A narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies* London: Hamilton, Adams and Co, 1843 p.227. For some case studies of Point Puer boys refer Maxwell-Stewart, H & Hood, S 'Pack of thieves? 52 Port Arthur lives' Port Arthur: Port Arthur Management Authority, 2001 and 'not under punishment' John Montagu's introduction in Hull, 'VDL Statistics' p.8.

<sup>23</sup> T. Lempriere 'Penal settlements of VDL' Facsimile edition Royal Society of Tasmania 1954 p.92

<sup>24</sup> I. Brand *Convict probation system in VDL, 1839-1854* Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1990 p.86, p.173