

Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia (Studies in Australian History)

Deborah Oxley

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before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia (Studies in Australian History):

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Advance Australia More Fairly By A Customer This is a work of quantitative depth that redresses a series of alleged misconceptions about female convicts sent to Australia. Deborah Oxley argues that to understand Australia's socio-economic development one must first understand the nature of a large portion of its first settlers that has gone overlooked. She makes a convincing case. Her research engages a historiography that previously saw all convicts as part of a 'criminal class', and it argues that female convicts were in fact heterogeneous and diverse in origins, and only marginally criminal, for the most part. This, she feels, helps to account for the fact that within a few decades after mass transportation began convicts were successful in establishing a socio-economic system which quickly replicated aspects of the Anglo-Celtic culture that spawned the settlement. Moving rapidly to the status of a "free society" in which female convicts laboured as workers, wives, lovers and mothers. (12) Her first item of business is to describe accurately what type of female convicts arrived to advance Australia fair. Generally speaking, these were not career criminals, but people guilty of petty crimes - usually theft - and convicted of crimes that in less merciful days would have carried a sentence of hanging or, in the case of the lucky and clergied, flogging. In any event, they were not members of a well established and at times romanticised 'criminal

class' of mythical fame. Accurate statistical data bear this out. And, unlike the formerly obedient American colonies where such criminals were sold as indentured servants, Australian transportees had to be integrated into a society in which they were expected to play more than an auxiliary role. It was a role for which they were surprisingly well suited. After a somewhat tangential review of female convicts in literature, Oxley returns to quantitative analysis of the convicts themselves. Though they spanned a wide age range, most were in their twenties and not all were incapable of working in skilled professions - the English more than the Irish transportees. The majority was not completely illiterate. In fact, they closely resembled the working class comrades they left behind. They were valuable if not indispensable in light of the fact that the vast majority of British emigrants chose North America ahead of Australia to start a new life, and some four fifths of transportees were male. In time, forced Australian immigration was supplemented with the aggressive recruiting of suitable free women; however, these were only slightly more skilled on the whole than their un-free sisters in the prison holds of Australia-bound ships. That convict women have been so unfairly maligned is, in Oxley's opinion, the product of nineteenth-century literature about criminals. Though not a particularly profound point, Oxley spends a chapter elaborating upon this. At the very least it helps to fill out the book. But all's well that ends well, and Britain's loss of a pseudo-criminal 'class' that also filled a literary need to decry female baseness and excess turn out to be Australia's gain. This study draws upon a wide array of primary sources, the richest of which are the 'indent' lists of the convict ships, containing detailed demographic and even anatomical data on the ships' human cargoes. She compares this to nineteenth century (mis)conceptions about convicts and invariably proves them wrong, along with the twentieth-century historiography that fell for such appraisals. Oxley weighs her various evidence judiciously, but still seems inclined to accept most of her data as reliable in spite of some cause for potential inaccuracies. Her analysis, however, is chronologically weak. It initially stresses the importance of the merciful reforms of the criminal justice system of the 1820s without providing much information about how this may have changed the demographic or social nature of transportation, apart from accelerating it. Oxley also does not say a great deal about what happened to the convicts, or how they actually made early Australian society, once they arrived. She seems to assume that clarifying who these women were is enough to demonstrate that they must have largely underlain the successful society they helped to engender. This book's argument and foci also become rather repetitive, as Oxley frequently reiterates the historiographical significance of what she is doing and displays her evidence in ways that essentially rephrase her thesis - one, she notes, that is a continuation of an existing historiographical revisionism. Nevertheless, she does meaningfully enhance some of the points this revision has been attempting to make. Oxley's prose is vivid and replete with short, pithy sentences that engage the reader in her arduous task. However, it also emanates an annoyingly patriotic type of proselytising about a (more politically?) correct understanding of 'our history', 'our social origins', and 'this country' typically becoming only of Canadian and, to a lesser extent, insular American left-wing nationalism. Her structure, as noted, is very comprehensive, although her engagement of a literary dialogue with quantitative analysis leaves the reader a bit unsatisfied at times. In the end, however, the evidence she presents speaks for itself and clearly demonstrates that however they served the new colony's needs after their arrival, Australia's female convicts were well suited to the task of forging a functional society.

Convict Maids looks at female convicts transported from Britain and Ireland to New South Wales between 1826 and 1840. Deborah Oxley refutes the notion that these women were prostitutes and criminals, arguing that in fact they helped put the colony on its feet. Analyzing their backgrounds, Oxley finds that they were skilled, literate, young and healthy--qualities exploited by the new colony. *Convict Maids* draws on historical, economic and feminist theory, and is impressive for its extensive and original research.

"The strength of *Convict Maids* is the systematic quantification of the indent lists in chapters 2 through 6. Valuable information is provided on subgroups: English versus Irish...valuable comparisons are made with the overall populations of England and Ireland." Ralph Shlomowitz, *Journal of Economic History* "...this is an excellent chapter in that long book toward unbiased recognition of the women of Australia." JPC