

# 1869

## LAST CONVICTS LAND

On 9 January 1868 the 875-tonne sailing ship' *Hougoumont* disgorged 279 male convicts at Fremantle, Western Australia, and brought to a close the era of transportation which had been the main reason for colonising the continent.

In the eighty years since the First Fleet had anchored in Botany Bay, more than 160 000 men, women, and children had been forcibly shipped nearly 20 000 kilometres from home to a vast jail from whence few ever returned.

With blood, sweat, rum, graft, corruption, and misery, Britain's criminal flot-sam had helped (albeit unwillingly) to tame the antipodes for the Empire. But, by 1853, only underpopulated and struggling Western Australia was still prepared to receive convicts.

Agitation in the eastern colonies, 'more populous and important', wrested from Britain an undertaking in 1864 to halt transportation to the western colony within three years. The emergent nation was clearly determined to outgrow its 'birthstain' — and the arrival of the *Hougoumont* foreshadowed the new,

free Australia.

Governor Phillip's convicts had been used at first to hack the rudiments of Sydney Town from the wilderness, their efforts spurred on by the liberal use of the cat-o'-nine-tails, with 300 lashes at a time being not unusual. Joseph Holt, a transported Irish rebel, left this account of a flogging in the early days of Sydney:

*I have witnessed many horrible scenes; but this was the most appalling sight I had ever seen. The day was windy, and I protest, that although I was at least fifteen yards to leeward from the sufferers, the blood, skin, and flesh blew into my face as the executioners shook it off from the cats. Fitzgerald received his whole three hundred lashes, during which Dr Mason used to go up to him occasionally to feel his pulse, it being contrary to law to flog a man beyond fifty lashes without a doctor being present. I shall never forget this humane doctor as he smiled and said, 'Go on; this man will tire you both before he fails!...*

As the convict population increased, more were assigned to work on the farms of officers, officials, and free settlers. They were little more than slaves, receiving no wages, only the most essential clothing, and a subsistence diet.

Some prisoners were given 'tickets-of-leave' as rewards for good behaviour: this entitled them to offer their labour for wages until their sentence expired, when they were usually given a grant of land on which to establish themselves as independent farmers.

The Governor was also entitled to grant conditional and full pardons, varying

in number from 1516 under Macquarie to only two under Bligh.

Discipline tended to grow harsher as the number of convicts increased. Hard labour in road parties or chain gangs for up to seven years was more feared than the 'cat'.

Transportation to a penal settlement was soon introduced as the ultimate punishment, short of hanging, for the most incorrigible convicts.

The first such settlement was at Newcastle, established in 1801, where convicts slaved in the coal-mines, burnt lime, and cut cedar trees.

By 1821 the free settlements in the Hunter Valley were considered too close to Newcastle, so new penal settlements were opened at Port Macquarie and Moreton Bay, the present-day Brisbane.

But, although both qualified as among the most brutal punishment centres in early Australia, they could not compete with the unbridled sadism and savagery of Norfolk Island, or Van Diemen's Land's Macquarie Harbour (nicknamed Hell's Gates), and Port Arthur.

Norfolk Island, 1665 kilometres northeast of Sydney, was first settled in 1788, but after 1804 its convicts were gradually transferred to Van Diemen's Land, the last leaving the island early in 1814.

Norfolk at first had been an ordinary settlement until, on the recommendation of Commissioner J. T. Bigge, it was turned into a 'secondary' penal settlement in 1825 for up to 2000 of the worst-behaved convicts from New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. On this isolated island they were to

be 'broken in spirit or die'.

A British Parliamentary select committee was told in 1837 of ...

*many cases in 'which it appeared that convicts at Norfolk Island had committed crimes which subjected them to execution... they deliberately preferred death, because there was no chance of escape, and they stated they were weary of life, and would rather go to Sydney and be hanged.*

A more humane period followed between 1840 and 1844 under Captain Alexander Maconochie, but this was soon changed by the sadist John Price, who reigned with whip and torture until 1853. The character of Maurice Frere in *For the Term of His Natural Life* was based on Price.

The island was finally abandoned as a prison in 1856, when the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers moved there from Pitcairn Island.

In Van Diemen's Land another hell-hole for incorrigibles was established, also as a result of Bigge's investigation, at Macquarie Harbour on the western side of the island.

Its commandants were ordered to make Macquarie Harbour 'a place of such strict discipline that they [the convicts] must dread the idea of being sent there...'.

Soon Governor Arthur could boast that 'Prisoners upon trial declared they would rather suffer death than be sent back to Macquarie Harbour, which is proof that banishment to that station operates as it is intended...'

Remoteness, however, led to its being closed down in 1833, and its few

hundred inmates transferred to the notorious Port Arthur.

Designed as the ultimate jail for the worst offenders, Port Arthur was made escape-proof by a 'fence' of guards and fierce dogs across the narrow Eaglehawk Neck which linked the peninsula to Van Diemen's Land proper.

Here all beasts of burden were prohibited, convicts taking their place to propel officials and visitors in a 'tram' along wooden rails between the settlement and the landing place at Norfolk Bay.

Prisoners were kept in hard labour from sunrise to sunset, with only two brief breaks for meals, while the regulations stated that those sentenced to chain gangs...

*are to wear chains and the yellow dress, with the word 'Felon' stamped upon it in several places; they are to sleep in separate cells; they are to go out to work one by one in Indian file, and no conversation is to be allowed among them; they are to be put to the heaviest and most degrading labour that can be found on the settlement.*

By the time Port Arthur was finally abandoned in 1877, more than 30 000 prisoners had experienced its grim hospitality.

Following growing pressure from free settlers, who sought self-government and had no further use for convicts after their assignment to private individuals was prohibited, the British Government finally abolished transportation of convicts and 'exiles' (hastily-pardoned felons) to New South Wales in 1850, and three years later, to Van Diemen's Land.

At the same time the island, in an attempt to shake off its past reputation, was renamed Tasmania.

Transportation continued only to Western Australia until the arrival of the *Hougoumont* in 1868, although by as late as 1886 about 200 remnants of the system still remained, either as prisoners or the holders of tickets-of-leave and conditional pardons.