WHO WERE THE FEMALE CONVICTS?

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SUMMARY

The convicts exported to Australia have been the subject of enquiry since transpor-
tation commenced, and the conclusions reached about the nature of the convict
"character" have not always been favourable. One belief that has received particular
currency is that the convicts were amongst the worst of the apprehended members of a
professional criminal class said to be operating within Great Britain. It is the
purpose of this essay to question this belief by investigating the origins and
characteristics of a sample of 2,210 female convicts arriving in New South Wales from
1825 to 1840 and to establish an alternative picture of those "damned whores" really were.

Introduction

For nearly two hundred years the convict "character" has been the
subject of enquiry, and for most of that period it has been found
morally wanting. The convicts transported to Australia have been
condemned by their contemporaries and historians alike as being of a
"criminal class" comprising individuals who had, according to the 1839
Royal Commission on the Constabulary, succumbed to "the temptations
of the profit of a career of depredation" (quoted in Gatrell and
Hadden, 1972: 381) rather than choosing the presumably more arduous
task of wage-labouring (although given the options, one may speculate
on the existence of any motivations to resist this supposed
temptation). To this class, it was claimed, belonged the "dregs of
society", "a disreputable lot" (Shaw, 1966: 165), mostly unemployable
and unemployable – through their own choice – who, like parasites,
lived off the healthy organism that the British society was said to
be. The characteristics ascribed to the "criminal class" were also
ascribed to the convicts: "the scum, the sweepings of the gaols, hulks
and prisons" (quoted in Robinson, 1985: 9).

Rather than being considered an exception the female convicts
were, in fact, thought to be even more reprobate. The moral virtues
of women were believed to be greater than those of men so that to fall
from grace was to fall further than could any man. These women,
claimed contemporaries and historians, had chosen to sell their
womanly virtues upon the open market rather than to fulfil the
worshipped role ascribed to them by society. In doing so they damned
themselves. The supposed prostitution of the female convicts (who
were labelled as "damned whores" and little else) was not perceived
as stemming from working-class poverty but as qualifying them for
membership of that outcast criminal class. The historians like Lloyd
Robson and A.G.L. Shaw who have investigated the origins of the female
convicts and, presumptuously, the female convicts' "characters"
(Robson, 1965: title page) have subscribed to this view, accepting
prostitution as a basic tenet by which the female convicts should be
judged, and have concluded respectively that "The picture they presented of the women convicted and transported to Australia is not an attractive one" (Robson, 1963: 53) and that "the picture they presented is a singularly unattractive one" (Shaw, 1966: 164). In an attempt to reprieve some of the women, Robson claimed that not all were prostitutes (1963: 53), and thus implicitly accepted both the view of prostitution as a wrong-doing not mitigated by economic circumstances, and also the ruling-class definition of the working-class practice of living in de facto relationships as prostitution (Sturma, 1978: 7).

Whether or not the women in the sample being investigated here were engaged in either prostitution or de facto relationships is unknown, but such information is only one small aspect of a very complex picture of the origins and characteristics of the female convicts transported to Australia. Data in the form of the Convict Indents enable the construction of a comprehensive profile of the physical, demographic, economic and "criminal" characteristics of these female convicts. By analysing these data and by placing the female convicts within the context of the economies and social structures from which they came the nature of their class origins will be questioned.

Demographic characteristics

The demographic information provided in the Convict Indents is quite extensive, with seven variables being recorded. These were:

i. marital status
ii. number of children
iii. religion
iv. level of literacy
v. county of birth
vi. town of birth where valid
and  vii. court of trial

From this information it was possible to generate five more variables of interest here:

viii. location, categorizing birth place as either rural, urban or foreign
ix. mobility between counties, measuring whether a convict's counties of birth and trial were identical or not; if not they were considered mobile
x. region of birth (England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland or elsewhere)

xi. region of work [as for (x)]

and  xii. mobility between regions, using the same technique as that described for (ix) but substituting regions for counties.

The measurement of "mobility" is subject to certain limitations. It cannot detect intra-county movement, the number of moves made, the