

(VI) THE CONVICT SHIPS



NOWADAYS we can form little conception of what it meant to be transported beyond the seas for a term of seven years. The accounts of George Loveless and his comrades, separated as they were, he in the "William Metcalfe," the others on board the "Surrey," are studiously moderate. True to the spirit that carried them through these terrible years of suffering and privation, they allowed no exaggeration of language to distort the picture of heroic fortitude. Firm as a rock in the knowledge of their innocence, they wasted no time in fruitless complaint.

The system of transportation was first established under the Vagrancy Act of Queen Elizabeth, by which power was conferred upon the Justices of the Peace to transport certain criminals overseas. It had become a regular practice by the time of Charles II, the American colonies then being largely used. The revolt of the colonists in 1775, and the war of American Independence, put an end to that. Nowadays, we find it difficult to realise that Australia was founded as a penal settlement and had, for many years, its chief use as a dumping ground for many of the more desperate criminals of Great Britain.

Capt. Cook had visited the continent in 1770 and had reported favourably upon its possibilities as a colony, but in its wild and unexplored condition no one but a few specially hardy pioneers could be induced to live there. A long and monotonous voyage to the other side of the world, to a strange and inhospitable land, peopled with savages, offered few attractions. Some one suggested that the flood of criminals which was overflowing the English gaols might profitably be diverted to the new continent in the Southern ocean. Here, removed from the contagion of their fellow criminals in England, they might start a new life.

The enterprising Prime Minister, William Pitt, seized upon the suggestion, and Botany Bay, in New South Wales, was chosen as the spot for making the great experiment. A naval officer, Captain Arthur Phillip, was chosen as the first Governor and he tried to discharge his onerous duties as humanely as the circumstances permitted.



The first fleet of convict ships with its tragic freight, reached Botany Bay on January 13, 1788, but Captain Phillip found it "a poor and sandy heath, full of swamps." He did not land there and proceeded a little further to Port Jackson, being greatly impressed by the magnificent natural harbour. Here, the first settlement was built and called Sydney after the Home Secretary of the period, Lord Sydney.

From 1788 until 1867 when the system was finally abandoned, Australasia received over 137,000 convicts from the British Isles. About half of these went to Van Diemen's Land or Tasmania as it is now called after its discoverer, Abel Tasman, a Dutchman. It is startling to recall that nearly 20,000 of the total were women. The convicts transported included all types of offenders from the blackest scoundrels long past any prospect of reclamation, to people who had committed the most trifling of offences, and who could not really be considered as criminals.

It must be remembered that 100 years ago, people could be and were sentenced to transportation for what to-day would be regarded as the most trivial offences. To steal a two-penny pork pie or a linen handkerchief was sufficient to bring about transportation. Then there were the political prisoners, including many Irishmen, who had been banished from their country after the rebellion of 1798. Some of these had never been tried and consequently no record of their sentences was in existence. All were rammed tightly together in a seething mass of festering humanity between the decks of the convict ships.

20,000 women transported



THE CONVICT SHIP "SUCCESS"

Many political prisoners

The floating
hells

The prisoners due for transportation were first conveyed to the hulks, there to await transshipment. Bad as were the hulks, the ships in which they were actually transported were worse and were aptly called "floating hells." The Government originally hired merchant vessels for the purpose and paid from £20 to £30 per convict to the owners. These gentry, with plenty of experience of the slave traffic to guide them, naturally tried to make as much profit out of the deal as they could. The consequence was that the ships were crowded to suffocation with results that can only faintly be imagined.



BRANDING OF A CONVICT

In 1790, the "Neptune" carried 502 convicts, 158 of whom died on the passage. In 1802, a colonial surgeon, Dr. White, reported that of 938 males sent out by the last ships, 251 died on board and fifty had died since landing, and "the number of sick this day is 450, and many who are reckoned as not sick, have barely strength to attend to themselves." In 1802, the system was changed. The ships were especially fitted out and were provided with

naval surgeons as superintendents. A bonus was paid on each convict landed so that it was to the interest of the superintendent to keep them in a sufficiently good condition to get them on shore alive.

Discipline
incredibly
severe

The discipline was incredibly severe and the most brutal floggings were common. Many prisoners attempted to commit suicide. The convict ship "Success" exhibits a branding iron, leg irons, weighing from 7 to 56 pounds, body irons with handcuffs attached, the iron strait jacket, the spiked collar, with a short chain to keep the convict stooping, the cat-o'-nine-tails, made of thongs of untanned leather, bound with brass

wire and tipped with pellets of lead, and the brine bath, nicknamed the coffin bath in which the convicts were plunged after they had been flogged.

The convicts were always shackled and Dr. White in his book, *Convict Life in New South Wales*, says that "the leg shackles were not removed when they went to hospital, and not always when they went to their graves."

What happened in the event of shipwreck is attested to by a young fellow with whom George Loveless worked in the Government domain at Hobart. On April 13, 1835,

the convict ship "George III" struck a rock only a few miles from the coast of Tasmania. When the ship struck, the prisoners were all locked below immediately. "The bottom of the ship was fast filling with water; they called aloud to have the hatches opened, but to no purpose; and when they were up to their middles in water, they rushed forward and burst open the hatches, and endeavoured to ascend the ladder; the soldiers, however, at the top fired on them and killed many; others had their throats cut with cutlasses. The man who was going up the ladder by my side, was shot, but I escaped. . . . Only eighty-one of the whole shipload was taken on shore alive, and a great number of them were so emaciated and crippled, that they were obliged to carry them to the hospital."



THE BRINE BATH

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The wreck of the "George III"

Butchery of the convicts

The result of this appalling system was to break the spirit of the prisoners, turning

most of those who survived into savage beasts of prey. Criminals were manufactured by the transportation system just as they were by the prison system itself. Huddled behind heavy oaken bulkheads with tiny holes through which the sentry could fire into the crowd on any sign of revolt, shockingly fed, sea-sick, frozen with cold and then stifled with heat, poisoned by the horrible atmosphere, at the mercy of bullying warders, with flogging always a possibility for even the best behaved, it is no wonder that sometimes mutiny seemed to furnish a means of escape through the merciful portals of death.

There is a grim meaning in the fact that there was no case of a successful mutiny by convicts on ships between England and Australia. Every attempted rising was suppressed, and the dark punishments associated with suppression can be left to the imagination.

On board the "Surrey" tossing and heaving as her bows plunged into the foaming seas, James Hammett and his four companions required all the will power they could command to prevent themselves from giving way to despair. John Standfield, little more than a boy, says, "I then began to feel the misery of transportation confined down with a number of the most degraded and wretched criminals, each man having to

contend with his fellow or be trodden under foot. The rations, which were served out daily, were of the worst quality, and very deficient in quantity, owing to the peculations indulged in by those officers whose duty it is to attend to that department. In addition to this, the crowded state of the vessel rendering it impossible for the prisoners to lie down at full length to sleep, the



BOTANY BAY IN 1834

noxious state of the atmosphere, and the badness and the saltiness of the provisions, induced disease and suffering which it is impossible to describe. Added to all this, in the case of myself and brethren, the agonising reflection that we had done nothing deserving this punishment, and the consciousness that our families, thus suddenly deprived of their protectors, and a stigma affixed to their names, would probably be thrown unpitied and friendless upon the world."

Day succeeded day in a seemingly endless round of monotony until one morning the magic whisper "land in sight" sent a thrill through even the most jaded breast. At exercise that day, the convicts could see a long low-lying patch of cloud on the horizon which slowly resolved itself into a rocky coast line.

On board the
"Surrey"

Land in
sight

Arrival at
Sydney,
August 17,
1834

On August 17, 1834, after a voyage of 111 days, the "Surrey" swept between the Heads, the two shoulders of rock which mark the entrance to the magnificent Sydney Harbour. After sailing a few miles further, they reached the sandy beach of Sydney cove. A few sorry-looking huts near the beach and further back, straggling streets with single storied wooden dwellings, gave little or no indication of the magnificent city which was later to develop there. Wild and primitive with none of the refinement of the Dorsetshire countryside, it seemed to the five men who gazed upon it for the first time, to be bleak and forbidding.

After the ship's papers had been cleared the vessel was boarded by Government officials who examined the convicts one by one, taking full particulars of their names, ages, occupations and sentences, together with the detailed description of each man, all of which was carefully recorded and preserved. Not even then were the expectant men allowed to land. They remained on board the vessel for nearly three weeks longer, and it was only on September 4 that they were conveyed on shore. They were lined four abreast and marched through the streets by way of the domain and Hyde Park to the large convict barracks. Here they encountered a motley crew of old hands, about 300 in number, some of them eager for news of the old country, and others only concerned with pilfering something from the new chums. John Standfield remarks that these men, "if possible, were worse than others with whom we have been associated." Here in the barracks they remained until they were assigned to their masters and sent to their various destinations up country.

George Loveless, in the meantime, was faring little better on board the "William Metcalfe." She followed the same course as the "Surrey" for the greater part of the journey, forging ahead on the southerly track which took her through the Bay of Biscay. One can easily imagine what the conditions were like for the convicts batoned down below deck when passing through the sleepless Bay. George Loveless writes, "I now began to think I had seen and heard but very little. 240 men, shut down together and locked in a prison, the greater part of them such monsters as I never expected to see, and whose conduct I am not capable of



CELLS BETWEEN DECKS

Conditions
on the
"William
Metcalfe"

The over-
crowded berth

describing. A small bed, pillow, and blanket was allowed for each man, which would have contributed greatly to our comfort, had there been room sufficient to have lain on them, but we could not. A berth about 5 feet 6 inches square, was all that was allowed for six men to occupy day and night, with the exception of four hours we were allowed daily on deck, two hours in the forenoon and two hours in the afternoon for air. For nearly ten weeks out of fourteen I was not able to lie down at length to take rest."

The agony of those weeks of suffering was but a preparation for the trials which lay ahead. But all things come to an end, and at last the torrid equatorial heat gave way to the more temperate breezes from the South. The Cape of Good Hope was rounded, and the ship entered on the long 5,000 miles stretch to Tasmania.

George
Loveless
reaches
Tasmania
September 4,
1834

On September 4, 1834, after a passage of 112 days, the "William Metcalfe" entered Storm Bay. Passing to the southward they caught a glimpse of the distant Tasman Peninsula where was situated the dreaded Penal Settlement of Port Arthur. Sailing up the Derwent river, George Loveless saw before him a range of hills rising in regular succession above each other and covered with trees. He was asked several times whether he didn't think the country was most delightful. Although he was quite ready to admire the beauties which nature had distributed here with such a prodigal hand, he was reflecting on other things when he replied, "I think we are come to the wrong end of the world."

After sailing about thirty miles, the "William Metcalfe" anchored opposite Hobart Town. George Loveless was surprised to see before him a rising town of considerable importance with wide streets and comparatively good roads, picturesquely situated with Mount Wellington rising behind it. The long voyage was at an end. What lay before him?



HOBART, WITH MOUNT WELLINGTON IN THE BACKGROUND