



Refractory Girls

Barry York looks at the female factories which existed in the Australian colonies in the first half of the nineteenth century

We're factory girls
Refractory girls,
The most unsatisfactory girls
Who left their country
For their country's good!

The above lyrics from the chorus of a nineteenth-century play, *The Factory*, by Charles Phillips and John Sherman, refer to the inhabitants of institutions known as female factories, which existed in the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) between 1804 and 1856.

The 'unsatisfactory girls' who 'left their country for their country's good' were convict women transported for periods of

seven or 14 years, mostly for theft. Of about 25 000 convict women sent to Australia, most were single, first offenders, aged in their twenties, able to read but not write, and English or Irish by nationality. About half ended up in Van Diemen's Land where, between 1821 and 1856, there were five female factories. Their story is told in Tony Rayner's *Female Factory, Female Convicts* (2004). In New South Wales, female factories were established at Parramatta, Port Macquarie, Newcastle and Moreton Bay (the latter was before the formation of Queensland). The Parramatta female factory is the subject of Annette Salt's *These Outcast Women* (1984).

Female factories were essentially workhouses, though they also had hospital and nursery functions. Convict women, who on their disembarkation were not assigned to work for military personnel or free settlers, were placed in the factories, where they worked for their accommodation and food. Another category of 'inmate' was pregnant

E. Tucker
*Relief Guard Arriving at a Prison
Hulk, Deptford 1821*
watercolour; 32.0 x 50.5 cm
Pictures Collection
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Augustus Earle (1793–1838)
Female Penitentiary or Factory, Parramatta c.1826
watercolour; 15.9 x 25.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2818460

convict women and those weaning babies. The factories also sometimes served as places of punishment for women offenders in the colony.

In the factories women worked as laundresses and needle-workers, made nails, hats and rope, wove flax for sail canvas and carded wool. They left the factory when assigned to a settler or officer, usually to serve as domestic servants. There was a shortage of women in the colonies, and marriage offered a way out of the factories for the unassigned. A ritual developed at the Parramatta female factory whereby the women would be lined up and a visiting man seeking a wife would inspect the line, dropping a handkerchief at the feet of a woman he fancied. If the woman picked the hankie up, it meant she accepted the proposal.

Convict women often rebelled against the conditions of their existence. Joy Damousi's *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (1997) contains a report of a classic protest during a vice-regal visit to the Cascades female factory in Hobart in the 1830s. Sir John Franklin, the colony's Lieutenant-Governor, was addressing the women from an elevated dais, when all of a sudden the 300 convicts turned their backs, bent

over, and pulled up their clothes to expose their posteriors. They then simultaneously smacked their bottoms with their hands to make a loud disruptive noise.

The first female factory was established on the upper floor of the Parramatta Gaol, west of Sydney, in 1804. Overcrowding was a problem, along with a lack of hygiene and, in 1821, Governor Lachlan Macquarie instructed convict architect Francis Greenway to design a new factory in Parramatta, with a three-storey barracks for 300 women. The first floor was for meals and the two top floors for sleeping. Women in the factory, including 13-year-old girls, worked seven days a week, sometimes for 12 hours a day. (This seems outrageous today but was common in the United Kingdom. The 1803 *Factory Act* stipulated that children were not to work *more* than a 12-hour day.) It is interesting to note, too, that elderly women were among the convicts: Catherine Finn was an 80-year-old first offender; she died at the Parramatta factory in 1826, six months after arriving. (An index to the factory, copied from official records of the period 1826–1848 and compiled by Joan Reese, is available on microfiche in the National Library.)

Some significant historical claims have been made for the women of the Parramatta

female factory. Firstly, it has been said that in 1822 the women produced the colony's first manufactured export: 60 000 yards (65 400 m) of woven cloth. And secondly, the 'refractory girls' were responsible for Australia's first industrial action when, in 1827, they rioted for improved conditions and better food.

Profanity, lewdness and defiance of authority characterised some of the women's behaviour, and one wonders how they would have responded to the sermon preached at the factory in June 1844 by the first (and only) Church of England Bishop of Australia, William Grant Broughton. Titled 'Take Heed', the sermon was published that year (two copies of this rare item can be found in the Library's Ferguson Collection).

Overcrowding at Parramatta remained a problem and, by the late 1820s, the barracks for 300 were accommodating more than 500. At its worst, the factory accommodated more than 1300 women and children. During the 1820s and 1830s, new female factories were built in New South Wales, as well as in Van Diemen's Land. The first established in Van Diemen's Land was in 1821 at Hobart Town, but this gave way to the larger Cascades female factory in 1828. At its peak, the Cascades factory held 1200 women and children, though again in overcrowded conditions. It ceased as a female factory in 1856. Van Diemen's Land also had a factory at George Town, which had opened in 1822,



but the women were moved to a new Launceston female factory in 1834. This became a prison in 1855, and was demolished in the 1930s, save for a well and a perimeter wall that are now heritage-protected.

Today, the most archaeologically intact Tasmanian factory historic site is at Ross, on the highway between Launceston in the island's north and Hobart in the south. The Ross female factory operated between 1848 and 1854 and, while only the overseer's cottage remains above ground, the site was quite recently subject to a major excavation, headed by Eleanor Casella of the University of California. The Library holds Casella's 2002 report to the

above left:
John Skinner Prout (1805–1876)
Portrait of Bishop William Grant Broughton c.1850
hand-coloured lithograph
23.0 x 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9454312

above right:
Cover of *Take Heed: A Sermon Preached in the Female Factory at Parramatta on Tuesday, the 4th of June, 1844* by William Grant Broughton
(Sydney: Kemp and Fairfax, 1844)

below left:
Unknown photographer
Female Factory, Cascades 1880
b&w photograph
Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania image no. NS1013/46



top:
John Skinner Prout (1805–1876)
*The Female Factory from
Proctor's Quarry* 1844
tinted lithograph; 30.5 x 40.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6940065

bottom:
Charles Harry Roberts (active
1818–1828)
*The Female Factory at
Parramatta, a Station Fifteen
Miles from Sydney, New South
Wales* c.1823
pencil; 17.9 x 26.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6239017

Cultural Heritage Branch of Tasmania's Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment (*Archaeology of the Ross Female Factory*), as well as a microform copy of her doctoral thesis, 'Dangerous Girls and Gentle Ladies: Archaeology and Nineteenth-Century Australian Female Convicts'. Also held is the Department of Environment and Land Management's *Ross Female Convict Station Historic Site: Conservation Plan* (1998).

Conservation plans for such sites are very useful sources of information, invariably based on substantial, thorough and wide-ranging professional research replete with images and detailed diagrams.

The Library also has a report on the Cascades Female Factory conservation plan (1992, Du Cros and Associates) and a report on the Cascades Female Factory historic site (Lindy Scripps and Audrey Hudspeth, 1993). The *North Parramatta Government Sites Conservation Management Plan* (2000), also in the Library, considers the female factory as one of three local nineteenth-century institutional complexes, the other two being the Catholic Orphan School and the Asylum.

Among a vast array of fiction and non-fiction works and studies of convict women in Australia to be found in the National Library—including such titles as Anne Summers's *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1994, 2002) and Sian Rees's *The Floating Brothel* (2001, 2005)—Thomas Keneally's *Bettany's Book* (2000) more directly draws on the female factory experience, through the convict character Sarah Bernard.

Among the Library's special collections are three artworks depicting the female factories. Charles Harry Roberts's pencil sketch, *The Female Factory at Parramatta, a Station Fifteen Miles from Sydney* is possibly the earliest image of that establishment, drawn around 1823. A watercolour by Augustus Earle, *Female Penitentiary or Factory, Parramatta*, was painted around 1826. John Skinner Prout's tinted lithograph, *The Female Factory from Proctor's Quarry*, shows the Hobart factory in 1844. Each is now digitised and viewable online via the Library's catalogue.

The female factory system entered its final decline with the cessation of convict transportation to New South Wales in 1840, and to Van Diemen's Land in 1853. (Convicts continued to be sent to Western Australia from 1850 to 1868, but these were men only.) Following the end of transportation to New South Wales, the Parramatta female factory was reassigned in 1847 as the Convict Lunatic and Invalid Asylum. Today, the remaining buildings form part of the Cumberland Hospital.

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