Shipwrecked in New South Wales

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BOOK REVIEW by Felicity Allen


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Beginning your convict career with a shipwreck suggests a quirky relationship with Lady Luck, but this is what happened to the 250 male convicts aboard *The Hive* when she ran aground near Jervis Bay NSW, in 1835. The wreck, with its terror, loss of property and loss of life owed nothing to wild weather and everything to the poor navigation skills of the aptly named Captain Nutting. Babette Smith was inspired to trace the fates of the survivors by attending a lecture on the rediscovery of the wreck in the 1990s. She has used a familiar methodology in Australian history: the systematic account of the subsequent careers of all members of a particular transport ship. Regular readers will recall the article on an earlier ship, *The Regalia*, as another example.

The structure may be familiar, but the approach to the material is not. Babette Smith takes issue with the received wisdom that Irish convicts were largely rural innocents, driven by starvation to petty theft and then transported as a prejudiced over-reaction on the part of the English
authority. She points to the considerable violence ingrained in Irish society of the time. She comments that ‘closer scrutiny of the Irish convicts brings violence confrontingly to the foreground.’ While some of the violent deeds in Ireland understandably sprang from an underground culture of dissent and resistance to British rule, traditional feuds between neighbours spawned many brutal acts. A great deal more than simple fistfights in the pub were involved as the account of 37-year-old Maurice Leehy shows. He was transported for his part in a riot at Milltown Fair which ended with at least 16 dead and many more wounded.

Riots, typically between feuding neighbours, were not at all uncommon at the fairs where livestock were sold. Any combatant in these internecine struggles who lost his (or her) footing in the melee could expect a merciless battering from hurley sticks or a pounding with heavy stones. Convicted of manslaughter, Maurice Leehy was transported for life. Agrarian secret societies such as the Ribbon Men (http://www.lurganancestry.com/ribbonmen.htm) and the Whiteboys (http://www.infoplease.com%20› ... › Modern Europe › British and Irish History) contributed their share of violent acts and transported convicts and Smith gives a clear-eyed account of the savagery of some of the responses, admittedly to oppression.

Most confronting of all to modern readers is the relatively high prevalence of sexual violence in the annals of Irish crime as compared with Scotland and English records. These incidents often involved a gang of up to 15 men abducting and raping a woman. Some women told the courts that they had refused to marry one of the gang – which may have led to a ‘punishment rape’, but others said they had never seen any of their attackers before. Women in possession of good dowries, especially those involving land were particularly at risk. There might also be political elements here, with rape used as a form of revenge on members of a different ethnic/religious group. While Smith admits that there were ancient Gaelic customs permitting collusive or romantic abductions, she makes it very clear that by the 19th century, romanticising these events would be a serious mistake.

As well as violent criminals, there was the usual collection of sheep thieves, pickpockets and embezzlers, so how did they fare in the new society of Australia? Was it the violent hell on earth as intended by the authorities (and sometimes depicted) or was it relatively benign? Smith makes out a good case for relatively benign.

Starting at the time of the wreck, convicts worked with the marines and officials to prevent loss of
life. One of the convicts, Patrick Maloney (theft of a hat), had been a seaman and was able to convince the panicking passengers, convicts and crew to calm down because they were in no immediate danger. The people were then disembarked in an orderly fashion to the shore and ultimately rescued. In the main society of the Australian colonies, the large numbers of convicts and ex-convicts relative to guards and settlers created strong pressures to bend rules, allow indulgences and treat prisoners reasonably well – by and large. By the time The Hive prisoners finally reached Sydney, there was already a tradition of prisoners having time off to work for themselves. Others used the free time to do their laundry, to visit friends or write letters home. Attempts to control this practice and to standardise the working day met with considerable, and effective, resistance in the form of reduced productivity on the employers’ projects. Clearly collective action and the ‘go-slow’ have very deep roots in Australian life.

Masters who worked with, rather than against, their convict workforce appear to have been quite common and very successful in persuading their workforce to put in a good day’s work. Smith quotes the example of pastoralist Alexander Berry who was proud of creating a stable and productive workforce from his ‘government men’. He testified to an enquiry:

Some of these Government men are still in my service till the present day and some are my tenants.

The practice of ticket-of-leave men leasing land from their former masters has been very little mentioned in earlier accounts of convict days, but it does suggest relatively positive relationships.

Smith writes very well about the ‘dailiness’ of life especially in remote, rural settlements and how well-intentioned gestures could go astray and apparently small things could cause considerable grievance. Of course, religion was at the forefront of these potentially irritating customs. In those days, all right thinking fathers of families led their families, including servants, in prayer on Sundays. This practice was well meant and an attempt to improve the hearers’ chances at salvation. It could strike problems when some members of the audience had different religious opinions and in the case of the convicts, many were simply bored by religious discussions which they either did not understand or thought were irrelevant. While Catholic prisoners in some areas successfully resisted attending Protestant divine service by appealing to priests and magistrates, other prisoners took a more individual approach. A Yorkshire errand boy distressed his master intensely by simply going to sleep whenever the service began. Solicitor George Allen, a devout Methodist, wrote about his reactions to this quiet resistance in his diary:

it is really awful to see such depravity in a mere child. If he could not help it, it would be different, but to see the lad compose himself to sleep as soon as the sermon or prayers be commenced is really awful.

Rations – their quality and quantity – were another area where conflict often arose. Convicts were extremely fond of sugar, tea and tobacco and depriving them of these was often a far more effective punishment than a flogging. Of course, depriving them entirely or giving them short rations of food might lead to a ‘walk-off’ as the men demanded that they be treated fairly and given what they were entitled to.

While arguing that flogging was relatively uncommon and not particularly directed against Irish
prisoners, Smith gives a very clear eyed account of the realities of the brutal punishments which could occur. Martin Ryan (theft of sugar) was one of the 5% of The Hive men who were sent to Norfolk Island. Although intended as a place of secondary punishment for ‘the worst of the worst’, many of the men there were like Ryan – property thieves who had fallen out with their masters. He had been flogged repeatedly at short intervals before being secondarily transported and Smith leaves no doubt about the sadism of this.

In a strong concluding chapter that links the heritage of convict days to modern Australian labour relations, Smith talks about the continued strong emphasis on egalitarianism and consultative leaderships and convincingly traces them back to the peculiar workforce that built the infant colony. She also queries how it was the present day belief in widespread and intense sectarianism came about – an interesting thesis. This book would be particularly helpful to people interested in genealogy and family history. Throughout the text, Smith acknowledges the help that she has received from family historians.

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