

# Introduction to the Archaeology of Confinement in Australia

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The Editor of a recent issue of the Australia ICOMOS journal *Historic Environment*, dedicated to an examination of places of confinement and incarceration, observed that:

Confinement...is part of Australia's traditional psyche. Ever since Governor Phillip sailed into Port Jackson with the transports of the First Fleet, the convict 'stain' has been with this nation. (Nelsen 1999: 3)

This prominent 'stain' on Australian history may appear an unlikely focus for national identity, especially in the eyes of those who, like ourselves, are not Australian-born. Nevertheless it has undeniably played a central role in Australian post-colonial culture. In 1874 Marcus Clarke published his immensely popular work *For the Term of His Natural Life*, a fictional account of the convict period. In the preface Clarke wrote that his purpose in producing the work was to record the events of the recent past, events that he described as the result of institutional 'blunders' (Clarke 1935 [1874]: iv). Two years later, the theatrical author and actress Eliza Winstanley consciously followed Clarke's theme in her serial paperback novel *For Her Natural Life: A Tale of the 1830s* (Winstanley 1992 [1876]). Both of these popular melodramatic works were explicitly intended to engender wide Anglo-Australian sympathy for the ancestral felons who had suffered from the flawed British legal system and the brutalities of colonial convict management.

More recently, Robert Hughes (1987) has revisited convict-era confinement in his well-known dramatised history *The Fatal Shore*, in which the 'painful transition' of Australia from penal colony to open society is a dominant theme. The

commercial success of *The Fatal Shore* is testimony to the affinity that the Australian public holds for colonial transportation, convicts and penal institutions. Other recent works directed to a wide audience, including Alan Frost's *Botany Bay Mirages* (1994), Ian Duffield and James Bradley's *Representing Convicts* (1997), Joy Damousi's *Depraved and Disorderly* (1997), Kay Daniels' *Convict Women* (1998) and Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart's volume *Chain Letters* (2001), testify to the continuing public appeal of the topic. Academic research has also witnessed a parallel move to convict-era studies. Early major works within this genre, L. L. Robson's *The Convict Settlers of Australia* (1965) and A. G. L. Shaw's *Convicts and the Colonies* (1966), marked a fundamental sea-change from an attitude prevailing among an earlier generation of scholars that the convict era was not a desirable area for in-depth research (e.g. O'Brien 1970 [1937]). This new focus has generated a broad and interdisciplinary array of academic studies and engendered sometimes robust debate (see for example responses to Nicholas' 1988 volume *Convict Workers*).

The study of the convict era has spread beyond archival research to the places associated with convictism. Interest in these places can be traced to the 1930s, a time when awareness of the cultural significance of sites of confinement began to increase. In that decade Port Arthur was placed under the jurisdiction of the Tasmanian Government, thereby formally acknowledging its place in Tasmanian and Australian history (Casella 1997; Young 1996). The 1960s witnessed the birth of historical archaeology in Australia, a development due in part

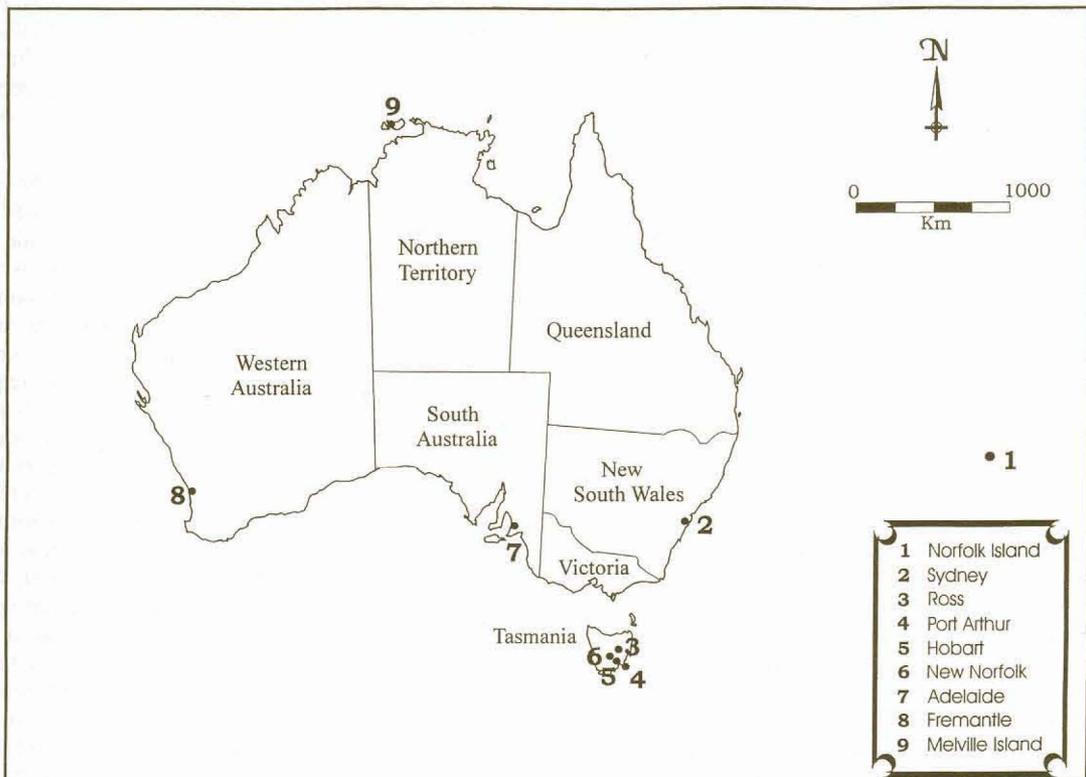


Figure 1

to a growing perception that something needed to be done to investigate and conserve the rapidly disappearing remains of the colonial past (Murray & Allen 1986: 86–87). Changing perceptions provided the catalyst for concrete protection measures. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s most States passed legislation to conserve places of historical importance (examples include the *South Australia Aboriginal and Historic Relics Act 1965*, the *Victoria Historic Buildings Act 1974*, and the *NSW Heritage Act 1977*). State and Territory measures were supplemented by Federal legislation, which followed the creation of the Australian Heritage Commission in 1975. Legislation in turn spurred the creation of a resource-management industry that provided the impetus for further study of places of confinement. Outcomes have appeared in the form of numerous management plans and published works. These include James Semple Kerr's landmark volumes on convict sites and other places of incarceration (Kerr 1984, 1988) and Michael Pearson and Duncan Marshall's stocktake of convict places to facilitate heritage-significance assessment (Pearson & Marshall 1995). Convict heritage now not only includes the sites of convict incarceration but also places such as First Government House and the Great Northern Road, that are now perceived and interpreted as material representations of convict labour. As non-institutional sites of unfree labour, these places have come to represent landscapes of confinement as much as embodiments of early colonial governance.

Although convictism still dominates the popular theme of confinement in Australia, incarceration in all its social and material aspects has attained an important position in historical studies. For examination of the physical places of confinement, analysis can be traced back to Kerr (1988), whose review encompassed gaols, labour prisons and quarantine stations as well as sites of convict incarceration. This dual emphasis has continued in more recent observations, such as John Pearn and Peggy Carter's edited volume *Islands of Incarceration* (1995), which focuses on quarantine and convict stations. Confinement studies have also expanded to include not only the numerous manifestations of places of institutional incarceration—gaols, labour factories, prison farms, leprosariums, hospitals, asylums, internment camps—but also places in which government control was less all-encompassing. Of special significance here are those places on the advancing 'frontier' of colonial society, that nebulous region where indigenous Australians were first confronted with the imposition of alien governance. Frequently this interaction was marked by confinement of Aboriginal people, as punishment for perceived offences or as a means of cultural assimilation. Places of confinement in this context range from ad hoc rural lockups, such as the 'Boab Prison Tree' seven kilometres south of the town of Derby in Western Australia, to the numerous mission stations established throughout Australia. These heritage sites stand as testimony to the imposition of white law and beliefs and the accompanying social adjustments and physical dislocation that many Aboriginal communities were required to cope with.

This special issue of *Australasian Historical Archaeology* addresses some of these strands of confinement in the Australian context. As might be expected from the foregoing discussion, convict confinement figures prominently. Seven of the nine papers in this volume address themes connected with the system that transported exiled convicts to the Australian colonies. Two relate to the most renowned penal station of them all, Port Arthur (Figure 1). Jackman, Egloff and Morrison examine convict life in this station, within the frame of site interpretation and heritage management. Attention is focused on the histories of specific structures, namely the chapel and schoolhouse in the boys' prison at Point Puer and a cottage briefly occupied by the Irish nationalist William

Smith O'Brien. Still in Tasmania, the study of convict artefacts from the Ross Female Factory site (Figure 1) is the focus of Casella's paper. Discussion is made of the likely functions of these artefacts in the social context of a women's prison in the period between 1848 and 1855. Starr also focuses on artefacts in her contribution on items recovered from the convict hospital privy on Norfolk Island (Figure 1). The author discusses the light these shed on health and disease in the station, and interprets their function in the context of discipline, control and resistance. Control and resistance are also major themes in Fredericksen's paper on convict labour at Fort Dundas, Melville Island (Figure 1). This details the excavation of the site of the settlement's commissariat store and examines what the uncovered evidence adds to the archival picture of convict work in an isolated outpost in decline. In his contribution Gibbs discusses the material evidence of the convict system in Fremantle and other regions of Western Australia (Figure 1). Significant differences are highlighted between the physical expressions of the system there and in the eastern part of the continent. An interesting contrast to this study is Gojak's overview of the evidence of convictism in Sydney and New South Wales more generally (Figure 1). In this paper particular emphasis is placed on the role that public archaeology and heritage management have played in the conservation and interpretation of convict-era sites, and discussion is made of areas that could profit from further investigation.

The two remaining papers of this issue examine confinement from slightly different perspectives. One is the confinement of the mentally ill in formalised institutions, the other the confinement of army personnel convicted of breaches of military discipline. Piddock addresses the first in her examination of nineteenth-century 'lunatic asylums' in Adelaide and New Norfolk, Tasmania (Figure 1). The architecture and physical layout of selected asylums in these two colonies are discussed in the context of a deliberate policy that saw an attempt to create a 'moral environment' for the cure of the clinically insane. Morrison's paper addresses imprisonment in the Anglesea Barracks, Hobart, Tasmania, which functioned as a military gaol from 1849 to 1870 (Figure 1). Discussion is made of the architecture of the building in the context of 1840s penological thinking, and a conclusion drawn that the health and general mental and physical well-being of military prisoners were better catered for than was the case for inmates of contemporary civilian prisons.

Most of the papers in this special issue were presented in a session on the Archaeology and Landscapes of Confinement at the ASHA–AIMA joint conference in Adelaide in 2000. We thank all who participated in that session, as well as the conference organisers who agreed to make room for it. We further extend our thanks to the Australian and overseas reviewers who provided critical appraisal and editorial guidance for this thematic volume. Some explanation is required of the cover of this issue. The photograph of Fremantle prison, Western Australia (Figure 1) was chosen for its sombre majesty that architecturally captures the mood of the two central tenets of confinement: incarceration and control. Black has been selected for the cover for two reasons. It symbolises the despair induced by restriction of movement and action that comes with forced confinement. We make the additional point that black is present-day currency for the tragedy of Aboriginal confinement and deaths in custody and that this situation is an outcome of a system that has deep historical roots in colonial forms of government-sanctioned incarceration, regimentation and domination. In conclusion, given the historically important role played by the theme of confinement in contemporary Australian culture, we think it fitting that these papers appear in 2001, the centenary of Australian federation.

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