

Cleansing the Colony: Transporting Convicts from New Zealand to Van Diemen's Land. By Kristyn Harman. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2017. 247pp. NZ price: \$35.00. ISBN: 9781988531069.

THE SUBJECTS OF TRANSPORTATION, convict labour, the administration of imperial justice and related topics are attracting a growing level of academic scrutiny, reflecting changing attitudes, the availability of online archives, new documentary discoveries and the world-wide growth in interest in genealogical research. This fine new book was long-listed in the Royal Society Te Apārangi Award for General Non-Fiction in the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards for 2018 and is the second on the subject of convict transportation by Kristyn Harman, a New Zealand-born senior lecturer in History at the University of Tasmania.

Like most people educated in New Zealand, I grew up being taught that the transportation of convicts was something that Britain did to its criminal class, with judges condemning those who came before them to penal servitude for life in Van Diemen's Land, Norfolk Island or the hinterlands of Botany Bay in New South Wales. New Zealand, according to the Social Studies teachers, was free of the 'convict taint' and received a better class of settler. Harman notes that she also believed this until completing research at Archives New Zealand's Wellington office where she discovered the 'Register of indents for convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land 25 Nov 1847–22 Feb 1853' which completely overturned the standard narrative. The idea for a New Zealand-focused companion to her *Aboriginal Convicts: Australian, Khosian, and Māori exiles* (NewSouth Books, Sydney, 2012) was born.

The attitude of many New Zealand writers is expressed in John Logan Campbell's *Poenamo*,¹ where he titled the chapter discussing leaving Australia 'I Forswear the Great Convict Land'. Here he noted his determination 'to try my fortunes in the new land ... a land where the taint of convictism was unknown, a land which the Imperial Government guaranteed should remain and be held intact from it, and to that land I determined to go.' But as *Cleansing the Colony* reveals, convicts and transportation were not just things that happened in Logan Campbell's 'Great Convict Land'. New Zealand fully participated in the transportation of convicts from these shores.

It is hardly surprising that many of New Zealand's early settlers fell afoul of the law. As Matthew Wright pointed out in *Convicts: New Zealand's Hidden Criminal Past* (2012), a number of new settlers were ticket-of-leave men, escaped convicts hiding from penal authorities and former soldiers, and it is hardly surprising that some resorted (or re-resorted) to criminal behaviour in their new home. *Cleansing the Colony* features a series of detailed biographies and deft explanations of the inner workings of the convict system. It shows how a range of gentlemen, ex-convicts, Māori, soldiers and one woman appeared before a New Zealand judiciary determined to not only keep the country free from the convict taint, but to remove those whose criminal influence might spread.

In *Cleansing the Colony* we encounter 110 convicts sent from New Zealand through their Australian penal settlement administration files and in their post-transportation lives – if they survived the brutality of the convict life. One story centres on William Phelps Pickering, who arrived as an ordinary migrant to Hobart in 1837 to become a businessman, at a time when there was unlikely to be sufficient business or population to sustain his enterprise. After imprisonment for debt and travelling to seek wider opportunities, he washed up in Auckland in 1841. When honest work proved

elusive, he attempted fraud by passing himself off as an agent for the Sydney Banking Corporation. A suspicious client saw through his act and he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to be transported for his crime. The 12 other convicts who eventually shared his journey to Hobart were guilty of a range of offences, from burglary, to theft of money from an employer. His story is unusual, in that Pickering survived to return to New Zealand, re-establishing himself as a businessman of some standing.

Wry humour prevails throughout the book. The first conviction is achieved 'after a necessary legal nicety and a few shenanigans' (p.12), while 'makeshift courthouses and flimsy gaols did little to increase respect for the rule of law' (p.35); in terms of the judicial process, 'there was to be no mercy for any of them for, in the eyes of the chief justice, they had no redeeming features' (p.51). The reader meets criminal drifters hiding their past beneath layers of pseudonyms and lies, but also encounters judges, administrators, politicians and the society of hardscrabble Wellington and convict settlement Van Diemen's Land on each page.

Harman's dissection of the probation system, which replaced the convict's assignment to employers and required prisoners to work through a progression of three stages until they were eligible for a 'ticket of leave', is usefully detailed. I also found the examination of the landscape and geography of convict settlement and administration illuminating. Some of these aspects were filtered through the lens of Governor La Trobe's reports on the facilities and buildings for each station. There is little examination of the brutal treatment of convicts, the casual brutality which was their daily lives, or the arbitrary punishments meted out in the name of redeeming or reforming the convict. But I found this useful, since instead it is people who are the focus for Harman's writing.

The description of the Māori convicts makes the most moving study in the book. Te Kumete and four other 'armed rebels' convicted under Governor George Grey's martial law imposition in Wellington, were banished to Van Diemen's Land for life. The discussion of how the Vandemonian settlers were appalled at the treatment of Māori is useful, if bemusing. Harman's description of Te Umuroa's disinterment from his burial place in the small colonial cemetery near Darlington, Maria Island, his eventual – and much belated – tangi, and the discussion of the return of the tokotoko with which he is associated, is a poignant but uplifting ending to this sorry chapter of New Zealand's history.

We need to change our national narrative around New Zealand's role in the convict transportation system. With *Cleansing the Colony*, we have an excellent history to do just that.

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NOTE

1. John Logan Campbell, *Poenamo*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1881.