BOOK LAUNCH OF VAN DIEMENS WOMEN:
A HISTORY OF TRANSPORTATION TO TASMANIA
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE
KATE WARNER AM, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
CASCADES FEMALE FACTORY SOUTH HOBART
SATURDAY 5th DECEMBER 2015

It is a great pleasure to be invited to launch *Van Diemen’s Women: A History of Transportation to Tasmania*, written by Joan Kavanagh and Dianne Snowden and published by The History Press, the UK’s largest local and specialist history publisher.¹

At the outset let me say how fitting it is that a work that belongs to two islands so far apart has been co-authored by a Tasmanian and an Irishwoman. Some of you will know that this is the book’s second launch, the first having taken place on Wednesday 11ᵗʰ November at the Wicklow Historic Gaol. It was launched there by the Australian Ambassador to Ireland Dr Ruth Adler.² So the book itself has undergone a metaphorical journey.

As many of you will know, in addition to being a well-published historian Dianne Snowden has held influential positions with the Tasmanian Heritage Council, the National Trust of Australia, the National Archives of Australia Advisory Council and of course the Female Factory Historic Site. So it may be fair to say that much of her professional experience has coalesced in this book.

And her co-author Joan Kavanagh is an historian from Wicklow, Ireland. She is the former Manager of the Wicklow Family History Centre and she was involved in the research for the restoration project of Wicklow Gaol.

This meticulously researched book tells the story of the transportation of women convicts to Tasmania by describing the experiences of the 135 female convicts and their 35 children who

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were transported on the convict ship *Tasmania* (2) from Ireland to Van Diemen’s Land in 1845. In doing so it focuses on a number of those women in more detail and two in particular, Eliza Davis, who was transported for life for infanticide and Margaret Butler who has convicted of stealing potatoes and sentenced to transportation for 7 years.

As the story of these two women gradually emerges from the details of court appearances, sea voyage (the floating dungeon), confinement on the hulk, the Anson, in the Derwent during the first phase of probation and then in the second phase, the probation pass holder phase, to detention in the female hiring depots – mainly at Brickfields at the top end of Argyle Street – where they were held whilst waiting to be hired into service. A ticket of leave was granted after successful completion of the probation pass-holder phase. Of course progression through the system did not always run smoothly – and if the women misbehaved, committed offences or became pregnant they were sent to one of the three female factories at Cascades, Launceston or Ross. It’s particularly appropriate that this book launch is here at the Cascades Female Factory as 82 of the women from the *Tasmania* were incarcerated at the Cascades Female Factory at some stage for such things as being absent without leave, being found in bed with a man, or for punishment after giving birth.

Neither Eliza Davis nor Margaret Butler appear to have been admitted to the Cascades Female Factory but it is clear why their contrasting stories have been selected by the authors for more detailed treatment.

Eliza Davis exemplifies the successful side of transportation as a measure of penal reformation. She was a convict who successfully made the transition from convicted criminal to respectable free settler. She was a foundling, and at the age of 19 was convicted of the murder of her infant son about a fortnight after his birth. The death sentence was commuted to transportation for life and she joined the *Tasmania* with the other female convicts bound for Van Diemen’s Land. Eliza married twice, each time to a fellow convict and died at the age of 78 at Burnie. Her first marriage to Joseph Roebuck was
difficult after he became mentally ill and Eliza was forced to support him and their three children. After he was committed to the mental asylum at New Norfolk, Eliza formed a relationship with Amos Eastwood with whom she had six children and lived a respectable life as a midwife. She married Amos just a week before her death and 40 years after the birth of their first child. Her children were highly respected members of the community and at least one of her grandsons left a considerable estate.3

In contrast, Margaret Butler’s story is one of poverty, transportation and tragedy. She became one of first documented cases on this island of a domestic homicide. Her story and that of her great granddaughter reminds us that domestic violence is not a new problem. Margaret was a widow with six children to support when she was sentenced to transportation for potato stealing. Two of her children, William and Mary Ann, were allowed to accompany her to Van Diemen’s Land. She was granted her certificate of freedom in 1852 when her period of transportation expired with no convictions recorded against her in the colony. Margaret had married John Shakleton in 1850 in St Joseph’s Church Hobart. Five years later he bashed, punched and kicked her in their house in Landsdowne Crescent, causing such severe injuries that she died in hospital five days later. Shakleton was a large man for his day – 5ft 9in tall and ‘stout made’. Margaret on the other hand was barely 5 feet. Witnesses at the inquest gave evidence of a violent relationship, frequent quarrelling and of Shakleton striking Margaret on earlier occasions and threatening to kill her. Shakleton was charged with murder but convicted of manslaughter and sent to Port Arthur. Daughter Mary Ann, then 11, gave evidence at the inquest. After her mother’s death she was returned to the Female Orphan School where she stayed for 4 years. She later had a large family and against so many odds appears to have had a reasonable life. However, one of her grand-daughters, Maggie, a child of 13, shot her father to protect her mother from him. She was convicted of manslaughter and I

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wondered why she was not able to argue defence of another and obtained a complete acquittal.

The story revealed of the lives of convict women is then one of many mixed experiences. There were successes and, even among the successes, tragedies. For some, transportation gave a chance of a new life.

I would like to congratulate the authors for giving us such a fascinating insight into this, the last phase of transportation. It makes an interesting contrast to the picture that emerges from the two earlier phases of female transportation: exile or open prison (1803-13) and the assignment system (1814 – 1842). The last phase was clearly a much more organized and stricter system of discipline. The regime on the *Tasmania*, for example, contrasts strikingly with that on earlier ships. We are told that neither the Master of the vessel, William Black, nor the Surgeon Superintendent ‘winked at any fraternisation between the convicted and the crew’ and they would have been penalised if any such contact occurred.

In contrast, on the voyages that brought our first two Lieutenant-Governors Bowen and Collins to Van Diemen’s land there was rather lot of winking. Alison Alexander’s book, *Obliged to Submit: Wives and mistresses of colonial governors*, relates how in 1802 the *HMS Glatton* took a load of female convicts from England to Sydney which included a convict Mary Hayes and her pretty 16 year-old daughter Martha. Also on board was Lieutenant John Bowen, aged 22. It seems that Martha became his mistress on the journey. And not just his mistress on the journey. He lived with her quite openly in Van Diemen’s Land and their two daughters were each known as Miss Bowen. Lt Governor Collins had a succession of three mistresses as well as a wife in England and his last mistress, Margaret Eddington, the daughter of convicts, was just 15 when she went to live with the 52 year-old Collins at Government House. His second mistress, Hannah Power, he met on the *HMS Calcutta*, and took her to his cabin despite the fact that she was married and accompanying her husband who was on board having been sentenced to transportation for forgery.
This of course was the first phase of female transportation, described in *Van Diemen’s Women*, as the exile or open prison phase. It contrasts sharply with the third phase, which is so well illustrated by the story of the women transported on the ship *Tasmania*.

Thank you Joan Kavanagh and Dianne Snowden for this excellent book. I now declare it launched in the southern hemisphere.