

**REPRESSION, REFORM & RESILIENCE: A HISTORY
OF THE CASCADES FEMALE FACTORY
BOOK LAUNCH SPEECH BY
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GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
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Good morning.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land – to pay respect to those that have passed before us and to acknowledge today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community who are the custodians of this land.

Thank you for inviting me to launch *Repression, Reform & Resilience: a History of the Cascades Female Factory*, the new title from Convict Women's Press, edited by Alison Alexander.

The story of the Cascades Female Factory, whilst tragic and depressing, is also uplifting – because so many of those individual convict women refused to be broken by a cruel system; and because they were literally the birth mothers of who we are today.

Thus their legacy is huge. And there is no more fitting tribute to it than the fact that in 2010 the Cascades Female Factory, along with ten other Australian convict sites, was given World Heritage status. As Alison Alexander writes: "By the work of hundreds of people, the Factory had been turned from a crumbling and neglected ruin into a historical site of the highest importance."ⁱ

Those are virtually the last words in this book, *Repression, Reform & Resilience: a History of the Cascades Female Factory*, and so in that sense I am beginning my launch at the end. But it seems fitting to me. And I say this because I think it is very important to acknowledge up front those hundreds of people who since the early 1970s worked tirelessly to restore the legacy of those convict women by reclaiming their legacy, for them and for us.

It was a long, hard slog, not least because of plenty of official indifference and associated lack of funding sources. And I do wonder if that indifference was at least to some extent gender-driven. After all, the Port Arthur penal settlement wasn't exactly neglected, once its place in Australian history was recognised.

Still, I don't wish to sound grumpy about it! Indeed, there is a mischievous spirit running through the book, nowhere better shown than in a 2004 photograph of restoration work being undertaken by a group of women in convict attire. That was the 2004 Muster day, encouraging people to visit the site and find out something about their ancestors.ⁱⁱ

The story of the restoration is fascinating, not least because it dates back over forty years – from the earliest days with the work of the Women's Electoral Lobby,ⁱⁱⁱ via Tony Rayner's pioneering short history that he was commissioned to write,^{iv} and the 1983 establishment of the Friends of the Female Factory, which as the books states eventually 'morphed' into the Women's History Group.^v

And other initiatives kept the project going as well – the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site group (despite its Board apparently being occasionally 'technically' bankrupt!^{vi}); Christina Henri's mammoth international bonnets project symbolising the 25,000 convict women transported to Australia; Lucy Frost's Female Convicts Research Centre; and its publishing entity, Convict Women's Press, run by Nicola Goc.

Which brings us back to the book.

Most of the chapters are written by Alison. Those that are not are identified as such.

There are also many short direct accounts of individual convict women. Seventy were chosen, from hundreds submitted. I expect that many were eminently publishable, but space restrictions clearly played a part in the decision-making there.

Let me read just one to you. It is enigmatic, but for that reason alone it seems to me to symbolise much about what it must have been like to have been a convicted female in remote, harsh Van Diemen's Land, with not much sympathy to be found for your plight. (As an aside, I was mortified to read how cold Lady Jane Franklin was towards the women.) Anyway, listen to this:

"Catherine O'Brien, who assaulted Mary Newell, was a wild young woman from the streets of Glasgow. Transported for theft age seventeen, she had already served two prison sentences and spent two years as a prostitute. The surgeon described her as 'bad'. She committed her first offence in the colony in the

month she arrived, December 1836: going to the men's hut and getting drunk. Twenty-one more offences followed, mostly being absent without leave or drunk, and Catherine spent years at the wash tubs at the Cascades Female Factory. Her 'indecent assault' on Mary Newell was her last crime, as after that her sentence expired. No more is known of Catherine's life."^{vii}

Enigmatic and sad, given how young and obviously troubled she was. I had said earlier how the convict women were in a literal sense the birth mothers of many of us, and you will read lots of individual accounts of convict women going on to raise large and successful families. The same can't be said for young Catherine O'Brien – we can only speculate. What did happen to her?

Her story and the others selected in the book, together with the chronological narrative structured in 15 chapters, ensure that this is a comprehensive historical account that is also personal – an achievement that is easier said than done. The research is also very thorough. And there isn't a dull page.

For me, the length of the book is well suited to its purpose, as is the illustrative material.

Congratulations therefore to Alison for yet another fine publication of Tasmanian history. And to Nicola as the publisher and to all the members of the Convict Women's Press Committee of Management. Your list of publications about convict women in colonial Australia is already notable, and this book adds magnificently to your titles.

May I also single out Gill Ward for her excellent design work, which gives a distinct liveliness to this book. It is a joy to read.

I had said at the top of this speech that I had begun at the end, as it were. So it seems appropriate that I now end at the beginning. The original Murray Street Factory was so horrible – a reality simply confirmed by an 1826 inquiry^{viii} – that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur eventually secured funds to purchase the Cascade Grove distillery alongside the Hobart Rivulet, to construct a new female prison. Yet, as if the authorities had learned nothing – or, more likely, they didn't care – the new Cascades Female Factory was, and I quote:

" ... Crowded ... The authorities had no control over [the women]; sometimes they could hear them singing and dancing. The conditions in the dormitories, with poor ventilation, no windows (to stop escapes) and the stench from the

chamber pots, must have been appalling ... the Cascades site was damp, dark, standing in an unhealthy marsh ... far from town ... insecure ... All the building was fit for was a madhouse. How true, [as] time would show.”^{ix}

So: a grim past, which we must never forget.

And it is through your work over so many years, and now with the publication of *Repression, Reform & Resilience: a History of the Cascades Female Factory*, that you continue to afford those women the mark of decency and humanity that was kept from so many of them.

Congratulations again, and I am very happy to declare this new Convict Women’s Press title launched.

Thank you.

ⁱ Page 244 paragraph 3.

ⁱⁱ Pages 238 (image) and 239.

ⁱⁱⁱ Page 218 paragraph 3.

^{iv} Page 222 paragraph 1.

^v Page 224 paragraph 1.

^{vi} Page 228 paragraph 1.

^{vii} Page 92.

^{viii} Page 29 paragraph 2.

^{ix} Pages 32 and 33.