

**WHITE RAG BURNING: IRISH WOMEN
COMMITTING ARSON TO BE TRANSPORTED
LAUNCH SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
CARNEGIE GALLERY, MARITIME MUSEUM OF TASMANIA
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Good evening and thank you to Dianne Snowden and Forty South Publishing for inviting me to launch *White Rag Burning: Irish Women Committing Arson to be Transported*.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the Mouheneener people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

As we know, Dianne has for many years been a notable historian and heritage researcher in Tasmania, and this was recognised with her Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2017 for significant service to the community as an historian and genealogical researcher, to higher education, and to heritage.

Dianne is the current President of the Female Convicts Research Centre, which since its inception in 2004 has brought great recognition to the importance of female convict transportation in the history of Van Diemen's Land and Tasmania. As Governor I have had much pleasure interacting with Dianne and her FCRCⁱ colleagues in paying tribute in numerous ways to those remarkable women whose suffering and endurance we are now able to more fully appreciate.

Dianne's previous publications as sole or contributing author are numerous and include:

Van Diemen's Women: A History of Transportation, which I had the pleasure of launching in December 2015.

Patchwork Prisoners: the Rajah Quilt and the Women Who Made it;

and regular contributions to *Tasmanian Ancestry*, the journal of the Tasmanian family History Society.

And a further measure of her research dexterity is evident in some of her other books too, including:

Meals, Wheels & Volunteers: Fifty years of Meals on Wheels in Hobart;

South Hobart Soccer Club 1910-2010; and

Foundations of a Tasmanian Industry: the History of the Master Builders' Association 1890-2005.

White Rag Burning is meticulously endnoted and indexed, and the "Select Bibliography" runs to eight pages, which tells us that the research quite clearly is first class and I was not surprised to read in the "Acknowledgements" that the book had in fact "began its life as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Tasmania".ⁱⁱ It therefore adds to the reliable body of knowledge of female transportation – and I say "reliable" not least because as Dianne herself points out, the records from those times are not always straightforward – with variant surname spellings for example – and hence the researcher needs to be very thorough, and then ultimately confident in going to print with an accurate telling of the story.

The engaging title, *White Rag Burning*, refers to the case of Jane Allen, one of the deliberate arsonists, who lit a white rag, a piece torn from her apron, which she then used to set fire to a bed at the Enniscorthy poorhouse. A witness at her trial, Margaret Doyle, said that 'she saw fire in [the prisoner's] hands, a white rag burning' and that Jane Allen had declared an intention to set the house on fire in order to be transported.ⁱⁱⁱ

So Jane Allen was one of the 79 women transported from Ireland to Van Diemen's Land for deliberately committing arson in order to be transported. In Jane's case it was an attempt rather than the completed crime because only the mattress cover was burnt. The complete crime of arson required that the building itself and not merely its contents catch alight and that the fabric of the building be at the least charred. So even though it was only an attempt and she was just 18 years-old she was transported for ten years. In 1849 attempted arson had become a felony rather than a misdemeanour and transportable.^{iv} Moreover, Jane had some eight prior convictions for various crimes. Her short life was a tragic one, she had been 'on the town' since the age of 15, and a year

after her arrival in Van Diemen's Land, she died in the Female Factory in Launceston after giving birth to a still-born child.

As the book explains, the spike in the number of female arsonists and deliberate arsonists transported from 1848 to 1853 coincides with the Irish Famine, which from December 1845 devastated potato crops and caused the death of one in eight people.^v

While acknowledging the difficulty of determining motive, Snowden challenges the view that arson for Irish female offenders was a protest crime as claimed by some historians but, she argues, it was a survival crime, a means of securing food and shelter or transportation, a remedy for poverty, starvation and distressed circumstances and, in some cases, a means of reuniting with transported family members, as is the case of Margaret Keogh, whose parents and seven of her siblings eventually arrived in Van Diemen's Land.^{vi} It was also a means of emigration, which was not an easy option for the poor.

What is revealed then is an account which emphasises the agency of these women, they were not merely passive victims of the famine but women actively seeking to better their lives.

Jane Allen's story suggests that her narrative fits within the second of four categories of convict women, namely the female entrepreneur, the convict whore, the happy family woman and the abandoned wife. But along with Kay Daniels, Snowden cautions against these rigid classifications on the grounds that by no means all women were destined to a single fate – their lives were characterised by change and complexity.^{vii}

The strength of Snowden's account of the female arsonists is that it reveals this change and complexity and does so by including the whole of the story, or a timeline, of this group of women starting with the social context of their offending, then trial and sentence, their criminal history in the colony and punishments for it; marriage – encouraged as an instrument to reform by the colonial authorities and as survival strategy by the women, the almost inevitable consequence of marriage, children and families; alternative survival strategies after conditional pardon when they were 'on their own hands', in other words, no longer supported by the State; and, in the penultimate chapter, details of their deaths.

There is so much of interest in this book. I was intrigued to read that 42% of the deliberate arsonists had no colonial offences recorded against them. Considering that most of their offences were work-related (absent from work, insubordination) and the degree of surveillance they were under this is rather low when one considers that today in Australia some 45% of released prisoners return to prison within two years.^{viii}

The marriage history of the female arsonists is also revealing. As I mentioned, marriage was encouraged by the authorities as it was seen as a reformatory tool for females convicts, and also for male convicts, although, as Snowden points out, little has been written about the latter.^{ix} She makes a strong case that marriage was a survival strategy and the best way to avoid poverty. Examples are given of widows with children who quickly remarried as they were particularly vulnerable economically.

The story of Alice Walker nee Julian is a good illustration of Snowden's assertion that is misleading to stereotype the deliberate arsonists and convict women in general as either a 'good' convict mother, who raised a stable family, or the 'bad' convict mother plagued by drunkenness and immorality.^x Alice has struggles and setbacks. During her sentence she was punished for refusing to work, being absent without leave and disobedience of orders. After marriage, her ticket of leave and giving birth to five children, she was convicted of uttering a counterfeit coin and sentenced to eight months' imprisonment which was served at the Cascade Prison (formerly the Female Factory) where one of her children died and another was born. After her release from this sentence, two more children were born, and she not only raised seven children and was the main breadwinner working as a nurse and then midwife and delivering many of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Clearly despite her convictions as a convict under sentence, she should be counted as a good convict mother who made a significant contribution to the community.

The final chapter contains an interesting discussion of the criteria of success and failure including Damousi's critique of the liberal notion of success measured in terms of the establishment of a middle-class nuclear family. Damousi argues the problem of this a criterion of success is that it blames the victim for failing to achieve such an ideal, rather than considering the wider forces which shaped the lives of these women.

It's difficult to disagree with Dianne Snowden's conclusion that the lives of the deliberate arsonists were characterised by change and complexity; that they

neither conformed to the image of the 'degenerate criminal professional' nor the passive famine victim nor the stereotype of the 'good' convict with an unblemished record who becomes a 'good mother'. These women exercised control over their lives by using a number of survival strategies including arson and many of them did survive to lead a less precarious life.

So it is with great pleasure that I launch, *White Rag Burning: Irish women committing arson to be transported*, published by Forty South Publishing.

Thank you.

ⁱ <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/about-us/about-us>, accessed 19 September 2019.

ⁱⁱ Line 1 page ix.

ⁱⁱⁱ Page xii.

^{iv} Page 54.

^v Page 2.

^{vi} Page 28.

^{vii} Page 10.

^{viii} Sentencing Advisory Council, Victoria, Released Prisoners Returning to Prison, <https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/statistics/sentencing-statistics/released-prisoners-returning-to-prison> accessed 27 September 2018.

^{ix} Page 72.

^x Pages 92-93.