

Background Sheet 7 (Stage 2 British Colonisation of Australia)

Convicts: An Alternative Look

The "innocent" convict?

The myth of the 'innocent' convict has existed from the early twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s a counter assertion was put forward by Manning Clark, Lloyd Robson and AGL Shaw, who suggested that the convicts who came to Australia were in fact professional criminals.

In recent research, S Nicholas and others have dispelled both the 'professional convict' and 'innocent convict' myths, claiming that the convicts were probably second rather than first time offenders who far from being professional criminals were workers who stole because their wages were so low.

The transportation of convicts to Australia formed part of a global system of forced migration that included other nations' convicts, bonded workers and slaves.

Skills and Literacy

Many convicts transported to Australia were already experienced migrants, having moved around Britain and Ireland prior to transportation.

The overall literacy level of convicts from England was significantly better than the general literacy level of the British 'working class'.

The proportions of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers amongst the convicts was approximately the same as amongst the British workforce.

Flogging

Flogging was a common form of punishment in both the British Army and Navy. Children working in mills and apprentices in Britain were commonly whipped. Convicts were flogged no more than servicemen and less frequently than slaves.

Convicts conditions in the colony

After the initial hungry years, convicts were well fed; the rations, although simple, contained a high nutrition level adequate for sustained physical work.

In the main, only healthy young convicts were selected to be sent to Australia. In general, the death rates on the voyage to Australia were low.

Economically, the convicts were an efficient and well-organised workforce who worked fewer hours than workers in Britain.

In general, Australia was a healthy country, and sick workers received better health care than workers in Britain.

Child morbidity was significantly lower being 1/8 that of industrial towns in Britain.

The improved fertility of women convicts was commented on by early contemporary writers.

Sources:

Nicholas, S (ed), *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Hawkins, R, *A Detailed Examination of a Work Gang: Convict Timbergetters of Pennant Hills*, Hornsby Shire Historical Society, 1994.