

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Jessica Walters, librarian with the State Library and Archive Services of Libraries Tasmania, to talk about the island's colonial convict women. So first, can you give us a bit of context around who these women were and how they ended up on what we now call Tasmania?

JW: The Tasmanian convict women were originally transported from all across the British Empire, mostly the British Isles. I haven't really come across many from outside of that. About 13,500 ended up in Tasmania. Some of them were re-transported from New South Wales for secondary offenses, because it was used as a place of secondary punishment as well. So people say that Van Diemen's Land had the worst of the worst, but that's only true in some cases that they ended up there. So they were sentenced to transportation for crimes of various sorts, but they usually involved theft. 80% of the convicts were transported for theft, but it was usually not their first offense. Many had other offenses before that, but they ended up with a sentence of transportation, which was increasingly being used after they started fading out death penalties for large larcenies and other offenses. So it was better than death, but...

AT: Okay, I'm sorry, we just have to point out that that should be Tasmania's new tourism slogan: Tasmania - better than death (laughter). I've been to Tasmania, it's lovely, no shade on Tasmania. Anyway, continue.

JW: They decided to colonize Australia, and this was how they were going to do it. They were going to send their convicts there as a workforce, and that's really what they were. They were usually from the lower classes, and a lot of them had been "on the town," which was the term which has been interpreted as being that they were prostitutes, or that they had at least engaged in some sort of sex work, but also that they were women who lived without family or without a household. They were going solo, or with a community of the same. Many had been transported for stealing from their clients, so they were usually sentenced for seven years, and that was the average sentence. Some for more, some for life, but because they were being transported so far away from their homeland, it was a one-way ticket, and they were probably not going to find a way to be transported back to Britain. Many of them abandoned their marriages, they agreed, they knew that they weren't going to return to them, and they said goodbye to their loved ones, and some of them left their children behind, and some of them did bring children with them. They were allowed to bring children almost as an extension of themselves into the prisons and then onto the ships. What happened to them, those families, when they arrived is another story, because they weren't usually allowed to keep those children with them when they arrived in Tasmania, because they were going to be punished, they were going to be used as a workforce, and children were not part of that. So they spent about six months on a ship, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on their passage, and usually very, very ill along the way. They arrived in Tasmania with their convict system-issued clothing, and usually were brought to a penal station or a settlement.

AT: Now I wanted to go back to something you'd said about the fact that some of them were also sex workers, which, the fact that we're talking about theft and women who were from lower classes, these do seem like "survival crimes," if you'd like, where these are people who are just trying to get by to feed themselves and the only options available to them may be outside the systems that are in place. But my understanding is that no women were ever transported for prostitution. They were transported for theft and may have also been sex workers, (JW: Yes, absolutely.) but it created this idea that all of these women were sex workers, with all of the attitudes, shall we say, that come along with that, especially when they're being transported to a colony that is overwhelmingly male.

JW: Yeah, that's right. They were absolutely engaging in sex work as a resort. So prostitution was not a crime, but the convict records will occasionally say that they were "on the town" for a set period of time, so that they had spent six months on the town or two years on the town. And that was only recorded as a way of judging

the women's character. So they would also have a jail report and a judgment of how "bad" or "good" these women were. Usually it's just one word to determine what level of character judgment we're placing on these women at that point in time. That would be used by their jailers to try to keep the bad ones from the good ones, in a way, or just to control them. So "on the town" was really just a matter of being sometimes just homeless and just living on the street. I don't think they had any way of knowing whether these women were engaging in sex work. So it was very vague term and it wasn't part of their crime. It was just what they may have been doing to survive on the streets.

AT: And so we've covered up until they got there. And one of the things that you're particularly interested in is the motherhood side, so women and their children. And as you've mentioned, even if they brought children with them, they were often almost immediately separated from those children. So what happened in those situations after they got there?

JW: So what seemed to be the case was that the women would be brought to a female house of corrections, also known as the female factory. And it was there that they were sort of separated into classes, and different things happened in different time periods. But usually the children would be taken off to either the nursery in the female factory if they were under the age of about two. And then from there on, they would be sent to the orphan school. And "orphan" - obviously, all these children had mothers who were brought on the ships with them. But they were considered orphans. And really the administration was trying to keep them away from the influence of their convict parents. So they would go into the orphan school and they would be given rudimentary education, sort of trade skills, if that. They were just kept separate. So one of the women I looked at arrived and she had a 18-month-old with her, who had sent to the nursery, and a 10-year-old. And I have not found what happened to the 10-year-old. They seem to have just, possibly been able to be absorbed into the community, to have found apprenticeship or work somehow. I don't know the gender of the 10-year-old either, or their name. So it was very hard to track them. So to some extent, the children who are a bit older could just live a life in the colony. But if they were still under the convict system, then they would be separated and institutionalized, much like their parents.

AT: And so when we're talking about the sentences, if a woman was sentenced to seven years and she comes with a 2-year-old, assuming that she doesn't have anything that extends her sentence, like a re-offense or anything like that, when her sentence is up and her child is 9, would she be reunited with that child or is that child just gone forever?

JW: They could get their children back into their care. They could take them out of the orphan school, but they did have to be basically given either a ticket of leave by the convict administration or their certificate of freedom, which was by default, give them to them at seven, the end of their sentence. But yeah, so they had this ticket of leave scheme, and that would give them certain rights back. Generally, women were more likely to be able to get their children back if they got married, and they had to seek permission to marry from the convict system as well. So, convicts were given the "indulgence" of being out loud to marry each other, male and female convicts, or a free settler would also have to apply to marry a convict woman, because that would be taking them out of the convict system. And a woman during the assignment period could also be assigned to work for her husband. So, essentially, he was in charge of her labor once they got married. So, it's all very transactional and power-driven. And so, women may have agreed to marriage based on that basis. It seems like they would have had to be very lucky to be in a situation where they were allowed to marry someone that they actually wanted to marry.

AT: One of the things I was talking to someone about recently was how we dehumanize people that we see as less than us or other than us. And the child separation aspect of that is really interesting, because of course,

that's also something that was done to the indigenous Australians as well, and in other countries with other indigenous populations. So, it is interesting this idea of, "you are less human, and therefore, I can just take your child away," and that was considered acceptable at a societal level.

JW: Yeah, definitely. It's quite horrifying. And some of the Palawa (*the island's indigenous people*) children did end up in the orphan school with the convict children for a time. It's quite interesting how the society came to the belief that that was better for the children. And I think it's only a lot more recently that we've come to appreciate the value of just being with your family and even being held for the good of the children themselves.

AT: You also see it with the eugenics movement, the idea that poverty is inherently a flaw that makes you less human, it makes you less able or qualified to be a parent.

JW: With the convict women, you've also got a big component of addiction and addictive behaviors. One of the convict women I studied, the one that came with the children, we can project a lot of our own perspectives about what a mother does and what a mother is and what a mother wants to do, because she didn't seem to make any effort to curb her behavior to get her child back. He died about the age of 4 and a half, I think it was, the 2-year-old. But the whole time before that, she had been in a spiral of addiction to alcohol, basically. She was repeatedly in trouble for being drunk. But then again, it's very hard to know what was behind that behavior, because all we have is the offenses against the convict system. We don't actually know how often she was drunk and it was about every two months that she would offend. But that's not actually that often if you think about the addiction cycle and how often people today would get drunk if they were alcoholic. It's really hard to tell what people were thinking and hoping for and trying to do, from these records.

AT: And we have no way of knowing what may have been going on for her in terms of mental health issues, past trauma, ongoing hardship, because obviously this was not the best environment for people.

JW: No, and you also have the component of being assigned as a servant to unknown masters. And each time this woman became drunk, she would be potentially returned to the female factory and given to a new master. So there's also the possibility that none of the masters she had were worth staying with. And she was inclined to re-offend in order to get to try her luck and try going back to be given another chance at something else.

AT: I mean, these were people who were basically using slave labor. So I don't imagine that speaks well to their character.

JW: No, but it was also the entire societal structure. As with slavery, it's systemic. And some masters might have been better than others, but at the end of the day, yeah, they are treating people like slaves. But then there's also agency and power struggles within that, but they're not just doing everything they're told. They have ways of resisting. And one way of doing that was to abscond and drink and swear at their masters and all sorts of things like that.

AT: When we're talking about these different groups that are at play here, you mentioned settlers as opposed to convicts. So were settlers people who had just come on their own? Were they people who had finished their sentence? Was it a combination? I assume there were also the official administrators who were there running everything and doing the bureaucracy, because it's British and therefore there is bureaucracy.

JW: Yes, yeah. So it was a combination towards the middle and later period of transportation. It would have been more a lot of ex-convicts filling out those classes. It would have also been administrators and soldiers that were there to keep the peace and hold the colony. So yeah, a lot of them would have been soldiers that

were the initial free settlers, and then a few bureaucrats and families of bureaucrats and things. So gradually a Tasmanian-born population would grow up out of that.

AT: And so obviously not all of the children that we're talking about at this period were brought over with their mothers. And you actually have looked at convict women who were in the system during their pregnancy, whether they were pregnant on the ships, which I can only imagine made that experience even better, or they became pregnant because even though as you mentioned, the men and women were largely kept separate, but that's not 100% effective.

JW: No, certainly not. And I think that was a delusional attempt, and in some cases they were out on stations and farms and the men would be actually kept at outposts, watching sheep or hunting kangaroos and the women would be kept at the household. But they were still usually male masters who would be highly likely to have been extracting favors from their female convict servants, especially if they didn't have a woman in their household to possibly curb that. But yeah, of course in the towns as well, there were more opportunities for women to meet men and have relationships, whether consensual or transactional or both.

AT: So when we're getting back to the question of these relations and the fact that a lot of these women had done sex work before, I think there's also not just that perception, but also a lot of men in that period seemed to just view any woman who was a servant as someone they could exploit sexually anyway. So it seems like this was really ripe for exploitation on that front.

JW: I'm sure it was. It's hard to tell from the records that we have, who exactly the fathers were of any of the convicts' children, especially because we don't have a lot of information about who their masters were even, a lot of the time. You only have a few records that tell us that information and we don't know who else was around in terms of male convicts or just people in the town. So in some of the cases, the women's conduct records, which is a record of all of the offenses they committed against the convict regulations. So it's not exactly crimes. It's things like getting drunk, being absent without leave, out after hours, swearing at people, bashing up a constable. And in the case of one other women I was interested in, she got in trouble for colluding with bush rangers, which she was absolved of, but still a possibility and that time to slip the bush rangers some supplies and defy the system that way.

AT: So for anyone who's not Australian, can you explain what a bush ranger is for context?

JW: So bush rangers were escaped convicts who took to the bush and stole to survive, basically. They were like highway robbers, they would steal guns from the soldiers and they would hold up shepherd's huts or towns. In one case, Matthew Brady's gang, which my convict Mary Armstrong was charged with supplying, took over a whole town because they took all of the officials in the town hostage once and they held the town for the night before the soldiers got to them and took it back. So they were really desperate men who were surviving outside of the convict system, outside of the control of the law by basically just being land pirates, just stealing what they could to survive. I don't think they lived particularly well a lot of the time and desperate and constantly on the run from the law, but it was a problem for the administration quite a while.

AT: Who could possibly have predicted that if you send a bunch of people who have been convicted of theft to one place and put them in awful conditions, that they might turn to banditry? Who could have seen that coming?

JW (laughing): Quite unlikely. But yeah, back to your question, which was about women who had children in the colony. So a lot of them would become pregnant and then they would still be convicted of offences and

taken back to the female factory for punishment. And so it's got to the point where some of them would, I've studied a few who seem to have committed a crime when they've realised that they were pregnant. So there was a couple of cases where a particular woman followed the same pattern of becoming pregnant and about four months into her pregnancy, she would commit an offence and be sent back to the female factory. And she may have done that because that was a place of stability and where she knew people and the structure and could sort of control some elements of her life. That's a speculation and I've only worked that out by counting back how many months she would have been pregnant from when she had a child. But that same woman actually seemed to have committed the crime she was transported for after her husband and her sister were transported for crimes. So she may have committed a crime in order to be transported in the first place. So it seems to have been a pattern for that particular woman.

AT: And so you've mentioned the factory a few times and I'd like to get into, what did that mean? So if a woman was not out serving a master, what would life in the factory have been like for her?

JW: So the factory was essentially a hiring depot for assignment, but it was also a place of punishment. So they had solitary cells for punishment and they had yards for hard labor. So things like laundry, they did the laundry there and they did sewing and they did a particularly awful task, which is picking oakum, which is basically extracting strands of rope that has been tarred in order to make new rope, which sounds very hard on the hands, it sounds like a very miserable activity. It was actually very poorly placed in Hobart. It's on the rivulet, which goes down from the mountain and basically in a damp, cold spot. So it was a very bad place for these people to live in sort of stone yards' width and to have babies who were very young and vulnerable and not with their mothers, basically the worst childcare center you can imagine, especially for spread of disease. And it had a horrific mortality rate for the children. And that was a constant issue that they confronted with it. So there were women who were in the nursery to look after the children, but once the children were weaned, the mothers were usually sent out for assignment again. So at about nine months, women who were breastfeeding would have been in charge of another child or two and given that they would have prioritized their own child over the care of the other children, it would have been quite a bad situation, especially when sickness blew through. It's quite a miserable situation.

AT: Well, and I think it's also fair to assume that these babies wouldn't have been born in the healthiest of conditions anyway, because those first few months of life and before birth are very much dependent on the health of the mother in terms of what the baby is getting from the mother as it's growing. And so we're talking about babies that would not have been in the best of health, generally speaking, even from birth, much less all of the things that happened to them afterwards.

JW: Yeah, absolutely. And it may have been that women prefer to be returned to the factory because they had more reliable food and things there. I don't know, because the food there, I have studied it, and it was not sufficient for a nursing mother or a pregnant mother. I have examined the nutritional value of the rations and determined that it was very deficient in a number of different things. And that's if it was even actually available as the full ration, if that was actually supplied to them as it was dictated, and not being skimmed off the top by the people who were running the institution, which it often was. So a lot of corruption, but then again, women could also barter and get goods in other ways. So they may have been trading and able to get additional food through black market economies and things like that. But it would have really depended on each individual's resources to do that.

AT: It has always bothered my logical brain to say, we're going to make people do a lot of manual labor every day, but also underfeed them.

JW: Yes, yes. And if you think about doing that while women were pregnant and pregnant women weren't treated as carefully as they are now if they were working class, convict women. The women in the upper classes were probably coddled and given special food and cared for when they were pregnant. But the convict women were not considered to need or deserve any of that. So they might have been given a little bit of an extra ration if they were pregnant. But that was up to the discretion of the surgeon or whoever was in charge of their care. They did actually give birth to the babies at the factory. There was a hospital wing at the factory for people who were ill and giving birth and nursing or recovering from birth. Not that they would have given them a lot of time to recover from birth before kicking them out of the hospital. But we do have some of the hospital notes which tell us exactly what some of the women were suffering from after their birth and how their births went. But of course in one of those cases that, we only have a handful of them, the classic story of a woman struggling to breastfeed and then she's got some sort of fever or something, she probably had mastitis or something like that. Her child's been given to someone else to feed and that woman was given some port as an incentive even. But that child died of basically malnutrition. So that woman probably would have prioritized her own child. And the child didn't survive but hers did for a while. So it's all just a horrible calculus of survival.

AT: If we assume that the best case scenario is these women finish their sentence, they're able to transition to being a settler rather than a convict. They get their children back. Even if that is the best-case outcome, we're still looking at a situation where they probably have limited support networks. They may still be dealing with poverty and other barriers. There are still a lot of restrictions on even the settlers in this community and particularly if you're an ex-convict. So even if they get to that point, they're still in a very difficult situation.

JW: Yeah, I imagine so. It's much harder to know about what happened to them after they exit the convict system because the records of the convict system are so detailed. And then basically, we only know when they died and when they had more children or when they married. It goes back to the basic births, deaths and marriages of record keeping and appearing in public records that we have. So we don't know a huge amount about their lives afterwards, except they probably were better off once they left because they were able to work for money themselves and they were able to marry and raise a family with their partner and depend on the partner's income. Obviously, that was still usually in poverty, but some of them managed to rise above that, managed to establish decent businesses and actually make good lives out of the opportunity of being in a colony. There weren't as many people, so if they had skills and were needed, they could forge a life.

AT: And so something that you've mentioned a couple times is that really all we know about these women comes from criminal records, which interestingly is also something that I've heard is common when we're talking about Australia's queer history. It's not terribly surprising that any large groups of exclusively one gender are often shown to have homosexual and related behaviors, whether we're talking about military or those who are imprisoned. And so can you tell us a bit about the queer history of Tasmania's lady convicts?

JW: Well, I don't have a huge amount of specific knowledge about this. And I think it's interesting that it has been taken up because the big thing that happened with the later part of the convict period is that as the society grew and the free settler population grew, there was more of a drive for becoming a respectable colony and a respectable economy and getting away from the convict stain on the community. They wanted to be taken seriously and to be able to go back to Britain and be someone there as well. And so as this was going on, the attitudes towards the convicts turned to a bit of a moral panic. And so a lot of the things that have been talked about and the newspapers sort of wrote about were things that were probably going on because it's a prison institution. It's a one-gendered institution of women who probably didn't have the moral ideals, the church didn't have a great foothold in their lives. I'm sure these women were much more flexible about morality than the free settlers and the people who were concerned with respectability and Christian values. So I'm sure that they did engage in sex with each other and even transactionally with each other. There is evidence of that.

There were stories that came out of women being flash, being really dressed up and having these relationships that they were very attached to. And I'm sure that there were very strong female relationships in these institutions. But the fact that the paper was willing to talk about it was because of the moral panic that they were trying to build, to put pressure to end transportation. And it's very hard to tell from the records that we have what these relationships looked like, what their dynamics were. We just don't know what their situations were. I looked at one woman in particular who was interesting from this perspective because her crime was robbing people outside a theatre and she had a previous offence for dressing in men's clothes, which I guess wasn't a transportable offence, but she was in trouble for it in the past anyway. And that is interesting and she was caught with a female companion and transported to Tasmania. After that, she almost immediately got married, which was securing her stability, and got assigned to her husband. So I can imagine that as a very tactical move. I think he was an older man as well. So a bit established, but possibly not a love match. But then she is in trouble later on and pregnant successive times. She's in trouble for being found in bed with a particular man, not her husband. And then a year later, she's charged with being found in a water closet with a strange man, so in a toilet situation, and for using obscene language. And at that time, she was six months pregnant. So there's a few instances of her engaging in sex with men and no indications of queer relationships. But then again, it could have all been transactional. There's just no way of knowing what her motivations were, what is behind all of that. So I find it interesting that people take these stories, and of course, it's the only evidence we have to build an understanding of what life was like for queer people in this time. But it's also very scanty evidence and that's based on political uses of that evidence.

AT: Yeah, I've had conversations before about how, just as some people want to write queerness out of history, there is that definite desire by a lot of queer folks to latch on to anything that they can use to say, "oh, this is queer history," but we just don't actually have enough evidence. And I truly understand that deep desire to want to see yourself represented in history, that you will just look at any tiny thing and want to extrapolate from that. But interestingly, we're also sort of touching on the male versus female documentation issue, where we always have less documentation about women's lives than we do about men's lives in different contexts. So my understanding is that while no women were transported for being sex workers, there were men who were transported because they had sexual offenses including sodomy. And so again, it's one of those, "oh, you sent a bunch of guys who you know have done the sodomy to the same place, and then you act surprised that there's sodomy happening." (laughter)

JW: Yeah, look, that is a fairly complicated thing as well. And I've tried to dig into that a bit in the past, and then just not found enough evidence to tell me anything. And I find it so fascinating. And obviously society was quite separated into the genders. And women would frequently share a bed and have three or four women to a bed. And as long as we were keeping this access apart in terms of marriage prospects, that was considered safe. And I imagine female queerness would be a lot harder to detect unless it's in an institutional context than male queerness. And I think a few of those men who were transported for sodomy were part of the military. So there would have been a lot of scrutiny on them in that context. But also it could be a crime because sexual desires that were acted out non-consensually. So it's very hard to know.

AT: Well, I think we're also getting back into that question of sex as sort of a spectrum of consent, where on the one end you have enthusiastic consent, and on the other end you have physical force and coercion. And then sort of in the middle, you've got that transactional aspect of, "I mean, I don't really want to do this, but I need money. So I'm unenthusiastically consenting," shall we say?

JW: Yeah. And I think women have been over time, and especially in this time period, I think women were very used to transactional sexuality even within marriage and within relationships that they had, that they even

wanted, there was still that element of accepting that part of their lives and just living with it. And so, someone would go, "why not use it? Why not take that and run with it?" And others would be obviously more hesitant to do that, depending on their experiences and their feeling like they could control the situation. It's very, very hard to see the good in all of this as well, like I'm very curious to look at these records and look for where there's maybe gaps between offenses and thinking about, well, maybe they would have found relative stability in that period of time. Maybe they found some light, some enjoyment of life. Maybe they had some community and some relationships. And I think looking for that is where some of this queer history examination goes, things like the groups of women in the female factory banding together and having female friendships and relationships that were strong and which they didn't want broken up, and for which they would reoffend to return to the factory for is a lovely hope to cling to that there was some happiness in these people's lives. And I do hope that that was part of the truth of their situation.

AT: Well, and something that we haven't touched on yet are the flash mobs. So you mentioned the flash dandies, but can you tell us more about how flash mobs did not start with fun dance moves?

JW: Well, I think there might be a little bit of a difference between a group that looked flash and a group that assembles in a flash to do a dance, but yeah. So the flash mob was a term that was given to some of the women in the female factory at a moment in time, I think given by the newspaper or maybe it was what they called themselves, I'm not sure. But they were a bit of a prison subculture within the female factory and they would dress up and have performances and put on little shows and dances and things. And it seemed like they were a little bit out of control of the matron and the masters of the prison. So they may have engaged in sex between each other. They may have had protection rackets going on in exchange for sex or they may have done any of those things that happen within prison subcultures. It's really hard to tell how much of it is the story that the paper wanted to tell and the officials went there and apparently couldn't find any evidence of it, which may have meant that everyone was complicit and keeping to themselves because they didn't want to give the group up to the officials, or it may have been that they really just were a good thing in a bad situation.

AT: Well, there definitely seems to be that element of defiance because these women were condemned to this very boring, gray prison garb and the flash mob ladies are out here with like brightly colored silk handkerchiefs, embroidered caps. They've got jewelry going on. They have fancy buttons. So it does seem like that middle finger of fashion.

JW: Yes, certainly. And the use of fashion too, to stick it to the officials, I think is fantastic. And I think it's certainly a great thing to know that there was an element of subversion of this very strict control that probably wasn't in a lot of control a lot of the time. A lot of what we have assumed to happen is based on the regulations that were in place, but how much they were actually able to enforce those regulations is uncertain because they often would have slipped in their control or would have allowed things in exchange for bribes and things. It's a backwater colony at the end of the earth, but it's really potential for anything.

AT: Tasmania's new tourism slogan (laughter): a backwater colony.

JW: Oh, I take that back because it was actually at that time quite central to trade routes and shipping and the whaling industry was huge here. And it was actually nowhere near as isolated as you might think. There's not a lot of documentation about the sailors who arrived here and went through, but it may have been a lot more cosmopolitan than we understand because of because of trade and because of travel via ships, and there's certainly cases of male convicts who were sailors who were able to travel back to England on ships. And in one case, which is a personal favourite of mine, William Swallow, who not only escaped from the secondary convict settlement on an island on the wild west coast, but managed to sail to New Zealand and



Japan before ending up in Hong Kong and lying his way to be transported back to Britain, where he narrowly avoided being hung for piracy. But that's another story and not related to women. Unless you want to tell the story of his wife, who was very loyal to him and returned to him even though she had shacked up with another man.

AT: Was she in Britain the whole time?

JW: Yeah, she was.

AT: All right, I feel like if he's gone to all that trouble to get home to her, the least she can do is be like, "all right, fine."

JW: It didn't last long. He got transported back and then died in Port Arthur, once he got caught.

AT: So this is a topic that's been an interest of years for over a decade, like you even completed your honours thesis on this. So what is it about these women that has kept your attention for so long?

JW: I think the main thing is that all we know of them are little snapshots and there's a whole variety and texture of life in these women. We know quite a bit about quite a lot of a whole class of people and it's fascinating to get to know a few of them through these records. But there's so much that we don't know and so many gaps in between things like committing offences and getting in trouble and going back and forth between masters and convict institutions and things. There's so much that we don't know and that we can speculate about or see potential for and I think it's the gaps that are fascinating and we really do know a lot about them. So we have a whole population here and with the help of some very avid researchers over the past 10 or 15 years, there's been a huge amount of documentation and coding of records to determine everything that we can know about the whole population. So there's demographics to pull out, there's stories about individuals, there's ideas about how their health would have been affected by punishment and what their lives would have looked like and how their lives in that time shaped the generation that emerged out of it and how that shaped the place that I live, and love to live, in. So it's just got so much potential and there are so many characters in there that are yet to be explored.

So I work here at the library and so I encounter people who are looking for their convict ancestry quite often and it's so exciting to be able to give them, so many of your ancestors, you'll know when they were born and when they died and how many children they have and then you come across a convict and you know what they ate for breakfast based on the convict rations and you know how they dealt with being in a terrible situation and how that, like what sort of character they they brought to it and when they resisted and when they gave up. And it's just a whole tale of life and then sometimes you get to the end of their sentence and then people are like "oh what happened next?" And we're just like, actually we don't know. Maybe they found some peace in not being scrutinized for so long. Maybe they retired and had a little farm or opened a pub and yeah they were able to live out their life without a magistrate pulling them up for getting drunk on a Saturday night.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.