

***From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond the British Isles* edited by Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine (Convict Women's Press, Hobart, 2015)**

Stories of convicts transported from Britain are familiar to most of us; however, little is known about people, particularly women, who were transported from other parts of the world. *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond the British Isles* goes a long way to addressing this gap. Edited by Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine, this collection tells the stories of women transported to Australia who were born or tried outside the British Isles. Often described on official records as women 'of colour', these made up only a small proportion of the 25,000 women transported to Australia. The contributors to *From the Edges of Empire* have mined available data and records to piece together and reconstruct the stories of these largely forgotten women; stories which add to the continual revision of history, giving us a broader picture of our national story.

From the Edges of Empire is published by Convict Women's Press, a small not-for-profit organisation dedicated to publishing convict women's histories, based in Hobart, Tasmania. The book comprises three parts: The Indian Ocean, The Caribbean World, and Europeans and the High Seas. An online biographical dictionary has also been created to allow continued expansion of the work. Reconstructing life stories through existing records is easier now than it has ever been, and so researchers are able to piece together disparate stories and gain a greater understanding of the far-reaching effects of colonisation in the nineteenth century. As the introduction notes, 'caught in the complex web of the British Empire,' these women had little agency in their lives, yet they 'play their parts in the story of Australia's convict history'. Their identification on official documents as women 'of colour' ensured they were a distinct minority amongst the other convicts, in some cases making them more visible in the records.

The life courses of the women in *From the Edges of Empire* have been meticulously traced through a range of available sources. There are fascinating stories of slavery, transportation, freedom and destitution. One of the difficulties of tracing these lives is that there are often no records after convicts become free citizens. Similarly, if women didn't marry, commit crimes or misdemeanours, or have children, records are scant. As such, many of the stories in this collection raise more questions than they answer, leading to further speculation about the life-courses of these women and the repercussions down the generations. They led transient lives largely controlled by other people, making the stories particularly poignant. The impotence of these women against their fates is highlighted in a comment about one of the convicts, Catherine Ferris, of whom it was written: 'The prisoner Ferris ... declared that she had not had a fair trial, and was working herself up into a paroxysm of rage, when she was taken out of the Court' (116). As author Jan Richardson notes, Ferris' life was 'far from ordinary', as were the many lives reconstructed in *From the Edges of Empire*. Some appear to be colourful characters who tried unsuccessfully to carve out a life in Australia. Douglas Wilkie writes of Frenchwoman Eugenie Lemaire, convicted of 'Larceny in a Dwelling House', who became a business woman and travelled the world before she is lost from the records. Eilin Hordvik tells the rather sad story of Maria Simonette from the Seychelles, who was convicted for murdering her lover and sent to Van Diemen's Land where she fell pregnant a number of times, giving birth to stillborn babies

Book reviews: *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond the British Isles* edited by Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine. Robyn Greaves.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

and ending up a drunk on the streets of Hobart. If they had no support from a man, life was hard for these women; some were declared insane, became prostitutes, or disorderly drunks. Susan Ballyn and Lucy Frost note that these stories serve as 'reminders that families in colonial Australia might be little more than precarious networks of individuals with nothing much to grab hold of as life tossed them across land and sea' (248).

While some of the women featured in the case studies in *From the Edges of Empire* prospered, these are largely tales of displacement, dislocation and otherness due to race and circumstance. Cassandra Pybus describes the case of two girls aged 8 and 11 convicted for attempting to poison the woman into whose service they had been placed. The girls were accused of putting arsenic into Madam Morel's tea (the powder was later found to be an emetic) and sentenced to transportation to NSW. Elizabeth and Constance were placed into the service of First Police Magistrate, Henry Croasdaile Wilson, who appeared to be an advocate for their welfare, giving them a better start than they would have had otherwise. Elizabeth died relatively young and in poverty, while Constance flourished. Pybus speculates on the extent that race could influence life outcomes for convict women in Australia, concluding that 'the different life stories of Elizabeth and Constance provide insights into the specificity of convict experience that challenge our assumptions about colonial society and the way that identity was formed and reformed in the colonial environment' (75). Cheryl Griffin, in her examination of Caribbean women transported to Australia, considers the effect of the convict system and race in the following way: 'What we can tell from the records that remain is that while they were within the convict system they were treated the same as all other convicts. In this way, the convict system had an equalising effect' (140). Insights such as these throughout the book add to our understanding of the myriad effects of transportation and the convict system.

Reading the stories in *From the Edges of Empire* as a whole gives a disquieting sense of how the British Empire, with its extensive colonies, affected the lives of people across the world with far-reaching consequences, helping shape the Australia we know today. Jan Richardson sums up the lives of these women: 'from the small fragments that have been gathered piece-by-piece from around the world ... fascinating and heart-breaking stories are now revealed, encapsulating themes of poverty, crime, prostitution, bigamy, illegitimacy, insanity, slavery and emancipation' (128). While the internet and digitisation of material have made information more accessible, tracing stories such as these is still a painstaking and time-consuming task, so we can be grateful to the contributors of this book, its editors and publisher, for making this research available to the public. I hope *From the Edges of Empire* is widely read and serves as a catalyst for the revelation of more forgotten stories such as those contained here.

Dr Robyn Greaves

2

Book reviews: *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond the British Isles* edited by Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine. Robyn Greaves.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>