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# 'The Lottery of Life':

## Convict Tourism at Port Arthur Historic Site, Australia

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**This article will explore the design process behind the 'Lottery of Life' interpretation gallery opened at the Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania, in 1999. A penal station designed as a site of discipline for secondarily convicted and recalcitrant convicts, Port Arthur operated from 1830-1877. Following its closure as a corrective institution it became a significant tourist destination. As such it has a long history of prison tourism. Prior to the opening of the 1999 exhibition, a number of prominent Australian historians and writers attacked the interpretation of convict and institutional life in this ultra-coercive penal station. The local criticism levelled at the site shared much in common with wider critiques of heritage tourism in the English-speaking world. The construction of a new visitor centre and interpretation gallery presented an opportunity to try and address some of the concerns levelled in the local and international literature. It also provided a rare chance to turn academic findings into an interactive display that could communicate a complex picture of penal station life to a diverse audience.**

Port Arthur is something of an enigma — a cluster of sandstone, pink brick and weatherboard buildings scattered along the edge of a picturesque cove. There are fewer buildings now than there once were — the result of a series of bushfires that swept through the former penal settlement in the 1890s. Locals completed the destruction, quarrying much of what was left for building materials, creating in the process a set of scenic ruins. Yet, even when the site was in full operation it looked beautiful. The American convict, Linus Miller, who was sent there in 1840 double-ironed in the vomit strewn hold of a colonial brig, described it as 'one of the most pleasant and romantic places' in Van Diemen's Land, although he added that '*man* has converted it into a home of woe, sin and shame'.<sup>1</sup>

From 1830 until its closure in 1877 Port Arthur operated as the principle place of secondary punishment for the colony of Van Diemen's Land. It is the word secondary that is important here. Between 1803 and 1853 around 59,000 male and 13,500 female convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land, yet of these only a handful of women and perhaps 12,000 men and boys

served time in the place, that in Miller's words, 'stamped gloominess, despair and death, upon every object'.

Port Arthur owes its existence to the simple fact that Van Diemen's Land was not a prison, indeed the penal colony has often been described as a panopticon without walls. Before 1840 newly arrived convicts were sent to work for settlers, the majority being used as farm hands. The system was referred to as assignment because property rights in the labour of convicts were temporarily assigned to private masters. Although, after 1840 convicts had to first undertake a period of probationary labour in a government gang, when this was completed they were eligible to be hired out to the private sector. It was precisely because the system was so open that a place of secondary punishment was needed — somewhere where those who abused this Antipodean version of a community work order could be sent. Penal stations in this sense were machines for extracting labour, as well as places for punishing the recalcitrant. Their aim was to ensure that the majority of convicts bent their backs and kept a still tongue in their head — an objective they sought to achieve through the graphic punishment of those who, like Miller, had been tried for a second offence and lagged to their remote confines.<sup>2</sup>

In the nineteenth century all official communication with Port Arthur was by sea. The only land connection, the route that terrestrial absconders would have to take, passed through two narrow necks. Lines of dogs, whose bark gave away the presence of all would be escapees, were used to seal these. The Tasman Peninsula was thus a natural prison. What's more, as Port Arthur was equipped with a fine harbour and the surrounding hills were thickly wooded, it was a place where convicts could be productively punished. Prisoners were primarily employed in the extraction of timber.

Port Arthur always had its critics. Some of the problems associated with its management went right to the heart of the convict system. The partnership with the private sector delivered punishment on the cheap saving the colonial government a substantial bill in rations, clothing and accommodation. It was not, however, without its drawbacks. Masters could not be persuaded to take on all convicts. Although they did not have to pay wages, they did have to train their unfree charges as well as clothe, house and feed them. The very young,

1. Linus Miller, *Notes of an Exile to Van Diemen's Land* (New York, 1846), 326–7.

2. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates: The Death of a Convict Station* (Sydney, 2008), 139–63.

injured and otherwise impaired were often left unassigned, there being nothing that the state could do to induce the private sector to act as *de facto* gaolers for prisoners who were unlikely to generate anything in return by way of a profit. At first such rejects accumulated in the Hobart prison barracks, but increasingly they were sent to penal stations in periodic clear outs. The problem was officially recognised in 1834 when a separate boy's institution was constructed across the bay from Port Arthur. Known as Point Puer it purported to train its young charges, providing them with practical skills. In practice it was a place run on strict disciplinary lines and the levels of punishment meted out compromised its capacity to instruct its inmates.

There were other problems too. Although masters were not permitted to physically punish their charges, they could take them to a magistrates' bench. As this involved time and expense, they were more likely to prosecute the unskilled — in other words those that were most expendable. Some observers alleged that settlers used the bench to get rid of difficult and unprofitable convicts in the hope that the replacement the state was bound to supply would prove a better deal. As the critics of transportation pointed out, convicts sent to the Australian penal colonies tended to be punished according to how useful they were and not according to the severity of the crime that they had been transported for.

Thus, while the official line was that only the worst convicts were sent to Port Arthur, this was not always true. Prisoners were shipped there for all sorts of reasons. Willem Pokbass, a Khoi transported from the Cape Colony for stealing cattle, ended up at the settlement because he was unfit for labour elsewhere, his right arm having been crippled in an attack by a lion.<sup>3</sup> And, of those who were ordered to the settlement by a court, many were status offenders who had been convicted of breach of the rules and regulations of the convict department rather than for breaking the criminal law. Miller, for example, was sent for absconding.

For the penal station to function, however, it was important for the colonial administration to stress the debased nature of all who passed through its doors, no matter how they ended up there. The easiest way to justify the extraction of pain, and much of the labour undertaken at Port Arthur was indeed painful, was to criminalize its inmates.

Three years after the last transport vessel arrived, the colony officially changed its name from Van Diemen's Land to Tasmania. Shortly after the final group of seven prisoners was transferred to the gaol in Hobart in 1877, Port Arthur too was erased from the map. Henceforth it was officially known as Carnarvon.<sup>4</sup> Yet the past, so painful for some, attracted others to the colony. Tourists came to Tasmania in increasing numbers drawn in part because of the island's past reputation as a penal colony, the latter proving far more difficult to expunge than place names. Fiction also helped to exhume what respectable Tasmanians attempted to bury. Port Arthur featured prominently in Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, first serialised in the *Australian Journal* between 1870 and 1872. This dark tale of wrongful conviction, cannibalism and the lash was adapted for the stage in the late nineteenth century and was subject of three feature films released between 1908 and 1927.

In 1927, the same year that Norman Dawn's adaptation of Clarke's novel hit Australian and American cinema screens, the Tasmanian government bowed to the inevitable. The name Carnarvon was dropped and Port Arthur restored. Just over a decade later the management of the former penal station passed to the state run Scenic Preservation

Board. Various attempts to maximise the tourism potential of the site culminated in an impressive federally funded project to stabilise the site structures. Many of the smaller buildings, which had originally served as quarters for officers and officials, were renovated as part of this initiative. By the early 1980s Port Arthur had become big business — Australia's most famous open-air museum.

Historians were unimpressed. While the site had been conserved, they complained that little was done to explore its history or to place its role as a penal station within the context of the nineteenth-century debate over transportation and the related rise of the prison. The focus instead was on structures — on what paint scrapes revealed about past tastes in interior design, or the story that long lost drains and bricked-up doors told of building modifications.<sup>5</sup> It seemed, in Richard Flanagan's words, that Port Arthur remained a place where 'a history of people is too dangerous to be contemplated'.<sup>6</sup>

A notable absence was the convicts themselves. While the exterior walls of the penitentiary were stabilised, little was done with the cells. It was almost as

## By the early 1980s Port Arthur had become big business — Australia's most famous open-air museum.

3. Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO), Con 18/21 and Con 31/35, p.82.

4. David Young, *Making Crime Pay: The Evolution of Convict Tourism in Tasmania*, (Hobart, 1996), 32.

5. Grace Karskens, 'Engaging Artefacts: Urban Archaeology, Museums and the Origins of Sydney', *Humanities Research*, 9, 1 (2002), 11.

6. Richard Flanagan, 'Crowbar History: Panel Games and Port Arthur', *Australian Society*, 9, 8 (1990), 35–7.

though they were too ugly to be worth bothering with, in contrast to the neat cottages that had served as accommodation for the settlement's officers. As Kay Daniels noted, the meta-message was that all that is bad 'emanates from the convict. All that is good comes from above'. The point was driven home by a caption in the site museum:

*No aspect of Port Arthur's history has been more distorted than the punishment and treatment of prisoners. Most of the horrifying stories that abound have no basis in fact and the cases of brutality that did occur seem to have been committed mainly by convict trustees against their fellow prisoners.*

As Daniels wryly added: 'No brutality or barbarism from above. No solidarity below'.<sup>7</sup>

Flanagan and Daniels' criticisms echoed wider concerns amongst historians about the rise of the heritage industry. Heritage interpretations, many argued, ignored problematic issues presenting the past as trouble free. Such rose tinted spectacled views were worrying, at least in the eyes of the heritage industry's detractors, since they reinforced a conservative view of history. As David Lowenthal argued, the problem was that site interpretation often collapsed the past into a single frame of reference. Doing so eased the task of comparing by-gone years with the present and therefore assisted the interpreter's aim of connecting visitors with the array of attractions that a site might have to offer. A reliance on everyday objects provided a simple means of facilitating this trick.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the kitchen attached to the Commandant's Quarters at Port Arthur was fashioned into a familiar space by equipping it with mid-nineteenth century domestic utensils. While the knife grinder in the corner may be less familiar to visitors, scales, breadboards and a dresser lined with blue and white tableware helped to connect the past to their own lives. It may not be what they expected to see at a site of secondary punishment, but it helped to normalise, and thus rationalise, the past.

The emphasis on convict living conditions, Daniels argued, did much the same. Interpretations that concentrate on the details of daily routines, the types of

uniform worn and the amount of calories the ration supplied tread safe ground. Convicts were better off at Port Arthur, the guides argued, because the ration that they received was superior to working class British and Irish diets. Convicts were also taught a trade and educated, so once released back into colonial society they stood a better chance of obtaining legitimate employment. The emphasis was placed squarely on reform. Port Arthur may have been characterised by a regime that was strict by contemporary standards, but as a place, it was fair. As Daniels wrote in 1982:

*With the visitor, Port Arthur plays an elaborate game. It says: you are here because you thought this was a terrifying place. You came to be horrified, to be confronted with the evidence of brutality. You came because you believed this was Devil's Island, a place of inflicted pain. Instead what we intend to show you is a place of humane and quiet justice.<sup>9</sup>*

Convicts were also taught a trade and educated, so once released back into colonial society they stood a better chance of obtaining legitimate employment.

A worry with this approach was that it threatened to close the cell door more firmly than was ever historically possible. In part this is because Port Arthur was never really a prison — penal stations functioned more like labour camps. It is true that the site acquired a carceral institution

in the shape of the separate prison. This building, constructed in the years 1849 — 50, was built on the Pentonville model and was designed as a place where newly arrived convicts, and those found guilty of breach of settlement regulations, could be isolated from their peers. Subject to a silent regime, inmates spent 23 hours a day in solitary confinement and were ordered to wear a mask whenever out of their cell.

Yet, Port Arthur had been in existence for two decades before the separate prison opened. It operated in the later years of the settlement when the number of convicts was in decline. It is true that over time the amount of cellular accommodation increased. The settlement flourmill and granary was converted into a penitentiary in 1857, for example, but even after the change inmates spent the bulk of their day at work in the open air. The aim of a penal station was to extract labour from the bodies of its inmates. In the case of Port Arthur,

7. Kay Daniels, 'Cults of Nature, Cults of History', *Island Magazine*, 16 (1983), 6.

8. David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), 137–43.

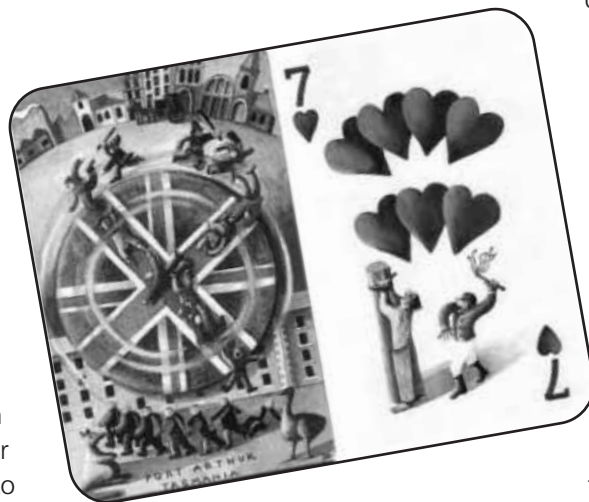
9. Daniels, 'Cults of Nature', 5.

this meant cutting and transporting timber, quarrying stone and coal, cultivating potatoes, building ships and boats and manufacturing articles such as furniture and shoes.

There is a related issue. Interpretations that emphasise the 'hardened' nature of Port Arthur's convicts peddle a line that closely resembles the rhetoric of nineteenth — century penal managers. The restraints that were historically placed on convicts were not all physical. Like other systems that utilised unpaid labour, some of the chains that shackled those lagged to Australia were ideological. The fact that all convicts had been found guilty by a court of law was used to justify their deployment as unfree colonial labour. The doubly degraded state of those condemned to penal stations facilitated the use of even greater levels of force in the process of labour extraction. In short, an emphasis on the 'hardened' nature of convicts disguised the similarities between penal transportation and other unfree labour migration schemes, notably slavery and indenture. The same logic was used to dismiss convict protests. The prisoner who attempted to challenge, or in other ways ameliorate their condition, merely confirmed their status as a 'hardened' offender.<sup>10</sup>

In 1998 I was asked by the Port Arthur Management Authority to help shape the content of their new interpretation gallery. The challenge was to design something that would appeal to visitors while simultaneously addressing the criticisms that historians had levelled at previous site interpretations. It is one thing to knock the attempts of others, but the acid test of the critic is could they do better.

The interpretation that I designed in conjunction with the then site interpretation manager, Dorothy Evans, and the Hobart architectural firm of Robert Morris Nunn and Associates, used an everyday object as its starting point. Our aim was to engineer interpretation strategies that relied upon familiar associations. Our intention, however, was not to flatten the complexity of the past, but to create a route by which historical interactions could be broken down into something that was, quite literally, child's play. To do this we used a pack of cards (see front cover) — a device with which we reasoned the vast majority of visitors to Port Arthur would be familiar.



Our approach was built around one of the key criticisms levelled at transportation by its nineteenth — century opponents — that the fate of the convict depended not on the severity of the crime that they had committed, but the use to which they could be put in the Australian colonies. In 1838 a British parliamentary committee highlighted the issue by characterising transportation as a 'mere lottery'. Cards provided a means of suggesting that chance might play a part in dictating the fate of a convict. It also gave us the opportunity to engage in some deck rigging of our own.

The interpretation we designed was based on a study of over 2,000 convicts who spent time at Port Arthur penal station in the 1830s. As the life of every convict landed in Australia was recorded in extraordinary detail, we were able to amass a considerable amount of information about this cohort of penal station inmates. We literally knew the colour of their eyes, their place of birth, the skills they claim to have acquired prior to transportation and the nature of the offence for which they had been lagged to the Antipodes. Crucially we could also determine the reason why they had been shipped for a second time to Port Arthur.

We were also able to determine how the labour of each prisoner had been deployed at the penal settlement. By tracing convicts as they were moved between gangs or were selected to work as sawyers, bakers, blacksmiths, watchman, overseers and constables, we could reconstruct the process by which labour was extracted from prisoners on both an individual and collective level. We documented the distribution of floggings and sentences to solitary confinement, as well as noting those convicts who were listed on the monthly list of prisoners in receipt of tea and sugar — luxuries that were doled out as incentives. As we also had access to death records, we could measure the impact of punishment on convict bodies. The death rate for convicts in gangs was four times higher than those who served in skilled or supervisory positions for example.

From the 2000 convicts in the wider study we selected 52 whose lives were representative of experience at Port Arthur during its formative years as a penal station. Each visitor to the site was provided with a card illustrated with a detail drawn from one of these

10. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, "'Like Poor Galley Slaves': Slavery and Convict Transportation', in M. Suzette Fernandes Dias (ed.) *Legacies of Slavery: Comparative Perspectives* (Newcastle, 2007), 48–61.

lives. That card determines the route they would be instructed to take around the interpretation gallery. If they chose to play the game (we hoped that many would not) they become captive to the hand they had been dealt. At various points red cardholders were directed in one direction and black in another. At others visitors are divided by suite. Our aim was to split tourists in the same way that transportation split convicts from family and friends. As they progressed through the gallery, the convict life behind each visitor's card was slowly revealed. Each was thus provided with the opportunity to explore one convict's experience. The lives revealed through this process, however, differed widely.

The value of each card determined the experience that a visitor would be exposed to. The twos and threes (designed to be given to children) explored the lives of boys who served time at Point Puer. The cards with values from four to nine were used to reveal the conditions experienced by the predominantly unskilled prisoners detailed to work in timber hauling or other gangs. Many of these were sent to Port Arthur for comparatively minor offences, commonly for absconding. Regardless of why they had been directed to Port Arthur, once there the unskilled bore the brunt of the punishment. In this way penal stations mirrored the operation of the convict system as a whole.

The cards valued ten and higher revealed the stories of convicts who had an easier time. The king's, for example, were all blacksmith's — skilled metal workers who were employed repairing tools and closing the rivets of the irons that prisoners in the chain gang were forced to wear. Some were sent to Port Arthur for burglary, yet despite the serious nature of their offence, their value as workers protected them from worse aspects of the penal station regime. It is perhaps not surprising that skilled prisoners disproportionately appeared on the settlement's incentive list.

There is a lot packed into the interpretation gallery. In effect it walks visitors through a research project. The display explores the diversity of convict backgrounds. One of the 52 convicts was born a slave in Spanish Town, Jamaica, another was a medical student from Paris. If you were to read every life you would discover who was sent to Port Arthur for homosexual offences, which routes absconders were most likely to take, the convicts that were likely to be selected as constables and why it was

better to work as a top, as opposed to a pit, sawyer. Yet, our intention was not to reveal all but to start a conversation. We deliberately devised a strategy in which we told visitors different, often contradictory stories, since we wanted them to argue about Port Arthur and the lives of the convicts that were sent there. One reason for this was that visitor's centres in themselves are problematic. At their worst they insert an unwelcome interface between the tourist and the thing that they have come to see.

It was for these reasons that we chose to concentrate the story that we told on the Port Arthur of the 1830s. Not much of the site survives from its first decade as most of the early buildings were of timber construction. We tried to reign in the focus of the visitor's centre so that it explored what the visitor would not see when they went out on site. Port Arthur has always relied on guides, who are predominantly Tasman Peninsula locals. We wanted to reinforce their role rather than undermine it. We attempted to do this by equipping visitors with questions that would make a guided tour a more rewarding experience.

Did we succeed? The interpretation was criticised by some academics who charged us with trivialising the past by making a game of it.<sup>11</sup> There may be truth in this, although we would counter that the game that visitors play takes them on a journey that reveals much about the inner workings of transportation. In this sense it is far from superficial. On a wider front, the exhibition has been a success and is still popular fourteen years after it was installed. It has now been viewed by over 2 million people, an indication that it is indeed possible to create interpretations that successfully convey complex views about the past. At least some of those who have seen it were sufficiently intrigued to purchase the more detailed book that accompanies the exhibition. *A Pack of Thieves? 52 Port Arthur Lives* is now in its sixth edition having sold over 30,000 copies. It explores the lives of the convicts who feature in the gallery in greater depth, using each to illustrate a different aspect of the transportation process. The most rewarding feedback, however, has been supplied by the descendants of convicts. Whatever its faults the 'Lottery of Life' puts inmates centre stage, exploring the forces that impacted on their lives and the ways in which they tried to ameliorate their circumstances.

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11. John Frow, 'In the Penal Colony', *Australian Humanities Review*, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-April-1999/frow3c.html> [accessed 30-5-2013]; Carolyn Strange, 'From "Place of Misery" to "Lottery of Life": Interpreting Port Arthur's Past', *Open Museum Journal* Volume 2: Unsavoury histories, August 2000, <http://hosting.collectionsaustralia.net/omj/vol2/pdfs/strange.pdf>, [accessed 30-5-2013]. This article contains a number of factual errors, for example, leg irons were used in the display at Port Arthur, not a ball and chain as alleged. The irons are also correct weight.