

# **The Dark Turn: History and Performance at an Emerging Tasmanian**

## **Tourist Site**

**Robert Clarke, University of Tasmania**

**Daniela Brozek, University of Tasmania<sup>1</sup>**

### **Author Notes**

**Dr Robert Clarke** is a Senior Lecturer in the English Program, School of Humanities, University of Tasmania. He is the author of *Travel Writing from Black Australia: Utopia, Melancholia, and Aboriginality* (Routledge 2016), and editor of *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Cambridge Scholars 2009), and *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* (CUP, 2018).

**Ms Daniela Brozek** is an independent scholar, writer, and visual artist based in lutruwita-Tasmania, where she operates the business Bright South, publishes Tasmanian writing, and is a member of the Board of Management of TasWriters. Her research interests and activities are mainly concerned with environmental sustainability and supporting diversity, as well as the topics of excess and the fool trope.

---

<sup>1</sup> Funding for the Ross Female Factory Project was provided by the College of Arts, Law and Education (CALE) at the University of Tasmania. Daniela Brozek received a Cultural Environment and Heritage Honours Scholarship that allowed her to work with the State Library and Archive Service, Libraries Tasmania (formerly LiNC). Our thanks to Ms Caroline Homer for assisting Daniela to undertake research in the SLAS, and Josephine Colahan (independent researcher) for assistance with researching women of the Ross Female Factory. We thank, also, Dr Bianca Deans, Tourism Research Officer, Tourism Tasmania, for providing statistics on visitor numbers and the economic impact of tourism in Tasmania. Our thanks, too, to our colleagues Associate Professors Hannah Stark and Kristyn Harman who read and provided feedback on drafts of this paper.

## **Key Words**

Convict tourism, heritage, Tasmania, Ross Female Factory, authorized heritage discourse, heritage performance

## **Introduction**

This paper reflects on the *Ross Female Factory Project*, a research initiative to “re-animate” a Tasmanian convict tourist site, the Ross Female Factory, a site that has been subject to multiple historical silencings. It describes the second author, Daniela Brozek’s script, “The *Caorthann* amulet and the Turkey,” which was developed for this purpose to tell the story of four female inmates. The paper also surveys the cultural and political context that informed the development of our script. It is concerned not simply with “what” history is presented at Tasmanian convict sites, but “how” that history is presented, and how such presentation reinforces conservative settler values about the past. The first part of the paper explores the “dark turn” in heritage performances at Tasmanian convict sites, and how the dark turn relates to an authorized heritage discourse that represents convicts as victims and heroes. The second part of the paper explains how, in light of these considerations, Brozek crafted the script.

## **The Ross Female Factory Project**

Despite its historical significance, the Ross Female Factory, in the Tasmanian Midlands, remains relatively undeveloped. Situated on the margins of the village of Ross (117 km north of the state capital, Hobart), within Tyerernotepanner

Aboriginal lands, little remains of what was, from 1847 to 1855, a significant part of Britain's penal colony in Van Diemen's Land.<sup>2</sup> From 1833 the site held a barracks and depot for male convict work gangs. It was converted to a female factory in 1847. It functioned as a place of correction for women, a hiring depot for female labour assigned to free settlers, and a lying-in hospital and nursery for convict women and their children. Today, a traveller arriving from the village centre, a kilometre to the north, encounters a paddock of 1.08 hectares sloping southwards towards Macquarie River.

Insert Figure 1 – “DBrozek Ross Site3.JPG”

**CAPTION:** The Ross Female Factory Site, bordered to the north, east and part of the southern boundary, with recent stone gabion walls (foreground) and post and wire fences on the remaining southern and western boundaries. The “Commandant's Cottage”, which was substantially altered and extended in the 1890s, can be seen on the right of the image, with part of the older sections visible in the background).

It is bordered on two sides by stone walls, with post and wire fencing on the other boundaries. The only structure is the Overseer's Cottage, a partially-restored double-fronted late-Victorian stone building, located on the north-western boundary. This serves as a visitors' centre. It is hard to imagine that, crowded into this small enclosure there were once dormitories, barracks, a hospital, cook house

---

<sup>2</sup> The island of Tasmania is known to the indigenous *palawa* people as *lutruwita*. It was named Van Diemen's Land by Europeans from 1642, and became a part of the British Colony of New South Wales in 1788. It became a separate colony in 1825. In 1856, a self-governing independent parliament was established and the island was renamed Tasmania.

and bake house, infirmary, nursery, mortuary, surgery, gothic chapel, smithy, solitary confinement cells, and morgue

Insert Figure 2 – “DBrozek Ross SiteModel.JPG”

**CAPTION:** Model of the Ross Female Factory showing the main entry in the foreground with the working and living compound beyond, the chapel in the background (south) with solitary cells to the right of it, and the “Commandant’s Cottage” on the right, foreground, with the 1890s extensions in transparent sections).

Dotted across the bare field stand embossed metal signs that describe various aspects of the site’s history, architecture, and previous inmates. Outside the “visitor’s centre,” these signs are the only attempt to provide a visitor with information or interpretation on the site. Yet, with few physical traces remaining, the Ross Female Factory is archaeologically rich and intact.<sup>3</sup> According to one scholar, it is, “the best surviving example of a female convict station in Australia, demonstrating the evolution and function of female factories and their role in the development of local, regional and national economies.”<sup>4</sup>

The absence of the physical apparatus of a convict station is indicative of the Ross Female Factory’s value as a case study of multiple historical silencings. It exposes both the way the convict past has been erased from history; and the relative silencing of female experiences of convictism.<sup>5</sup> The lack of physical remains

---

<sup>3</sup>Eleanor Conlin Casella, *Archaeology of the Ross Female Factory: Female Incarceration in Van Diemen’s Land, Australia* (Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Terry, “Ross Female Convict Station Historic Site Conservation Plan” (Hobart: Department of Environment and Land Management Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998), 1.

<sup>5</sup> From 1803 to 1853 almost 75,000 prisoners were transported to Van Diemen’s Land. Of those, approximately 12,000 were women. Up until the late twentieth century, in the popular imaginary

presents challenges to curators. While the grounds have been managed by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service since 1990, there is little interpretive infrastructure to assist visitors

Insert Figure 3 – “DBrozek Ross ExternSignage2.JPG”

**CAPTION:** Example of one of the information panels which dot the external area of the site (see Figure 1). These highlight the locations of various buildings and site functions. Further panels and installations within the one remaining building on site, the “Commandant’s Cottage”, provide additional details about the site’s appearance, uses, occupation and investigative processes).

However, in 2017, these challenges inspired a multidisciplinary team of academics from the University of Tasmania to establish the *Ross Female Factory Research Project*.<sup>6</sup> The team aimed to develop a proof-of-concept brief for an augmented reality application that would re-animate the stories of the 832 women once incarcerated at Ross. Such an endeavour has intellectual and ethical, as well as commercial, implications. For a start, tourism to Tasmania’s convict sites has long been popular and economically significant.<sup>7</sup> Previously driven by domestic demand, Tasmania’s curated convict sites, such as those at Port Arthur, Macquarie Harbour, and the Cascades Female Factory, have become vital to the state’s efforts

---

and historical narratives, the convict was overwhelmingly depicted as male; the experiences, hardships, and contributions of female convicts were frequently glossed over. One might note that silencings have also extended to voices of differences of class, ethnicity (there were non-British prisoners) and sexuality.

<sup>6</sup> The team is led by Dr Angela Thomas, and includes Assoc. Prof. Kristyn Harman, Dr Louise Zamatti, Dr Karen Hall, and Assoc. Prof Meg Keating.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Conlin Casella and Katherine Fennelly, “Ghosts of Sorrow, Sin and Crime: Dark Tourism and Convict Heritage in Van Diemen’s Land, Australia,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 20, no. 3 (2016): 506–520.

to attract tourism revenue.<sup>8</sup> The success of other convict tourism sites suggests that, with a good interpretation plan, the Ross Female Factory could be a significant attraction.

The authors' role in the *Ross Female Factory Research Project* was to develop a script for the augmented reality application. The script draws on the biographies of several convict women, and is to be part of an immersive interpretive visitor experience. In undertaking this work, we were aware of the influence on contemporary Tasmanian heritage discourse of tropes, practices, and expectations associated with what is referred to as “dark tourism/travel” and “dissonant/difficult heritage.”<sup>9</sup> Death, trauma, suffering, and loss have, increasingly, been emphasised in the interpretation of Tasmanian convict sites.<sup>10</sup> This has often seen convicts cast as victims of a cruel system, as “more sinned against than sinning,” which leads to

---

<sup>8</sup> In 2018/19 tourism in Tasmania directly and indirectly contributed about \$3.6 billion or 11.1 per cent to Gross State Product (GSP), the highest in the country. It directly and indirectly supported around 43,200 jobs or about 17.4 per cent of total Tasmanian employment: again, the highest in the country (Source: Tourism Satellite Accounts 2018 - 2019, sourced from Tourism Research Australia). Figures from Tourism Tasmania's Tasmanian Visitor Survey (TVS) show that in the year ending March 2020, over one in five national and international visitors to Tasmania reported that “to experience Tasmania's history” influenced their decision to visit Tasmania (22%, 292,000 visitors; this figure is consistent with the results from the previous five years). Over 40% of national and international visitors (N=527,553) reported actually visiting a historic site or attraction during their stay in Tasmania. Tourism Tasmania adds a disclaimer to their figures: the survey doesn't represent the views of all visitors, and it does not survey the behaviours of domestic (i.e. Tasmanian resident) tourists.

<sup>9</sup> Casella and Conlin, “Ghosts of Sorrow”; Robert Clarke, et al. “Shadow Zones: Dark Travel and Postcolonial Cultures,” *Postcolonial Studies*, 17, no. 3 (2014): 221–235; John J. Lennon and Malcom Foley. *Dark Tourism* (London: Thomson, 2004); Catherine Roberts and Philip R. Stone. “Dark Tourism and Dark Heritage,” *Displaced Heritage: Responses to Disaster, Trauma, and Loss*, edited by Ian Convery et al. (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 9–18; J.E. Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth. *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1996); William Logan and Keir Reeves, ed. *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kristyn Harman and Angela Thomas. “Transporting Visitors into Tasmania's Convict Past.” *Tourism in Tasmania*, edited by Can Seng Ooi and Anne Hardy (Hobart: Forty South Publishing, 2019), 125–137.

simplistic representations within the historical record. The “more sinned against than sinning” trope rehabilitates a once maligned symbol of moral corruption, transforming it into an emblem of settler patrimony: a parent of the nation. This deflects the modern gaze from the lived experiences of convicts, as well as from colonisation’s other impacts: on Aboriginal people (some of whom were also convicts: see Harman 2012), other minorities, and the non-human environment. Tasmania’s heritage has not always been viewed through such a dark lens, yet, as dark tourism has gained popularity, cultural institutions have adapted and, arguably, become complicit in a way of representing the past that carries with it questionable politics and ethics.

### **The Dark Turn in Tasmanian Tourism**

The so-called “MoNA Effect” is indicative of a general orientation toward “darkness” in contemporary Tasmanian tourism. MoNA, the Museum of New and Old Art (MoNA), Hobart, has quickly established a reputation for its provocative collections and displays. Each year the museum hosts a mid-winter festival, Dark Mofo, which has become a major cultural tourism drawcard. Dark Mofo employs theatre of the macabre to provoke publicity; to titillate its audiences and outrage its critics. Yet, rather than being novel, the gothic excesses of MoNA and Dark Mofo belong to a tradition that exploits the violence of the island’s colonial culture. Dark Mofo and MoNA have hit on a winning formula: The so-called “MoNA Effect” is credited with attracting off-island tourists to Hobart, and leading to a revival of the

island's economic fortunes.<sup>11</sup> The MoNA Effect is emblematic of the dark tourist aesthetic in Tasmania: the commodifying of Tasmania as a dark place. Nowhere is this shift in branding more noticeable than in those spaces that curate Tasmania's dark past, namely the state's convict sites. It might be thought that the provocations of Dark Mofo come as a reaction against the kind of authorized heritage discourse that dominated Tasmanian tourism for much of the twentieth century. But it could equally be argued that the dark turn, for all that it celebrates dissonance and perversity, is actually consistent with, and complementary to, Tasmania's authorized heritage discourse, especially insofar as it applies to convict tourism.

Laurajane Smith explains that representations of the past in Western cultural institutions are governed by an "authorised heritage discourse" that "focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for their 'education', and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past."<sup>12</sup> Authorized heritage discourse "naturalize[s] a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage [as well as] certain narratives and cultural and social experiences – often linked to ideas of nation and nationhood."<sup>13</sup>

Smith's characterisation of authorised heritage discourse is reflected in the way Tasmania's past has been displayed for tourists. Historian Richard White,

---

<sup>11</sup> Kate Isobel Booth, "Hobart's Poorer Suburbs are Missing Out on the 'MONA Effect,'" *The Conversation*, 18 June 2018, <https://theconversation.com/hobarts-poorer-suburbs-are-missing-out-on-the-mona-effect-98003>; Miriam McGarry, "The Mona Effect: Regeneration in the Dark," PhD Thesis, University of Tasmania, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 4.



argues that in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, following the cessation of the convict system, and the death of Truganini (apocryphally dubbed “the last Tasmanian”), Tasmania’s elites ignored the past.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, they frequently went out of their way to erase it, as when, after 1877, the government sanctioned the dismantling of the Port Arthur prison complex,<sup>15</sup> and the scavenging of materials from abandoned prisoners’ camps along the main road from Hobart to Launceston.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Tasmanian governments have long appreciated the power of tourism, to promote commerce as well as emigration. To attract tourists, early Tasmanian governments advertised the island as “an angler’s paradise, a wilderness wonderland, a sanatorium of the south, the garden of the south, appleland, the jewel of the Commonwealth,” the “Switzerland of the South,” and a “little England.”<sup>17</sup> Missing from this list is what most tourists of today recognise as essentially Tasmanian: namely, the convict past.

The closure of Port Arthur in 1877 saw a stream of visitors arrive at the site in informal and organized groups. Nineteenth-century tourists also visited other abandoned convict places, though such activities were frowned upon by authorities. Genteel, sophisticated, and middlebrow tourists were directed towards the wonders of Tasmania’s natural estate. Yet, despite official objections, “vulgar convict

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard White, “The Presence of the Past: The Uses of History in Tasmanian Travel Writing,” *Studies in Travel Writing*, 20, no. 1 (2016): 50.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Davidson, “Port Arthur: A Tourist History,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 26 (1995): 653–665.

<sup>16</sup> David Young, *Making Crime Pay: The Evolution of Convict Tourism in Tasmania* (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1996), 12.

<sup>17</sup> White, “Presence of the Past,” 50; Marion Walker, “‘The Switzerland of the South’? Thomas Cook and the Institutionalisation of Tourism in Late Nineteenth Century Tasmania,” *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, 13 (2008): 63–82; Anna Johnston, “Little England: Nineteenth-Century Tasmanian Travel Writing and Settler Colonialism,” *Studies in Travel Writing*, 20, no. 1 (2016): 17–33

tourism” was never suppressed, and, moreover, White and others observe, “from the late 1930s ... the convict past began to acquire a respectable middlebrow audience, in tandem with an attempt to rehabilitate Tasmanian history.”<sup>18</sup> In the writings of journalist Stanley Brogden, E.T. Emmett (former director of the Tasmanian Tourist bureau), and travel writer Charles Barrett, White argues that a new tourist sensibility emerges that is interested in the physical heritage of the convict era. This was a sensibility that “looked back to the past, bringing a more modern outlook to it, with a more comfortable history that could also be aesthetically pleasing.”<sup>19</sup>

White traces the early developments of an authorized heritage discourse in Tasmania that appropriated the convict past for tourist consumption and linked this activity to acceptable performances of settler citizenship. As White states, “for a nervous middle class, [convict tourism came to] be seen as having a civic virtue and was given a respectable legitimacy through government endorsement.”<sup>20</sup> This re-institutionalisation of convict sites turned the gaze of the would-be tourist to the places of convictism, rather than the lives of actual convicts: in the authorized heritage discourse of Tasmanian tourism, architecture dominated. That focus changed after 1988, the bicentenary of Britain’s colonisation of Australia. From that point on, the tourist gaze has been directed less towards architecture and more to the lived experiences of convicts, now cast as the “victims” of the colonial penal system and its cold stone walls.

---

<sup>18</sup> White, “Presence of the Past,” p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> White, “Presence of the Past,” p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> White, “Presence of the Past,” p. 55.

Despite this turn toward “lived experience,” Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Lydia Nicholson note that convict heritage remains associated with convict sites (physical prisons), rather than those other spaces that convicts passed through and, in most cases, spent the majority of their time in (the domestic and commercial spaces where convicts provided “unfree” labour). They also note that the life narrative approach places overwhelming emphasis on individual cases of incarceration (often accentuating the violence suffered by individuals) rather than collective experiences of convicts during and after incarceration. They are suspicious of the way “[a] fixation with penal architecture frames an emphasis placed on the unusual prisoner, or the spectacular act of prisoner violence.”<sup>21</sup> Maxwell-Stewart and Nicholson’s arguments suggest, paradoxically, how much and yet how little has changed in the authorized heritage discourse of Tasmanian convictism: because while the aesthetics have altered, the guiding ideology remains: to render the convict at once an idealised and virtuous “parent” of the nation, and, equally, an attractive commodity for heritage tourism.

Yet heritage discourse is not static or monolithic. Smith develops her idea of authorized heritage discourse within the context of an expansive understanding of heritage *per se*. For Smith, heritage is a cultural process that is intimately involved in the construction and negotiation of identity. It is a performance embodying “remembrance and commemoration,” while at the same time constituting and validating “the very idea of ‘heritage.’” Authorized heritage

---

<sup>21</sup> Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, and Lydia Nicholson, “Penal Transportation, Family History, and Convict Tourism,” *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, edited by Jacqueline Z. Wilson, et al., (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 714.

discourse regulates how heritage is understood and which versions of the past are most valued. Therefore, “heritage is ... inherently dissonant and contested,” but authorised heritage discourse reduces conflict to “case specific issues” and obscures heritage’s basic contribution to “the cultural process of identity formation.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, while authorized heritage discourse accommodates dissonant views, it does so in a regulated way, usually by framing such views as relating to exceptional instances. The histories of Tasmanian convict heritage tourism provided by Maxwell-Stewart and Nicholson, Casella, Davidson, Young, White, and others, demonstrate this play between antagonism and accommodation that can be observed in “official” authorised versions of Tasmania’s convict past and “alternative” accounts. This is an ongoing process that can be witnessed by visitors to the state’s convict sites today.<sup>23</sup>

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of Tasmanian heritage sites have developed exhibitions that deploy the “low-brow” aesthetic of digging up the past and re-presenting it through sophisticated live or recorded performances. *Pandemonium—The Convict Film Experience*, at the National Trust-administered

---

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Dealing with dissonant, difficult, or dark tourist sites with the context of heritage management has been a theme of numerous studies over the last few decades: see Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 1997; Logan and Reeves, ed., *Places of Pain and Shame*, 2008; As publications like *Place of Pain and Shame: Dealing with ‘Difficult Heritage’* (2008) and Daniel H. Olsen and Maximiliano E. Korstanje eds. *Dark Tourism and Pilgrimage* (Wallingford: CABI, 2020). Like these studies, our is concerned with the “mainstreaming” of dark heritage and tourism. Yet, so many previous studies approach dark tourism as though it is somehow exceptional, marginal, or aberrant. However, an examination of Tasmanian tourism discourses refutes such positioning: in Tasmania, as well elsewhere, dark heritage tourism has become a standard practice. Smith’s concept of *authorized heritage discourse*, despite its limitations (see, for instance, Joar Skrede and Herdis Hølleland, “Uses of Heritage and beyond: Heritage Studies viewed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Realism,” *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 18, no. 1, pp. 77–96), provides a powerful heuristic through which to map and understand the process by which dark history can be assimilated to hegemonic discourses and understandings of the past.

Hobart Penitentiary, is a good example. The experience is billed as “an immersive audio-visual experience projected four metres tall onto the walls within the original Penitentiary Chapel where the convicts actually sat.”<sup>24</sup> Situating the Hobart Penitentiary as “the dark heart of the convict system in Tasmania,” and drawing on biographies of nineteenth-century inmates, *Pandemonium* uses sound and lighting effects and curated life stories, to elicit emotional reactions to the horror and tragedy—and in some cases black comedy—of its subjects. *Pandemonium* depicts nineteenth-century Tasmanian society as brutish and unjust: as the name implies, “a place of demons,” with its allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and its rhyme with “Vandemonian.” This is a far cry from the heritage discourse promoted by the state in the mid- to late twentieth century, which emphasised not personal suffering but a narrative of Statehood constituted by variants on the “march of progress” and the “civilizing mission”: Tasmania as an outpost of European modernity. However, while the dark turn offers a response to colonisation’s negative consequences, especially those affecting Indigenous Australians, it nevertheless reinforces an identical discourse: by focussing on brutish violence, and injustice, the methods employed by recent dark interpretations fail to address the negative effects of ostensibly “civil” or “progressive” impulses and intentions.

*Pandemonium* is impressive, and it demonstrates Smith’s insights about the nature of heritage *as* performance. It also exemplifies what Eamonn Carrabine describes as the “iconic power” of dark tourist sites:<sup>25</sup> not only does the film reach

---

<sup>24</sup> See [www.nationaltrust.org.au/pandemonium](http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/pandemonium).

<sup>25</sup> Carrabine, Eamonn, “Iconic Power, Dark Tourism, and the Spectacle of Suffering,” *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, edited by Jacqueline Z. Wilson, et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13–36.

for iconicity in the massive scale and disturbing setting of its projection, but it also reiterates and reinforces the conservative foundational narrative of Australian nationhood: the convict as “parent” of the nation, “more sinned against than sinning.” But to say that *Pandemonium* is an “authentic” representation of history stretches the point. The way that *Pandemonium* equates the horrors of invasion and the subsequent attempted genocide of Indigenous Tasmanians with the “horrors” of convictism, risks subsuming Indigenous suffering within a national narrative that affirms settler hegemony. Despite its obvious feminist challenges to the patriarchal elements of the conventional convict mythology, the same might be said of the experience of visitors to the Cascades Female Factory, another popular Hobart tourist site.

In the valley of South Hobart at the foot of *kunanyi*/Mount Wellington, the Cascades Female Factory was originally built as a distillery in 1824. The first “yard” of the Cascades Female Factory was refurbished and opened as a Female House of Correction in 1828. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2010<sup>26</sup> and administered by the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, the Cascades Female Factory is arguably the most intact female prison of the nineteenth-century British colonial convict system. High stone walls surround three yards including the old superintendent’s cottage. Apart from a temporary visitors’ centre in the central yard,<sup>27</sup> no other buildings remain, but the outlines of former buildings

---

<sup>26</sup> There are 11 convict sites in Australia that are included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In Tasmania these include the Port Arthur Historic Site and the Coal Mines Historic Site on the Tasman Peninsula; the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart; the Darlington Probation Station, Maria Island; and the Woolmers and Brickendon Estates near Launceston.

<sup>27</sup> A more extensive interpretation centre has been planned to replace this.

(laundries, hospitals, solitary confinement cells, and so on) are clearly marked in the well levelled earth.

The “Heritage Tour,” which takes around 45 minutes, is an explicit invitation to consider the female convicts as “sinners or sinned against”.<sup>28</sup> The information and stories focus on the suffering of women prisoners and their children. The tour is complemented by an environmental theatre piece, “Her Story.” Billed as “an accurate and emotional depiction of the harsh life within the Cascades Female Factory in 1833),” the performance features two actors: a female performer who plays Mary Jane, a resilient English convict, based on a real-life character; the male performer shifts between an “overseer”—a bullying ex-convict—and a “doctor”—a sympathetic character. Touted as “living history,” the performance begins with visitors welcomed by Mary Jane and “processed” as though they were newly arrived convicts. The tour proceeds through different sections of the factory. The degrading and often lethal conditions of the site are grimly exposed. There is much audience engagement, although visitors cannot ask direct questions. The audience is, however, actively encouraged to empathize with Mary Jane through harrowing depictions of her experiences: her confinement in solitary cells, wearing of the iron collar, and separation from her child. Her experiences are portrayed in a manner that is moving, without sacrificing pathos for sensationalism. Indeed, the story offers hope for Mary Jane’s reunification with her son and “husband” and a long life as a settler after release.

---

<sup>28</sup> See [www.femalefactory.org.au/tour/heritage-tour](http://www.femalefactory.org.au/tour/heritage-tour).

Ironically, although “Her Story,” focuses on the female experience, and is inspired by the feminist historiography of the Cascade Female Factory Research Centre, it is consistent with the conventions and tropes of male convict narratives. For white Australian visitors (the primary audience for these performances) the tour encourages a highly sentimental response that occludes “other” histories associated with the site. For example, as Kristyn Harman and Angela Thomas write, the performance leaves “those unfamiliar with Tasmania’s convict past with an impression that all female convicts were lower class white women. The many women of colour and the few Indigenous women incorporated into the convict system were rendered invisible.”<sup>29</sup> Harman and Thomas note the absence of any reference to Indigenous Tasmanian ties to this site, such as the fact that Truganini was buried there in 1873 – “a woman whose death, in the wake of the Tasmanian genocide, was mourned globally as she was incorrectly considered to be the last of the Tasmanians.”<sup>30</sup> In its depiction of history, then, “Her Story” is progressive and conservative: pushing against the traditional patriarchal narratives of convictism, yet obscuring aspects of the convict history that challenge white settler hegemony.

Jacqueline Wilson observes that, “social memory is often affirmed, and national identity thus served, by those sites that embody the darkest narratives.”<sup>31</sup> If this is the case, then what kind of national identity is affirmed in the dark

---

<sup>29</sup> Harman and Thomas, “Transporting Visitors,” 132–133.

<sup>30</sup> Harman and Thomas. “Transporting Visitors,” 133. The remains of Truganini were exhumed and displayed at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery until 1951. In 1976 they were cremated and the ashes scattered according to her wishes.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, Jacqueline, “Dark Tourism and National Identity in the Australian History Curriculum: Unexamined Questions Regarding Educational Visits to Sites of Human Suffering,” *Tourism and National Identities: An International Perspective*, edited by Elspeth Frew and Leanne White, (London: Routledge, 2011), 203.



narratives performed in heritage sites like the Hobart Penitentiary and Cascades Female Factory? The stories told at these sites aim to elicit empathetic responses—to engender in visitors a frisson of identification with the unfortunate individuals who once passed time in these places. Such tactics used are immersive and far more realistic than the clinical depictions of Tasmanian convict history that prevailed in earlier times. But they remain limited in their ability to convey the complexity of convict life, and the ambivalent roles convicts and convictism played in colonization. The dark turn’s emphasis on convict suffering relies on a normative “convict”: one mainstream audiences can identify with, who does not significantly challenge social norms. Emphasis on the experiences of individual characters often bypasses important contextual aspects of the colonial world that might help us make sense of the past and inform discourse about the long-term effects of convictism. It is against such considerations of the ideological weight of contemporary convict mythologies, that the authors approached developing a script to dramatize the lives of convict women at the Ross Female Factory.

Sites like the Ross Female Factory demonstrate the functions of narrative and performance in the re-animation of history for tourism. Narrative and its performance are literally all there is in a space where the physical traces of history are faint. The Ross Female Factory Project team’s challenge is to develop ways of telling those narratives that are responsive to the prior inhabitants and the broader context in which the site was established, as well its present stakeholders: visitors, the local community, historians, and so on. The history of the Ross Female Factory contains ample material for tales of tragedy and melodrama. It was a horrible place

where, despite some good intentions, awful things were allowed to occur. It certainly invites a “dark” approach to interpretation.

Smith writes:

heritage may ... be a resource that is used to challenge and redefine received values and identities by a range of subaltern groups. Heritage is not necessarily about the stasis of cultural values and meanings, but may equally be about cultural change. It may, for instance, be about reworking the meanings of the past as the cultural, social and political needs of the present change and develop, or it may be about challenging the ways in which groups and communities are perceived and classified by others.<sup>32</sup>

Smith’s point is that heritage is “inherently dissonant and contested”;<sup>33</sup> open to change and negotiation. And this makes heritage an important focus of debate about vital themes of social life: history, identity, and citizenship.

The Ross Female Factory is a site rich in potential for storytelling that challenges the sensational yet comforting myths of convict tourism. In view of the Ross Female Factory Project’s aim, to produce a story-driven immersive experience for visitors to the site, Brozek adopted a narrative-based approach structured around the life stories of people historically documented as having spent time at the site. The way those stories were juxtaposed was used, as will be show, to avoid offering a totalised narrative and, rather, to suggest a diversity of possible experiences and interpretations.

---

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 4.

The stories of the inmates and guardians of the Ross Female Factory, have come to us through a variety of avenues including the archives assembled by the Female Convicts Research Centre, digitised newspapers and periodicals, and other archival materials. Some longer texts contain references to women who spent time at the Ross Female Factory, like Meredith Hodgson's works on the Leake family (settlers at Rosedale, near Ross, to whom a number of women from the Ross Female Factory were assigned).<sup>34</sup> Available sources reveal historical and demographic biases that result in normalising effects, in that what is available mostly records the experiences of white women transported from the British Isles. In 2011, a series of collected biographies were published by the Convict Women's Press – the Convict Lives series, edited by Lucy Frost. *Convict Lives at the Ross Female Factory* contains the stories of 29 inmates of that institution. And, in addition to the historical sources, the Ross Female Factory has, since 1992, been the focus of archaeological investigations. This activity complements the historical record and provides often surprising data suggesting ways various parts of the site might have been used and about “material expressions of gender identity.”<sup>35</sup> Brozek, the second author, used these resources in drafting her short playscript “The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey.”

---

<sup>34</sup> Alice Meredith Hodgson, *The Convict Letter Writer* (Hobart: Forty South Publishing, 2018); Alice Meredith Hodgson, *Miss Leake's Journal*. (Hobart: Research Tasmania, 2014). These are based on the Leake Papers and suggest another possibly useful repository of information about the women of the Ross Female Factory in settler records.

<sup>35</sup> Casella, *Archaeology*, 9.

## Scripting the Dark Turn: Crafting “The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey”

### SCENE I

*Ross Female Factory, Christmas Eve 1848. Anne Mary Dougan is alone in the hospital, quietly singing “Hey Diddle Diddle” to herself as she makes up a bed and wipes clean the headboard (badly). She stops and sighs, putting a hand to her stomach.*

**Anne:** Do y’ think I’m a dish Banty?<sup>36</sup> Your daddy did, he said to me, “you’re a dishy little thing”. “Y’ mu’nt go on so”, I said, but I thought me face might be shining. It were a full moon y’ see. I were the dish and he were the spoon. (from “The *Caorthann* amulet and the Turkey”)

My response to Tasmania’s convict past has been significantly influenced by the experiences of growing up in Tasmania, which have, in turn, shaped my understanding of myself as a settler “Tasmanian.” As a (matrilineal) descendant of convicts and free settlers of Tasmania, yet, also the offspring of a refugee from war-torn mid-twentieth century Europe, I have felt ambivalent about my presence in Tasmania and that I need to find an ethical language by which to represent it. My maternal (Tasmanian) genealogy is well documented, and all the foregone fossicking in the family tree has contributed to my sense of uncertainty.

There is undeniably a personal urge to vindicate the travails of convict ancestors, and through them, to *work out* one’s sense of place. With this comes a

---

<sup>36</sup> Coined, from ‘bantling’ – baby, similar to buntling, could be pronounced closer to ‘Bunty’. Thought to be derived from the bands used to wrap infants (swaddling).

risk of focussing undue attention on specific convicts' lives, as well as vindicating convicts as a class. Greg Jackman warns,

Visiting convict places, acquiring convict particulars, and imagining convict martyrs are ways for those who subscribe to ideas of a nation founded on convict experiences and values to fulfil their desires for an ethnic homeland and native sovereignty. For them the detailed history or archaeology of a convict place is not what is important. Rather, what is important is that the existence, content, and experience of the place meet their emotional and psychological need to belong.<sup>37</sup>

Being invited to contribute to the Ross Female Factory Project was a challenge I did not take lightly, for I knew I would need to confront personal demons. One of these was certainly the legacy of a sanitised Australian high school history education. This immured me against convict history for many years. However, my mother worked at the Port Arthur Historic Site, so as a child I had “the keys” to that and other heritage sites. For my friends and I, the battlements, spires, and massive sandstone blocks of these ruins readily lent themselves to reimagination as the kinds of romantic features Australia seemed sorely to lack: castles, for example. Such experiences made me well aware of the “lure of the other”: an urge to reconstruct history into a more appealing form. That tendency may have been exacerbated by the rise of the gothic aesthetic in Tasmania over the nineteen-nineties and early 2000s, but, ironically, I experienced such trends as

---

<sup>37</sup> Greg Jackman, “From Stain to Saint: Ancestry, Archaeology, and Agendas in Tasmania’s Convict Heritage—a View from Port Arthur,” *Historical Archaeology*, 43, no. 3 (2009): 110.

antagonistic. With the dark turn towards an increasingly mainstream gothic aesthetic, repetition deprived that aesthetic of much of its emotive power. Meanwhile, culturally, our thinking about Tasmania's past has evolved. <sup>38</sup> What Bain Attwood refers to as "the Aboriginal Turn" in Australian historical discourse emerged at the end of the last century, illuminating the importance of ethically representing Aboriginal histories and Australia's wider historical canvas. <sup>38</sup> Alongside this have been the questions of human entanglement with the nonhuman world. There are complex issues that ought to be considered by anyone writing historical narratives – issues that the dark turn undoubtedly grapples with, but which it risks failing to do justice to.

Concern with broader questions of justice are, ultimately, what drove me towards wanting to understand the real complexities of convict lives, especially those of my ancestors. James Boyce's *Van Diemen's Land* (2010) depicted early Van Demonians in a way I thought I recognised – a people who were not just victims of their own past mistakes and struggling to survive the convict system, but also a people actively discovering a new land and eyeing, with hopes and fears, a future. <sup>39</sup>

For those with emplaced convict heritage, personal questions are unavoidable: when histories relate to one's personal lineage, the urge to exculpate convict ancestors, both individually and generically, must be managed. Personal concerns may contribute to history writers focussing excessively on certain themes

---

<sup>38</sup> Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Black Inc, 2008.

such as the settler-colonial past (at the expense of other periods); the normalisation of significant individuals; and, human and social preoccupations at the expense of broader environmental issues.

Ultimately, despite a certain ambivalence about writing Tasmanian history, I thought that the Ross Female Factory Project offered an opportunity to wrestle with my concerns and provide a personal response that could contribute to opening up what I had experienced as troubling heritage discourse – a dark turn that failed to do justice to a past which continues to have significant ongoing personal and society-wide implications. The brief for production of the manuscript was that it should be suitable for the production of a virtual reality video prototype by the Ross Female Factory Project team. What was expected was something that might become a commercially successful production. I did my best to ignore this, however, and focussed on delivering a storyline that assuaged my doubts about writing heritage ethically, and offering others the opportunity to investigate their own understandings and responses to Tasmanian convict heritage. This involved a push back against the dark turn whilst simultaneously building on elements of it that I found stimulating.

**Catherine** (shouting): Mouchen!<sup>40</sup>

*Retreats, paces, returns to the grate: Mouchen ye bodach!*<sup>41</sup>

Come here to me Mouchen. I know ye ken hear me!

---

<sup>40</sup> Mrs Mouchen is a woman Catherine was found guilty of threatening with a knife, for which she was sentenced to 14 days in ‘the cells’ (see her convict record).

<sup>41</sup> Boor, pig or low-life.

You know what Johns was giving out on that snaidhm an Tríonóid Ró-Naofa<sup>42</sup> in the hospital? A lover's knot! What would she know, that devil worshipper? Said it was a witches' charm. Then she took off her shoe and was after us buryin' it to keep the wicked spirits out. Said we needed 'good magic'. I took her shoe and slammed it at the window for a good 'n' pure reason – to let the Holy Father's rain in and wash you sinners all away an' down t' Hell.

**Catherine** (*crossing herself*): In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.  
*She lifts the hem of her skirt and with a swift, powerful movement, tears it all the way up to the waistband.*

The script imagines episodes from the lives of four real women whose convict records show that they were at some time held at the Ross Female Factory. Historically documented events in their lives were used to piece together their possible character and suggest a storyline. The women were selected primarily for their varied personal qualities, characteristics that I thought were interesting and which I hoped would stimulate curiosity and engagement in the audience. This resulted in the selection of women who had occupied the site at different times: Anne Mary Dougan in 1848, Elizabeth Tyrell in 1850, Catherine Ward in 1851 and Bridget Mullins in 1853. I also found that I had, at my disposal, two women who were probably Irish, and two from Yorkshire. This offered an opportunity to

---

<sup>42</sup> Gaelic literal translation of 'Holy Trinity knot'.



develop the script around a cultural “dialogue”, exploring the women’s origins and potentially resisting the stereotype of the convict as urban.

The short script utilises dialect and idiom from Ireland and England. The details of each soliloquy were selected to tell a common story – one woman relates how she ended up in the female factory after becoming pregnant, another details the effects of solitary confinement and how she sought protection in the arms of another female prisoner. Along the way, the script introduces elements of the women’s economic lives (including the use of buttons as currency and consideration of items of black market value), and their spiritual lives, with the *Caorthann* or triquetra symbol providing a unifying motif.<sup>43</sup> All of these aspects of the script relate in some way to existing archaeological and biographical information about the site and its inmates.

Adopting the *Caorthann* symbol as a central motif offered an opportunity to tap into recent interest in convicts’ “magical” and pagan beliefs (for example, in Ian Evans’ and Ian Morrison’s documentation of magical signs and symbols in convict buildings in Tasmania).<sup>44</sup> Alan Garner has suggested that lingering pre-Christian beliefs held by rural British people might have enabled them to relate to Aboriginal people and culture more readily than the Christian upper classes.<sup>45</sup> The

---

<sup>43</sup> The *caorthann* (otherwise known as a *triquetra*) resembles a Celtic knot or Christian trinity symbol. It can be interpreted in various ways by people of different spiritual persuasions, Christian and non-Christian, Catholic and Protestant. The Gaelic “caorthann” name was adopted in the script to destabilise and challenge the audience by drawing attention to the linguistic and cultural diversity of convict women by featuring Anne’s (possible) Irish background.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Joseph Evans, *Touching Magic: Deliberately concealed objects in old Australian Houses and Buildings*, PhD Thesis, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, 2010; Ian Morrison, “Colonial Cunning Folk, Part One: William Allison,” *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Blog*, Libraries Tasmania, 2018; Ian Morrison, “Colonial Cunning Folk, Part Two: Moses Jewitt and Benjamin Nokes,” *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Blog*, Libraries Tasmania, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Garner, *Strandloper* (London: Harvill Press, 1996).

*Caorthann* motif allows the script to leverage off some current trends, including aspects of the dark aesthetic, and James Boyce’s theory of a Van Demonian culture (which he suggests, arose from mingling and knowledge transfer between early and emancipated convicts, and Tasmanian Aborigines).<sup>46</sup> Focussing the narrative around the amulet motif also allowed the personal and cultural diversity of the characters to be conveyed, opening the text to more varied interpretations and avenues for engagement.

Given the setting of “The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey” at an important women’s prison site, it was critical that the script consider current thinking about *women* convicts. In the late 1990s, historian Kay Daniels highlighted the importance of understanding the factors that affected convict women’s life experiences; not just their individual characteristics, but also the institutional, social and cultural environments in which they were embedded.<sup>47</sup> Daniels’ work has contributed to recent trends that see heritage narratives often focussed on the experiences of actual individuals and their relations with the system. This strategy lends itself to consumer tourism because, as we have seen, it uses methods that encourage direct empathetic and emotional engagement with characters. But the downside of this approach is its reliance on techniques that normalise individuals and experiences. To counter this, “The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey” attempts

---

<sup>46</sup> Between 1803 and around 1817, most convicts in Van Diemen’s Land were fairly free to move about the colony, working where they found work and potentially mixing with Aboriginal people, as had sealers on the Bass Strait Islands. After 1818 the assignment system was introduced, with far greater regulation, paving the way for the arrival of very much greater numbers of convicts. These changes were paralleled by the decline in the Aboriginal population, increased distancing between Aboriginal people and colonists, and ultimately the Black Wars and removal of Aboriginal people from their lands. All of these events restricted opportunities for any ongoing cultural exchange.

<sup>47</sup> Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998), xi.

to open a dialogue between quite different characters and not necessarily ones with whom it is easy to empathise. There is also little or no exposition or introduction to the characters. Though based on historical figures, the audience is given only scant information about who the characters are and where they came from. Their stories are also left unresolved. Alongside the text's juxtaposition of varied characters, these porous edges aim to encourage the audience to reflect on the inner nature of the characters, as well as how place, institutions, society or other aspects of life could influence the way lives are shaped.

“The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey” explicitly invites supplementation on a number of levels, beyond the obvious aspects of performance. It aims to stimulate personal interpretation and questioning, and allow space for the audience to imaginatively extend any of the script's narrative threads in multiple directions. It is hoped that this would enable people of different backgrounds, cultures and experience to interpret and connect to the site in diverse ways and also, perhaps, alleviate some of the issues previously identified – of limiting the scope of the story to a specific space and time. For example, storylines could potentially be extended to explore connections into deeper or more recent time. The individuals featured need not necessarily retain their central position in the narrative, but they could be superseded by other characters, as story itself takes precedence. The production of a short, essentially unresolved script functions as a way of forestalling the kind of sympathetic identification that risks framing the convict narratives and vignettes within the authorised heritage discourse of the female convicts as more sinned against than sinning. The script has also been crafted with a view to being

performed as part of an augmented reality product. What's obvious though, is that this performance itself requires augmentation: a critical interpretive framework through which audience members are able to understand the performance's many rich symbols, stories, and suggestions, as well as its overall narrative strategies.

The idea of using augmented and virtual reality applications in tourism and heritage sites is by no means new. As the technology and software, and hence capabilities and applications, have developed in the last 20 years, tourism operators, cultural institutions, and researchers have become both excited and concerned about the implications of using augmented and virtual reality—how it transforms the intellectual and emotional experience of heritage sites.<sup>48</sup> Much of the research published on the topic appears to extol the benefits of augmented reality: its ability to create value for visitors and tourism sites; its power to enhance the values of sustainability; its power to enhance the representational and affective appeal of sites. Less prominent, however, is critical reflection on the potentially conservative implications of the technology and its uses. Despite the growing number of studies in this area, for example, relatively little is understood about the impacts on visitors<sup>49</sup> and of the implications on such technologies for, for example, the pedagogical ambitions of the site.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Nadia Magnenat-Thalmann and George Papagiannakis, "Virtual Worlds and Augmented Reality in Cultural Heritage Applications," *Recording, Modeling and Visualization of Cultural Heritage*, edited by Emmanuel Baltsavias et al. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 419–430; Frances Tscheu and Dimitrios Buhalis, "Augmented Reality at Cultural Heritage Sites," *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2016: Proceedings of the International Conference in Bilbao, Spain, February 2-5, 2016*, edited by Alessandro Inversini and Roland Schegg (New York: Springer, 2016), 607–691.

<sup>49</sup> Dai-In Han, "User Experience Model for Augmented Reality Applications in Urban Heritage Tourism," *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 13, no. 1 (2018): 46–61.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Challenor and Minhua Ma, "A Review of Augmented Reality Applications for History Education and Heritage Visualisation," *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction*, 3 (2019): 39.

#### SCENE IV

*Ross Female Factory, Autumn, 1853. Git (Bridget Mullins) is sitting in a solitary cell but the door is slightly open and her posture is relaxed. She is smoking a small clay pipe and has an olive-coloured glass bottle beside her, from which she occasionally drinks.*

**Git singing:** Oh, that I was an itty bitty bird,  
with me wings trimmed oh so bravely o!  
Oh, that I was a fine turkey  
with my fan-tail oh so fanned oh-o!  
Mason says he'll have a fine fowl  
For his dinner oh yeah, he thinks so oh.

*She sighs deeply and smokes. Then starts tracing a triquetra pattern on the ground. She adds a turkey's tail feathers on the top and turns the downwards loops into wings.*

#### **Conclusion**

Allowing dissonant views of history to be expressed through a heritage site requires a conscious and tactical approach. In contemporary Tasmania, the dark turn has been harnessed as an aesthetic strategy to capture visitors' attention and invite them into a deeper engagement with the heritage of specific spaces. Yet, rather than challenging traditional versions of the past that reinforce white hegemony, the narrative performances at such sites can be counter-reactive. We have argued that

despite their gestures towards telling “alternative” stories about convictism and the lives of individual convicts, in particular the complicated lives of convict women, sites like the Penitentiary Chapel and the Cascades Female Factory encourage a moral view of the convict as “more sinned against than sinning.” That moral view carries conservative political implications: it tends to promote a view of the Anglo-Celtic convict as the “parent” of the nation that excludes or silences other aspects of colonial history, especially the dispossession and ruin of Aboriginal people and their culture. How to tell the convict story at a specific site—how to reanimate that site—in a manner that eschews the distorting politically retrograde sentimentality that is observable elsewhere in contemporary Tasmanian tourism, is the question that we faced in our work with the *Ross Female Factory*. In answering that question, we devised the playscript “The *Caorthann* Amulet and the Turkey.” The question of whether the script in performance is successful in its attempt to challenge the authorised heritage discourse that structures so many of the heritage performances on display at Tasmanian heritage tourism sites would be a worthwhile subject for future research. Visitor interviews could provide insight into audience response to the script itself and the audience’s engagement with the site and the animation strategy adopted.