

Who Were the Convicts?

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TIS A QUARTER-CENTURY since the Australian in London risked hearing languid sneers directed at his criminal ancestry. This colonial vestige was already dying a generation ago. Nevertheless, it was part of English attitudes to Australians before 1960, and especially before World War II. When it appeared, it would send upper-middle-class Australians into paroxysms of social embarrassment. None wanted to have convict ancestors, and few could be perfectly sure that some felon did not perch like a crow in their family tree. Fifty years ago, convict ancestry was a stain to be hidden.

Working people in Australia saw their convict past differently. Growing up free and reaching for social trust, children born in the colony—the Currency, to use the common colonial term, many of whom had convict ancestry—might be obsessed with respectability. But memories lived on as social myths, particularly among the Irish, who never forgot what treatment their convict forbears received on the Fatal Shore. As we shall see, the System inadvertently produced Australia's first folk-heroes, the bushrangers, most of them escaped prisoners. The basic class division of early colonial Australia—guards versus prisoners—lived on as a metaphor of future disputes there. It was something to think about at the Trades Union meeting, and on the picket lines. It provided a scheme of historical oppression. The Good Squire, the Benevolent Landowner, the Paternal Peer, all those figures of property who rise to modify the simple picture of early nineteenth-century labor relations in England—and who did in fact exist—were not features of the mythic Australian landscape. Instead, there were the harsh overseer, the treacherous “special,” the flinty officer, the brute with the whip, and under them, the suffering convict.

From these twin pressures to forget and to mythologize arose the popular Australian stereotype of convict identity. It says that convicts

were innocent victims of unjust laws, torn from their families and flung into exile on the world's periphery for offenses that would hardly earn a fine today. They poached rabbits or stole bread to feed their starving offspring—and they had to, because their rulers had so brutally mismanaged England that they could no longer survive as honest yeomen in a collapsing rural economy. Crushed between economic forces they could not understand and laws they had not written, they were the people Thomas Gray apostrophized in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1750) and Oliver Goldsmith in “The Deserted Village” (1770).

The stereotype insists that the human fodder of transportation sprang from the root of British decency, the yeoman in the rural village. This would be given allegorical form by William Blake, whose vision of industrial desolation mingled with accounts he had heard of the Pacific thief colony, the “Horrible rock far in the south,” where “my sons, exiled from my breast, pass to & fro before me,” and

The Corn is turn'd to thistles & the apples into poison,
The birds of song to murderous crows . . .

The commonest tag in Australian ideas about the convicts' class identity came from Gray's “Elegy,” where, musing on the decent obscurity of the village dead, the poet evoked a yeoman resisting the power of the enclosing landowner: “Some village-Hampden that with dauntless breast / The little tyrant of his fields withheld.” Hence, wrote J. L. and B. Hammond in 1913 in their influential study *The Village Laborer, 1760–1832*, “the village Hampdens of that generation sleep by the shores of Botany Bay.” From there it was only a step to the full form of the myth, stated more than sixty years ago in the rhetorical question of an Australian historian, Arnold Wood: “Is it not clearly a fact that the atrocious criminals remained in England, while their victims, innocent and manly, founded the Australian democracy?”²

It was no fact, but a stout and consoling fiction. The innocence of convicts as a class (if not their manliness) was first exposed to criticism by Manning Clark in the 1950s and finally demolished with statistical analysis by L. L. Robson in 1965.³ Basing his work on a “random” sampling of one name in twenty in the Home Office Papers in the London Public Record Office, which list the names, ages, places of trial and crimes of about 150,000 of the transporees, Robson was able to show that, far from being first offenders, one-half to two-thirds of the convicts carried previous convictions. Eight in ten were thieves, and only a minuscule fraction could be classed as political offenders. Most were city-dwellers, not villagers or peasants. Nearly all were propertyless laborers

rather than smallholders. Three-quarters were single, and their average age was about 26. The idea of the convict that one might extract from the earliest transportation indents—an old woman who stole cheese, a mere child, a harmless wigmaker's 'prentice or a sensitive Scottish painter like Thomas Watling—is very far from the whole truth about the majority of convicts who came later.

The ferocity and scope of eighteenth-century capital statutes created, as we have seen, an extraordinary range of hanging crimes. The erratic mercy of the courts could, and did, transmute such sentences to exile in Australia. Hence, many early convicts, up to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, went on board the "Bay ships" for small, often ridiculously slight, offenses. But after 1815, the general tendency [to which, of course there were thousands of exceptions] was to reserve transportation for less trivial crimes. By 1818, the first stirrings of postwar legal reform were felt in England. A parliamentary committee urged that some kinds of theft (though by no means all) should be punished by transportation, not death, and that forgery should cease to be a capital offense. Sir Robert Peel's attempts to reform and consolidate the criminal statutes in the 1820s did have a gradual effect on men in the dock. And as the number of hanging crimes shrank, so the volume of "transportable" offenses grew.

There was no third choice, for England had no penitentiary system, could not keep her felons at home and would not be forced to do so until the Prison Acts of 1835 and 1839. Consequently, each liberalization of the law helped to increase the flow of convicts to Australia. Only extreme Tories saw the period 1820 to 1840 as a time of "reckless" liberalization of the criminal law. But a sense of humanity did creep forward. By 1837, hanging was mainly restricted to cases of murder, while crime after crime—forgery, cattle-theft, housebreaking—was relegated to the less terrible and magical status of a "transportable" offense. Slowly, the English authorities acknowledged the mistakes and fantasies that had led their predecessors to fetishize the death penalty. But the real rise of transportation began, not with the law itself, but with its new enforcers: the "peelers," the English police, established by Sir Robert Peel in 1827. A police force meant a huge rise, not in gross crime, but in successful arrests and convictions. Likewise, the abandonment of transportation was not caused by any fall in crime, but by three other factors: the growing moral and political opposition to the System among English reformers in the 1830s, the growth of an alternative English penitentiary system and the Australians' own opposition to a continuous dumping of fresh criminals on what, after 50 years of settlement, they had come to view as their soil.

A graph of transportation to Australia would run fairly flat (though uphill) from 1788 to 1816, then climb more steeply, shoot to a peak in the mid-1830s and then flatten again. After 1850, the English prison and penitentiary system could hold nearly all the criminals the courts could convict. Transportation to New South Wales finished in 1849; to Van Diemen's Land, in 1853; and by 1868, when the last convict ship from England discharged its Irish prisoners on the other side of the continent, in Western Australia, transportation was part unpleasant memory and part unhealed wound.

Thus we can roughly distinguish four phases of transportation. The first—"primitive" transportation, as it were—runs from 1787 to 1810. It began, as we have seen, as an attempt to clear the English hulks and jails and to post a British strategic presence in the Pacific. It involved relatively few convicts: in round figures, about 9,300 men and 2,500 women from England and Ireland (no more than 7 percent of the total number who would eventually be transported). They started coming out at a rate of about 1,000 people per year, but this fell by half when the Napoleonic Wars began in 1793 because convicts were needed for dockyard labor. Some were press-ganged into the Navy, or even dragged into the uniformed rabble of the British Army. England could not spare the ships to transport them "beyond the seas" to Australia.

The second stage belongs to the two decades between 1811 and 1830. Around 1811, the transportation rate began to rise again. The accumulation in jails and hulks had cleared, but the government felt that, having set up its criminal waste-disposal system, it should keep using it. The sharp rise in this second phase came after 1815, when the wars ended and England was struck by a succession of internal crises. Its population was increasing out of hand, between 1801 and 1841 it nearly doubled, from 10.1 to 18.1 million, and its fastest rate of growth in this period was in the decade 1811–20. Workers were pinched between falling wages and rising prices, the mechanization of hand trades created runaway unemployment, and the inexorable spread of enclosure was driving people from the country to the slum. Hence the crime wave which so troubled England's rulers after the war, and which prepared Parliament to accept Peel's novelty, a police force. Once the police existed, the supply of felons rose. So there was a great pressure driving the convicts onto the transports—and a corresponding suction at the other end of their journey, Australia, where the growth of the pastoral industry after 1815 created a ravenous demand for convict labor. From 1811 to 1820, some 15,400 male and 2,000 female convicts sailed out from England and Ireland. From 1821 to 1839, the corresponding round figures were 28,700 men and 4,100 women. So in this second phase, about 50,200 people—some

31 percent of the total number of transportees—went to Australia. By 1830, the System was mature and working at the full stretch of its efficiency.

In the third stage, 1831 to 1840, the System peaked and began its decline. In those years, 43,500 male and 7,700 female convicts sailed for Australia—a total of 51,200 people, more than the previous two decades' decantation on the Fatal Shore. The most active year was 1833, when 6,779 prisoners of both sexes were shipped to Sydney and Van Diemen's Land. By then, transportation had been accepted by most respectable Englishmen as the best of all answers to crime; the idea of the penitentiary was still a Benthamite hypothesis in England, although it was being tested by the novelty-loving Americans across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, the English Prison Acts were passed in that decade, and they distinctly signalled the end of transportation. By the late 1830s, a strong current of opinion, fed by anti-slavery sentiment, was running against Botany Bay. English liberals were hearing more about the System and were shocked by what they heard, especially when the sensational and tendentious Molesworth report was published in 1838. Meanwhile, native-born Australians had come to hate the stigma of convictry—and the competition from assigned convict labor. In 1840, all transportation to New South Wales ceased.

This prepared the fourth and last stage of transportation. After 1840, convicts were of diminishing use as pioneers, and even their value as slave labor was falling. England kept sending them to Van Diemen's Land; by 1847, only 3.2 percent of the population of New South Wales were convicts under sentence, as against 34.4 percent in Van Diemen's Land.⁴ From 1841 to 1850, some 26,000 convicts were poured into Van Diemen's Land, a number that soon jammed the System and led to its administrative breakdown. Transportation to Van Diemen's Land was not abolished until 1853. In 1850 the embryo colony of Western Australia announced, with naïvely eager opportunism, that it would like some convicts too—there being little enough to attract free labor, in those pre-mineral days, to a place cut off from Sydney by 3,000 miles of desert and bush. In response, the System produced one last dribble: 9,700 felons, shipped there from Great Britain over a period of eight years, finishing with a group of Irish Fenians. By 1868, transportation was all over, except for the social and psychic results. These were considerable, for a young country does not serve as the pad on which England drew its sketches for the immense Gulags of the twentieth century without acquiring a few marks and scars.

THERE WERE NO "fashions" in English crime. Poverty begets theft, monotonously and predictably. Year after year the same proportion held: about four-fifths of all transportation was for "offences against property."⁵ Of the male convicts in L. L. Robson's survey, 34 percent were transported for unspecified larcenies, 15 percent for burglary or housebreak-ing, 13 percent for stealing domestic or farm animals (as distinct from poaching wild game, which accounted for less than three people in a thousand), and 6 percent for "theft of wearing apparel"—a reminder of how ill-clothed the English poor were in the days before cheap, mass-produced clothing. Only a little more than 3 percent of the male convicts went down for "offences against the person," which ranged from assault, rape, kidnapping and a few statistically negligible sodomy convictions to manslaughter and murder. A meager 4 percent were under sentence for "offences of a public nature," which embraced an assortment of acts thought to undermine the rights or prestige of the Realm—mainly "coin-ing and uttering" bad money (2 percent) followed by another 1.5 percent convicted of treason, conspiracy to riot or membership in trade unions or Irish secret societies like the Whiteboys and Ribbon Men. A few people were sent to Australia for bigamy, smuggling and perjury.⁶

Seven men in ten were tried in England, mainly at assizes and quarter sessions in London and six chief counties: Lancashire, Yorkshire, Warwickshire, Surrey, Gloucestershire and Kent. These areas were home to four transportees in every ten. About one convict in five was tried in Ireland, most of them in Dublin.

Men outnumbered women six to one. Over the whole transportation period, only 24,960 women were sent out, half to New South Wales and half to Van Diemen's Land. Probably 60 percent of the male English convicts had previous convictions, and 35 percent are known to have been charged with as many as four earlier offenses before they "napped a winder" and "went to the Bay." With women it was the same: A little more than two in ten had certainly never been convicted before, but the probable ratio of second offenders or worse was about 60 percent.⁷

Set against the popular Australian belief that the "typical" convict was an innocent creature who had sinned once and been savagely punished for it, these figures speak for themselves. They do not, of course, tell the whole story. The English criminal law was without a doubt as savagely repressive as it was inefficient. But a code's badness does not necessarily acquit its victims—even though law reflects the interests and ideology of those who frame it.

The System swelled in the 1830s because its administrative machinery had improved—that is, more criminals were caught and processed. This did not imply a catastrophic increase in crime, even though there was no end of talk about “crime waves.” Rather, because it was working so much better, it was able to gratify the social desires of respectable Britons much more readily. It answered a deep desire for sublimation and generalization. Few people want to take direct responsibility for hanging; understandably, they prefer abstractions—“course of justice,” “debt to society,” “exemplary punishment”—to the concrete fact of a terrified stranger choking and pissing at the end of a rope. Likewise, the idea that flogging reforms the criminal was an abstraction. The realities of the lash were only apparent where the cat-o’-nine-tails met the skin. Neither the man inside the skin nor the other wielding the cat was apt to think that an act of reformation was taking place. What happened was crude ritual, a magical act akin to the scourging-out of devils. All punishment seeks to reduce its objects to abstractions, so that they may be filled with a new content, invested with the values of good social conduct. But the main use of prison, from the viewpoint of the respectable, is simply to isolate and neutralize the criminal. Australia met this requirement perfectly. Since it was not a building but a continent, it could receive a whole class, with room to spare. And it was a class, not just an aggregation of individual criminals, that the English authorities thought they saw.

For in the 1830s a new language of class had begun to take hold in England. The older Georgian vocabulary of social difference spoke of “order,” “degree” and “rank,” implying society stabilized by “vertical dependence,” its social strata linked by bonds of common interest and patronage. The new one, by contrast, was a language of division, not merely distinction. “Class” implied sharp demarcations and possible oppositions; the hierarchies of the old order may have seemed “natural” and conventional (at least to those on top), but relations of one class to another were adversary, contractual and based on the negotiation of opposed interests rather than a commonly recognized system of duties. The very idea of “class” implied a society, and a world, in change.

We are used to thinking of the language of class as the language of the working class—perhaps, as Gertrude Himmelfarb suggested, “because social history has generally been written by labor historians and socialists.”¹⁰ But the language of class in the 1830s was mostly invented and used by a middle class trying to describe the social complications that surrounded it, and it did not resemble the scheme of a two-class society—proletariat versus bourgeoisie—that Engels would later invent. Instead of a working class, they spoke of working classes: an idea that

reeks of atomization and false consciousness in Marxist nostrils, but which in the 1830s seemed to recognize the variety of interests among working people. Even Chartists and other radicals usually spoke of a singular “middle class” and plural “working classes” or “working people.”¹¹ Meanwhile, the English middle classes had achieved a state of “class consciousness”—meaning an awareness of their identity, desires and hopes—long before the workers. In the 1830s, it was they, not the Left of the future, who owned the rights on the definitions of “class,” which they always took to be plural.

One of these, the authorities felt, lay in crime. Criminals did not need to name themselves as a class—to show class-consciousness—before law-abiding citizens felt entitled to call them a “criminal class.” There was a crucial line between the “deserving” (frugal, hardworking, stoic) and the “undeserving” (lazy, improvident) poor, and crime certainly arose from the ranks of the “undeserving.” “I am anxious,” declared Henry Mayhew, “that the public should no longer confound the honest, independent working men with the vagrant beggars and pilferers of this country; and that they should see that the one class is as respectable and worthy, as the other is degraded and vicious.”¹²

The idea of a criminal class, as understood by the English in the 1830s, meant that a distinct social group ‘produced’ crime, as hatters produced hats or miners coal. It was part mob, part tribe and part guild, and it led a subterranean existence below and between the lower social structures of England. The criminal class had its own argot, its hierarchies, its accumulated technical wisdom. It preserved and amplified the craft of crime, passing it on from master to apprentice. This idea emerged from the late-eighteenth-century perception that crime in England had risen so fast that Authority must deal with an orchestration, not just an accumulation, of criminal acts. The spectacular career of Jonathan Wild promoted a vision of “generals” of crime—criminal masterminds—leading “armies” of thugs. This proved a durable fantasy. It lasted right through the nineteenth century and culminated in the image of the pre-Mafia super-criminal—Arthur Conan Doyle’s Moriarty.

Stabs were made at guessing the size of this class. Patrick Colquhoun figured in 1797 that there were 50,000 whores and 10,000 thieves in London, along with more specialized citizens of the demimonde (Mud-larks, Bludgeon Men, Scufflehunters and dozens of other types) who brought the criminal total to some 115,000, more than 12 percent of the city’s population.¹³ He was guessing, of course, and his figures were ridiculous even then. The crime statistics assembled by the early Victorians were “harder,” more voluminous, but still misleading—for criminal sta-

tistics have little to tell us about crime and criminals in the nineteenth century.*

The data of the early nineteenth century are further clouded by the prejudices of those who interpreted them at the time.¹² Around 1800, the "mob" was seen, with every reason, as dangerous. It was fuel for the same revolutionary fire that had destroyed the monarchy on the other side of the Channel. Propertied Englishmen were obsessed with Jacobinism. In their eyes, it justified every resurgence of repression inhibited every effort at reform, and deeply unsettled the poise with which they had hitherto contemplated the lower classes. It also lent a pervasive if unconscious tinge to all guesses about the nature and composition of the "mob." Their fear of the political threat translated itself into repeated exaggerations of criminal nature. Thus, it was all too easy to assign criminal propensities to the marginal, the outcast, the rag-and-boner—in short, to those who might be seen as English *sans-culottes*. For that large tract where the unpropertied survived, where tricks of subsistence had to be invented from day to day, where the cunning, the illicit and the illegal blended into one another without fine distinction, they had only one name: the criminal class.

Their tendency to invest the struggling and the low with an aura of criminality was sometimes amplified by Evangelical Methodism. If the lower orders were not frugal, humble, hardworking and devout, if they clung unrepentantly to their rum, rutting and fairs, the randy humor and coarse songs and all the other amusements that make life at the bottom of the heap intermittently tolerable, then they were on the Devil's side, not God's.

The fear of crime itself cast an exaggerated solidarity on "the distinct body of thieves, whose life and business is to follow up *a determined warfare against the constituted authorities*" and who "may be known almost by their very gait in the streets from other persons."¹³ Was all crime as professional as such sentinels believed? Probably only a minority of thieves ran in gangs. Many thefts were spontaneous, desperate and often bungled efforts to relieve want and hunger. Crimes of violence were

* The inherent difficulty may readily be seen if one thinks of a modern equivalent: How many cocaine-dealers are there in Manhattan? Despite the public preoccupation with drugs, despite immense publicity given to the production, distribution and consumption of cocaine, its physiological and psychological effects, its social imagery, its power as a status symbol and sexual stimulant, despite the relative social visibility of the dealers who sell it and its cachet as a "respectable" drug, nobody really knows. Nor is it known, despite spectacular guesses from police and government, how much money the cocaine trade in New York is worth a year. The number of convictions bears only the sketchiest relation to the number of criminal transactions. Yet here we have a crime which is thought, by many Americans, not to be criminal at all, involving a product they regularly use and dealers they often meet face-to-face. Project this back 150 years, into a different culture, and one sees the impossibility of guessing the size of the English "criminal class" in transportation days.

not always premeditated. There was a wide gray area between the "occasional" criminal, stealing a rabbit or a coat, and the hard-core professional whose strategies were evoked by the idea of a criminal class. The latter were taken to be permanently degraded, "members of a sort of criminal race," as Sydney Smith's *Edinburgh Review* expressively put it; the former, not. Although hard-core criminals did not drift into respectability, the respectable drifted into crime. For the official English morality of the early nineteenth century was far more absolutist than ours. Today's orthodoxy is to look for the environmental excuse and to seek the roots of crime in nurture, not nature—that is, outside the criminal's power of choice. One hundred and fifty years ago it was assumed that men and women chose a life of crime. The way to this life was seen—and its image was reinforced by the immense power of official and church imagery—as a sequence of irrevocable steps leading downward, the easy road to Hell. This accorded with the basic conservative tenet, that people are not "naturally" wise or good: We must be restrained by law, and frightened by punishment.

Such ideas, however, were in themselves a harshly coercive part of the social environment and may have caused many people to give up the struggle—to let go, to be what society said they would become, and accept the only milieu that would not rebuke them: crime. The son of a well-off country grocer, caught stealing apples over a neighbor's wall, might get a small fine and a heavy thrashing from his father and so, chastened, go on to respectability. The son of an Irish casual worker in a London slum, caught breaking a window, might experience no such change in the House of Correction. All people, but especially the young, tend to become what society says they are.

Belief in "criminal class" was self-fulfilling in other ways too—mainly because it made rehabilitation so difficult. Once off the edge, it was not easy to find another respectable job. Records were better in 1830 than in 1770, and they could be checked by any prospective employer.

Many observers realized that crime does not appear in a social vacuum. From 1800 onward, a large literature—at first Evangelical in tone and rising at last to the power of Dickens's encyclopedic vision of the city as ultimate social and moral compressor—sought to describe the causes of crime: poverty, lack of work, dislocation, vile housing, addiction, the death of hope. But the official inquiries into crime, drunkenness, prisons and transportation that were held between 1815 and 1840 tended to confirm the same view of crime: that its class nature mattered more than its causes. The criminal class, in the view of one writer in 1854, "constitutes a new estate, in utter estrangement from all the rest."¹⁴

But how threatening was it? And was there not hope for the respect-

able in its estrangement and apparent cohesiveness? The difference between the "criminal classes" of London and the classes dangerous of Paris was that the English were not as dangerous; events like the Gordon Riots in London were the exception, not the rule. England had no tradition of riot and revolt abetted by outpourings of aggression from the criminal classes, whereas the French were used to such explosions from the "vile mob," as the French minister Adolphe Thiers called it in 1850, that had brought "every Republic down in ruin."¹⁵ But, despite the inflamed rhetoric of some Tory extremists, there had never been any alliance, natural or otherwise, between English criminals and English radicals—indeed, the latter took care to exclude the former from their ranks, always stressing their own respectability as workingmen.

But if English crime, unlike French, seemed to present no political threat to the state as such, it certainly menaced its citizens—chiefly the laboring poor. The "criminal class" threatened middle-class property, but what most worried the authorities was the moral contagion it offered to workers and their impressionable children. They had tried to remove the bad apples from the lower classes before they could contaminate the good. The New Poor Law had tried to separate the independent laboring poor from the paupers; the ragged-schools tried to keep the offspring of the lowest and most depraved paupers apart from the "respectable."¹⁶ Transportation sought to remove, once and for all, the source of contamination from the otherwise decent bosom of the lower classes, and ship it "beyond the seas" to a place from which it could not easily return. There it would stay, providing slave labor for colonial development and undergoing such mutations toward respectability as whips and chains might induce. The main point was not what happened to it *there*, but that it would no longer be *here*.

The final aim of the transportation system, then, was less to punish individual crimes than to uproot an enemy class from the British social fabric. Here lay its peculiar modernity; its prediction of the vaster, more efficient techniques of class destruction that would be perfected, a century later, in Russia. However, it failed. Transportation did not stop crime in England or even slow it down. The "criminal class" was not eliminated by transportation, and could not be, because transportation did not deal with the causes of crime. And before we leave the generalizations that led authorities to their ideas about the "criminal class," we should consider a voice from inside it. Written by the wife of a thief bound early for the Fatal Shore, it recounts in bare language the descent into a crime of desperation that must have been traced by thousands of convicts, in an England without pity for the "undeserving poor."

Isaac Nelson, clerk, has been sentenced to seven years' transportation at the Stafford Assizes in 1789. He is now in chains at Portsmouth, cast

for transportation on the Second Fleet. His crime was stealing "a Quantity of plated goods" [silver] from a former employer in Birmingham, Matthew Boulton, whom he had served "with the utmost fidelity" for three years. After quitting Boulton's service, he had come to London and worked for several employers (all of whom signed the letter as character witnesses). Nelson's wife—only the initial of her Christian name, S., appears on the letter—begs to assure the authorities she is petitioning that her husband, after losing his last job with a Piccadilly optician,

from that time was so unfortunate as to be Destitute of all kind of Employment for upwards of Twelve Months in which Time we were reduced to the uttermost Distress possible. Myself afflicted with Illness the whole time and in want of the Common Necessaries of life through a Long and Severe Winter, and my Husband, the only one I had to look up to get Support, Deprived of the means to gain subsistence, and in this Deploitable Situation to Heap Up the Measure of our Misfortunes, I was Delivered of a Male Infant, who died in a few days from want of proper nourishment, My Self being in so weak a Condition as not to be able to afford it any assistance.

Think, most gracious Sir, the Feelings of a Husband who tenderly loved a Wife and had always been used to afford a comfortable Subsistence, to see her in such a Situation, without the Possibility of relieving her Wants, and humbly hope the Gates of Mercy will not be shut against him.

Isaac Nelson went back to Birmingham and got a job at Boulton's for six weeks at 10s. 6d. a week, which was garnished to repay his coach fare and an employer's advance. His wife in London was still destitute and frantic, and so "in a fit of distraction" he stole the silverware, which was recovered later. Mrs. Nelson goes on to beg the home secretary that

You will in Humanity to a poor unfortunate man be pleased to Interview with His Majesty to grant him His Most Gracious Pardon or . . . [that] he will mitigate his Sentence, by allowing him to stay the time of his sentence in England, or allow Your Petitioner the favour to accompany her husband in his exile, that she may be able to afford him some Consolation amidst his Afflictions as his long confinement joined to his other Troubles, being of a weak Constitution, has brought him into a deep Consumption that has nearly reduced him to the Grave.¹⁷

The "Infinite Mercy and Goodness" of George III did not extend so far and Isaac Nelson sailed for Australia on the terrible Second Fleet. Such lives confirm the truth of E. P. Thompson's bitter remark: The

worst offense against property was to have none. We do not know, and never will, how many Isaac Nelsons figured in the "criminal classes." At the same time, rising somewhat on the scale of culpability, people were transported for offenses that the law condemned but their communities tended to condone. Some popular codes stood at a sharp angle to law. Thus youths made heroes of highwaymen, and whole communities in Cornwall and Devonshire not only engaged in wrecking but claimed a traditional right to plunder ships.¹⁸ In smuggling communities along the Sussex coast, people used every shift to avoid the excise on rum and tea, despite the threat of transportation and the gallows. Poaching was another offense that few countrymen, if any, thought wrong, for the poaching laws were among the most corrupt of all English statutes; in sum, they forbade a man to kill a wild animal, even on his own land, unless he could show an income of £100 a year from a freehold estate. Since a laborer in 1830 might expect to make between £10 and £20 a year, the poaching laws were a constant theater of class conflict.

The popular legend of transportation in Australia still insists that there were many convict poachers, but there were not. The number of men transported for poaching was infinitesimal, about the same as those sent out for buggering sheep or boys; those poachers who did get sent to Australia were usually convicted for resisting arrest or assaulting a gamekeeper, not just for the pheasant in the pocket. It was very hard to find witnesses in village communities. Nevertheless, the fact that authorities pursued country people for such morally insignificant crimes—and were quick to identify them with the "dissolute and idle" rather than the "working" peasantry—shows that there was as wide and ill-recognized a gray area between harmless offense and real crime (like sheep or cattle stealing, acts condemned by all villagers) in the country as in the town.

came to me in a doubtful mood, scratching his head and observing, "When I ask what their trades are, all the answer I can get from three-fourths of them is, 'a thief, a thief'; shall I put them down as *labourers*, sir?"¹⁹

Although we cannot speak of a "criminal class" with the same confidence as early Victorians did, there certainly was a subculture of crime in the British Isles, in London most of all. It expressed itself in common interests, cant language, specialization, loyalties. Its main character, to the journalist's eye, was the fantastic range of "trades" it contained, as though the Industrial Revolution, breeding an ever-expanding range of products and specialists to make them, had brought forth an equal army of specialists to steal them. The arch-reporter of the underworld, Henry Mayhew, tabulated at least a hundred subspecies of London criminal by their argot names; a small fraction of his list runs as follows:

2. "Sneaks" or those who plunder by means of stealth.
[a.] Those who purloin goods, provisions, money, clothes, old metal,
&c:
 - i. "Drag Sneaks," or those who steal goods or luggage from carts or coaches.
 - ii. "Snoozers," or those who sleep at railway hotels, and decamp with some passenger's luggage . . .
 - iii. "Star-Glazers," or those who cut the panes out of shopwindows.
 - iv. "Till Friskers," or those who empty tills of their contents during the absence of shopmen.
 - v. "Sawney-Hunters," or those who go purloining bacon from cheese-mongers' shop windows.
 - vi. "Noisy-Racket Men," or those who steal china and glass from outside of china shops.
 - vii. "Area Sneaks," or those who steal from houses by going down the area steps.
 - viii. "Dead Lurkers," or those who steal coats and umbrellas from passages at dusk, or on Sunday afternoons.
 - ix. "Snow Gatherers," or those who steal clean clothes off the hedges.
 - x. "Skinners," or women who entice children and sailors to go with them and then strip them of their clothes.
 - xi. "Bluey-Hunters," or those who purloin lead from the tops of houses.
 - xii. "Cat and Kitten Hunters," or those who purloin pewter quart and pint pots from the top of area railings.²⁰

THERE IS NO doubt that many Britons made their living, wholly or in part, from crime. At trial and again on the boat, prisoners had to give their trade or occupation; the two largest categories among the transported were "farm workers" (20 percent) and "laborers" (19 percent). The prisoners did not always use these descriptions themselves; they were more blunt about what they really did for a living. Peter Cunningham, remembering his first voyage to Australia as surgeon-superintendent of convicts on the transport *Recovery* in 1819, described how a seaman he had ordered to list the trades of the prisoners on board

And so on. Argot, like all technical jargon, set its users apart. English criminal slang was impenetrable to the "straight" ear. It described ac-

tions that did not exist in respectable society, high or low, but were known to "the family"—all those who lived "upon the cross." A running-rumbler, around 1800, "gets a large grinding-stone, which he rolls along the pavement, the passengers hearing the rumble, get out of the way, for fear of its running against them, or over their toes; in this critical moment some of the gang give you the ram-hustle, or pick your pocket."²¹ Amusers or puzzlers would throw handfuls of street flith in a victim's eyes and run away while their accomplice picked his pockets. A horse-thief was a *prigger of prancers* or a *pradnapper*, a coiner, a *bit-smasher*, a *bit-cull* or a *beneftreaker*. To clip coins and keep the gold-dust was to sweat them or to be in the diminishing way. If one stole loaves from a baker's basket, one was said to be *pricking in the wicker for a dolphin*. There seemed to be no substance that could not be stolen: The black-spice racket consisted of stealing bags of soot from sweeps, and the word *buff* for skin gave rise to *buffer*—a man who killed dogs by running a sharp wire into their hearts and then sold their pelts to glovers. There was even a market for *curls*, or human teeth, they were used by some dentists to replace the lost molars of the living.

These were low trades. But a man whose means are two *pops* and a galloper had real status as a mounted highwayman with a pair of pistols, fearless as Turpin in bailing up rattling-coves, or coachmen. Forgers drew the King's picture in Georgian days or, in Victorian ones, dummed the old woman's ticket. A shoplifter practiced the *jam lay*, sometimes palming a ring from a jeweler's counter "by means of a little Ale held in a Spoon over the fire, by which the Palm being daub'd, any light thing sticks to it."²² His female equivalent would *cant the dobbin* [steal rolls of ribbon] from haberdashers.

Of all the myriad kinds of thief—"the sons of St. Peter, with every finger a fish-hook"—the most dexterous were the *files* and *buzz-gloaks*, or pickpockets. Dickens's description of Fagin's school for boy thieves in *Oliver Twist* was no fantasy. Larger schools (whose ten-year-old initiates were known as *erriffs*, a straight word for young canaries, or *academy buzz-nappers*) were a favorite topic of London journalists. They taught the arts of *fogle-hunting* [drawing out handkerchiefs], *bung-diving* [taking purses], *speaking to the tattler* [lifting a watch, with its onions, or seals] and *chiving the froe* [cutting off a woman's pockets with a razor]. A pupil with no talent for this was scorned as a *purple atomedary*. A skilled, coordinated adept became a *boman prig* [from the French "beau," fine] with *rum daddles* [expert hands]. Out he would go, with a *bulker*, or accomplice, whose role was to jostle the mark, to do fieldwork among the crowds in Piccadilly, the sauntering dandies in Vauxhall Gardens, or the milling crush in Drury Lane during the *breaking-up* of the *spell*, as

theater interval was called. It was under such circumstances that George Barrington, an Irish pickpocket of high vanity and considerable skill, was caught picking the pocket of the Russian Prince Orlov during an operatic first night at Covent Garden; he was transported, and ended up as a "decayed macaroni" at Parramatta with 110 acres farmed for him by lesser convicts. Barrington's celebrity was such that a number of books, none of which he wrote, were published under his name, including an early "history" of New South Wales.²³

One could not, of course, enter the milieu of crime just by learning its argot. It took work to build up a name. There was nothing unlikely about the words Dickens put into the mouth of young Charley Bates, as he sees his *beau ideal* the Artful Dodger facing transportation for pinching a mere snuffbox. "Oh, why didn't he rob some rich old gentleman of all his wailables, and go out as a gentleman, and not like a common prig, without no honour nor glory! . . . How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar? P'raps not be there at all." "See what a pride they take in their profession," Fagin crows.²⁴

No classless society has ever existed or ever will. Every group has bottom and top dogs. The hostile glare of the decent did not prevent men and women "on the cross" from constructing pecking orders whose minuteness and punctilio were almost worthy of Versailles. From the lowest thief to the highest member of the "Swell Mob," all was graded; the criminal milieu was a meritocracy with strong tribal overtones. The pyramid of crime was a buried, inverted reflection of the pyramid of respectability, and those who lived where the two met—beggars and charity cases, with neither the skill to work nor the gumption to steal—were despised by both. Thus, Mayhew noted that a poor boy might be "partly forced to steal for his character." One's criminal record was an index of rank. At a party in a thieves' kitchen Mayhew found that

the announcements in reply to the questions as to the number of times that any of them had been in prison were received with great applause, which became more and more boisterous as the number of punishments increased. When it was announced that one, though only nineteen years of age, had been in prison as many as twenty-nine times, the clapping of hands . . . lasted for several minutes, and the whole of the boys rose to look at the distinguished individual. Some chalked on their hats . . . the sum of the several times they had been in gaol.²⁵

One had to start young, but inexperience gets caught. The young thief was eager to prove himself, rash, and hence an easy target for the police, even before fingerprints. After 1815 it was quite rare for a first-time thief to be sentenced to transportation, but the number of thefts committed

by habitual criminals meant that further convictions, and Botany Bay, were bound to follow.

Illustrators depicted the "criminal type" as a mask of low cunning, stunted but alert. In fact there was no difference between the look of English criminals and that of the working class from which they came. Against the jargon of "criminal types" and the pseudo-scientific babble of the phenologists one must balance the description of cotton-mill workers offered by Peter Gaskell in 1833:

An uglier set of men and women . . . it would be impossible to congregate in a smaller compass. Their complexion is shallow and pallid—with a peculiar flatness of feature, caused by the want of a proper quantity of adipose substance to cushion out the cheeks. Their stature low—the average height being five feet six inches. Their limbs slender, and playing badly and ungracefully. A very general bowing of the legs.²⁵

The convicts' height was not always recorded, but they tended to be short. Thus a giant poster published in Hobart in 1850, listing 465 emancipated convicts at large (cumulative over 20 years) puts more than 80 percent of the men below 5 feet 8 inches, with the largest group, some 15 percent, only 5 feet 3 inches tall. Compared to most modern Australians of Irish or English descent, these men were runts, and the difference was one of diet.

They shared other traits with *lumpen* workers, chiefly a loathing of authority. The "criminal classes" of England were apolitical; on that, all observers agreed. They played no role whatsoever in the radical disturbances of the day. Tribal loyalties could be fanatically strong among them, and they stuck together against the peeler, the beak and the pink chaplain in his "cackle tub," as the prison pulpit was known. "The more you value your number one, the more careful you must be of mine. . . . [A] regard for number one holds us all together, and must do so, unless we would all go to pieces in company." Fagin's words sum up an ethos of loyalty among thieves, a clannishness much like Sicilian *omertà*.

This contemptuous resistance to everyone and everything outside one's small group was one of the roots of Australian mateship. But no convict ever felt that all convicts were his brothers. They would often trample and oppress one another, behaving with the utmost cynicism and cruelty toward weaker prisoners. And often they would not. There was no hard-and-fast rule of "convict solidarity." From authority's point of view, the London "sneaksman" had something in common with the Northumbrian cattle rustler—both had broken the law. But the two men, who knew nothing of one another's background and barely had a language in common, would feel no bond at all. Even when people were

transported from the same place for the same offense, they did not always stick by one another. "I hope you will not mind what you may hear from anyone that writes to Boulton saying how good anyone have been to me," wrote the young protestor Thomas Holden, transported with other Luddites in 1812, to his parents. "In all my illness have Receiv'd no favour from any one of them that come from Boulton, but far the other way."²⁷

Most were irreligious too—except, obviously, the Irish—since the reformed man or woman devoted to Methodist "enthusiasm" and the Evangelical meeting was the last person apt to be transported. Chaplains on transport vessels and tractsarians visiting the hulls felt like missionaries among hostile white heathens. They bewailed the hard-heartedness of the convicts, their imperviousness to the Word, their cynicism about prayer, their inability to imagine God, Heaven or Hell. They were "abandoned," "profligate," "irrecoverable." They respected neither God or man but truckled shamelessly to both when expediency whispered.

Mateship, fatalism, contempt for do-gooders and God-botherers, harsh humor, opportunism, survivors' disdain for introspection, and an attitude to authority in which private resentment mingled with ostensible resignation—such was the meager baggage of values the convicts brought with them to Australia. They also brought, if men, the phallos of the tavern and ken, and, if women, a kind of tough passivity, a way of seeing life without expectations. What they bequeathed to their native-born Australian offspring, the Currency of the colony (as distinct from the Sterling, or English-born free settlers), was summed up by the Australian poet James McAuley in the 1950s as

a futile heart within a fair periphery,
The women are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them:
The men are independent but you could not call them free.

iv

ONLY A FEW convicts were sent out for political offenses. Yet transportation was an important feature in the machinery of English state repression. The right to send political offenders to Botany Bay was jealously wielded by the British Government. English interests did not want to make martyrs of radicals—and there were obvious constitutional problems attached to hanging a Dissenting clergyman for owning a copy of Tom Paine. But transportation got rid of the dissenter without making a hero of him on the scaffold. He slipped off the map into a distant limbo, where his voice fell dead at his feet. There was nothing for his ideas to engage, if he were an intellectual; no machines to break or ricks to burn.

if a laborer. He could preach sedition to the thieves and cockatoos, or to the wind. Nobody would care.

The first political agitators were transported to Australia early in the life of the System. They were convicted in Edinburgh and were known as the "Scottish Martyrs."

In the early 1790s, "reforming" English intellectuals flirted with Jacobinism. To enable such persons, lawyers and pamphleteers to make contact with like-minded workers, discussion groups known as "Corresponding Societies" were formed. Their officers called themselves "Jacobins" but were, in fact, reforming constitutionalists, who wanted to recall Britain's laborers and artisans to a sense of their ancient rights. It was to this audience that Paine's *Rights of Man* sold most of its million copies in Britain. Tories, thinking of Jacobinism in terms of the guillotine and the September Massacres, viewed the Corresponding Societies with horror and set out to break them up.

They would have liked to stage a crushing trial of some English Jacobins in England, but they could not be sure a jury would convict them. So their blow against the Corresponding Societies was struck in Scotland, where juries were easily rigged. It fell on a young, blue-eyed Scottish lawyer named Thomas Muir (1765–1799), vice-president of a Jacobin discussion group in Glasgow. Muir was an ardent constitutionalist whose offense was to advocate yearly elections of Parliament and a broadening of the Scottish franchise. He stood trial for sedition in Edinburgh in 1793, and every juror was handpicked from the rolls of a Scottish Tory organization known as the Life-and-Fortune Men, the equivalent of the Loyal Orange societies in Ireland.²⁸

The main charge against Muir was that he had lent out radical tracts, among them a copy of Paine's *Rights of Man*. Muir admitted the charge but claimed he could not receive a fair trial from the packed jury. The judge—Robert Macqueen, Lord Braxfield, Lord Justice Clerk of Scotland—brushed that aside, as he had been told to do. He was a coarse cunning old drunk whose remarks during this trial won long notoriety. (When one of the Jacobins pointed out that Christ himself had been a reformer, Braxfield chuckled and snorted: "Muckle he made o' that—He was hanget.") From such a man, Muir was unlikely to escape, whatever his forensic skills.

Braxfield's instructions to the jury could hardly have been clearer: It was axiomatic that the British Constitution could not be improved. Muir had been telling "ignorant country people" that it must be changed to secure their liberty—"which, if it had not been for him, they would never have thought was in danger." And what right did the "rabble" have to representation? None, for they had no property. "A government in this country should be just like a corporation," the judge declared,

made up of the landed interest, which alone has the right to be represented. As for a rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation of them? They may pack up all their property on their backs, and leave the country in the twinkling of an eye, but landed property cannot be removed.²⁹

The jury quickly and unanimously found Thomas Muir guilty and he was sentenced to 14 years' transportation. A few months later another "radical" clergyman was tried in Perth, for circulating a "seditious" pamphlet questioning Britain's motives in her war against France and helping a Dundee weaver publish an 'Address to the People' on the subject of parliamentary reform. This was Thomas Fyshe Palmer (1747–1802), no Scot but an Englishman, a Unitarian minister and fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, who had spent the past ten years preaching as a humble pastor in Dundee. He got 7 years' transportation.

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These sentences caused apprehension in England, and not only among Jacobins. A group of moderate constitutionalists, headed by Lord Lauderdale, complained about them to the home secretary, Henry Dundas.³⁰ They asked Parliament to overturn the verdict on Muir and Palmer. Dundas would hear none of that. He wanted to press on and see if English radicals who did not live in Scotland could be arrested and tried there, and his chance came in October 1793, when the National Convention of British reformers met in Edinburgh.

Its two London delegates were middle-class dissenters, Joseph Gerrald (1760–1796) and Maurice Margarot (1745–1815). The Edinburgh sheriff's deputies worked hard to break up the other assemblies at which they spoke. William Skirving (d. 1796), the Scottish secretary of the convention, was arrested at home and his papers impounded. Gerrald and Margarot were dragged out of bed in the dead of night, later to be released on bail. Braxfield's court tried Skirving for sedition and sentenced him to 14 years' transportation. Gerrald, temporarily free, went back to London and fled to Republican America. But Gerrald refused to abandon his comrades, whose trials were now taking place in Edinburgh. Margarot was sentenced to 14 years' transportation. Gerrald's turn came a month later, and Lord Braxfield gave him 14 years. Both judge and prisoner knew that this was a death sentence, for Gerrald had tuberculosis.

Palmer, Muir, Skirving and Margarot were shipped to Australia along with eighty-three less celebrated convicts in the transport *Surprise* in

February 1794. Gerald followed a year later. On the voyage, Maurice Margarot seems to have had a nervous breakdown, and he denounced his comrades to the captain as parties to a mutiny plot. The indignant "Martyrs" spent the last five months of the voyage in the brig, on short rations. No wonder Muir wrote to a friend in London after their arrival to announce that "Palmer, Skirving and myself live in the utmost harmony. From our society, Maurice Margarot is expelled."³²

In fact, despite their lamentations, Sydney did not treat them harshly. They did no forced work, wore no chains, and never tasted the cat-o'-nine-tails. Palmer and Muir got land grants and even managed to turn a profit in the rum trade. The government only wanted them neutralized. But they needed watching and the acting governor, Francis Grose, promised Palmer "every indulgence," provided that he "avoid on all occasions a recital of those Politicks which have produced in you the miseries a man of your feelings and abilities must at this time undergo."³³ Although Skirving was granted a hundred acres and Gerald was bought a house on Sydney Harbor, the "Martyrs" felt the hostility of the Rum Corps—"they have kept us poor," said Palmer, though he may only have been complaining about the difficulty of getting into the rum trade himself. Political discussion was out—"they are all aristocrats here from ignorance, and being out of the way or desire of knowledge."³⁴

Transportation did not destroy the political beliefs of the Scottish Martyrs. But it cooled their ardor, and one sees this reflected in "The Telegraph: A Consolatory Epistle," a lengthy poem Thomas Muir addressed to his fellow reformer Henry Erskine in Scotland. It opens with the depressing landscape of exile, "Where sullen Convicts drag the clanking chain / and Desolation covers all the plain." Here, Muir reflects that he is still a Jacobin and that

The best and noblest privilege in Hell
For souls like ours is, Nobly to rebel,
To raise the standard of revolt and try
The happy fruits of lov'd Democracy.
The sacred right of Insurrection there
May drive old Satan from his regal chair
And the same honest means may raise perchance
A France in Hell, that raised a Hell in France.

But doubts arise. Does not revolution wreck the constitutional principles they all stand for? (Muir was so much a moderate that he even went to Paris to plead with the real Jacobins for the life of Louis XVI.) Brooding on the dangers of the mob, he devised a new metaphor of revolution, thus, an Australian bushfire makes its first appearance in English poetry,

as a symbol of political passions ignited by ignorance. He had seen aboriginal hunters setting fire to the scrub:

Some naked Savage on the distant shore

With rapid step advancing to the view
Reminds me, Henry, of my friends and you:

Of those dear friends who join with heart & hand
To spread the flame of Freedom round the land,

And restless labour, anxious to inspire
Each sluggish bosom with the sacred Fire.—

To clear the forest's dark impervious maze
The half-starv'd Indian lights a hasty blaze

Then lifts the Torch, and rushing o'er the Strand
High o'er his head he waves the flaming Brand
From Bush to Bush with rapid steps he flies
Till the whole forest blazes to the skies.

Often, 'tis true, this deed of Madness done
He mourns the mischief which his hand begun,

When the red torrent rushing o'er the plain
No art can stop, no human power restrain,
Till from a Rock he sees with wild amaze
His Wife & Children perish in the Blaze.

Stop Henry stop! and cautiously enquire
If you can quench as you enflame the fire:

Think on the Savage in my simple tale
Who fires a Province, for a scanty Meal.¹⁵

The coarse intellectual clay of Sydney was not for their shaping. They tried to catechize some prisoners but got little response. Then Thomas Muir, with extraordinary daring, contrived to escape. Early in 1796 he managed to contact the skipper of an American fur-trading vessel, the Otter, provisioning in Sydney Harbor. As soon as the ship sailed, Muir stole a rowboat and hauled out through the Heads, at night; the Yankees picked him up a few miles offshore. Months later, when the Otter reached Alaskan waters, Muir learned that a Royal Navy ship had been seen in the area. Fearing capture, he transferred to a cruising Spanish gunboat, which took him south to Monterey in Spanish California.

From Monterey he made his way to the Caribbean, via Mexico City and Vera Cruz. He reached Cuba by the end of the year, hoping to work his way north on a ship to Philadelphia. But by then war had broken out between England and Spain, and the Spanish colonial *jefe* put Muir in the Havana prison for several months. At last he was shipped out, not to America but to Spain, on a frigate bound for Cadiz. Near the end of her

voyage she was attacked by a British naval squadron, and an exploding shell mutilated Muir's face and destroyed his left eye; he was so badly wounded that the British officers, on learning he was aboard, could not recognize him. So unhappy Muir was put ashore in a prison-hospital in Cadiz. But after several months' word of his arrival reached the French, and as an English Republican he had friends in Paris. Talleyrand negotiated his release and brought him to Paris in December 1797 as a guest of the Directory. There he remained, a gradually fading celebrity, occasionally consulted on plans to invade England, he wrote an account of his exile and wanderings around the globe which, although it was eagerly read and discussed in manuscript, never saw publication and is now lost. Muir died at Chantilly, in lamentable poverty, on January 26, 1799—precisely eleven years after the convict settlement at Sydney Cove, the antithesis of all his republican ideals, had been founded. His grave is not known.

Two of the other Scottish Martyrs did not outlive him long, though they had no idea what had happened to Muir. Joseph Gerald, the mild consumptive scholar, died of tuberculosis in March 1796; William Skirving followed him three days later. Both were buried in Sydney, and Skirving received the epitaph "A seditionist, but a man of good moral character."

Thomas Palmer finished his sentence in Australia, and went into the shipbuilding trade while he was serving it. He and his close friend John Boston—another "avowed Jacobin," who had voluntarily come with his wife on the long voyage to Sydney to keep Palmer company—had little experience of business, but they possessed a singular advantage: the only encyclopedia in the colony. With it, they taught themselves to make beer. Then they learned how to make soap. Next they looked up "ship" and, after some trial and error, contrived to build a somewhat cranky but adequate small vessel for trading stores to Norfolk Island. It was followed by a 30-ton sloop, the *Martha*. Finally Palmer bought and refitted *El Plumper*, a decrepit Spanish warship, and tried to sail her to England via the East Indies. Near Guam, a remote Spanish outpost in the Marianas east of the Philippines, her rotten hull opened. The survivors of the voyage, Palmer included, were detained in jail by the Spaniards. Palmer died there of cholera in June 1802. The Spanish priests, hearing of his radical opinions, refused his body Christian burial, and so the most civilized and liberal-souled gentleman to breathe Australian air in early colonial days was buried among pirates in a common grave on the beach, until an American captain (himself a man of reforming opinions) took the trouble in 1804 to retrieve Palmer's body and bring it back to burial in a Boston church.

The only Scottish Jacobin who stayed on in Australia was the erratic

Maurice Margarot, who managed to lead a shadowy, ill-documented life as a double agent between the various colonial cliques. He seems to have reported to Governor Hunter on the financial doings and political discontents of the New South Wales Corps Officers; and some evidence suggests that he kept both Grose, Hunter's predecessor, and King, Hunter's successor, informed on the conversations of his own former friends the Jacobins. King believed he plotted rebellion with the Irish convicts in 1801 and again in 1804, but he also feared that Margarot was reporting on him to the Colonial Office in London. In 1810, after seventeen years' Australian exile, Margarot struggled back to England. He died in London five years later, wretchedly poor, and politically broken, disliked and distrusted by the friends of his former radical associates.

Transportation had dealt effectively with the Scottish Jacobins. It would continue to do so with representatives of nearly every English protest movement, industrial upheaval and agrarian revolt for the next half-century. But first, it would deal with the Irish.

v

AUSTRALIA was the official Siberia for Irish dissidents at the turn of the century. Their presence there caused the System acute strain and insecurity. Rebellious Irishmen, known as "United Irish" and "Defenders," had been sent out in dribs and drabs during the 1790s. But between 1800 and 1805 their influx began in earnest, swollen by political exiles transported for their role in the rebellion of 1798, when Ireland tried unsuccessfully to ally with France in revolt against England.

Some of these men had been formally tried and sentenced to transportation. Others—most prominent among them was "General" Joseph Holt (1756–1826), the leader of the 1798 United Irish rebellion in County Wicklow—had surrendered under the promise of amnesty given by Lord Cornwallis and agreed to be exiled without trial rather than rot in prison. Others still had been bundled onto the convict transports without any form of trial; in 1797, the undersecretary in Dublin had been advised from England that "a light punishment for rebellion will excite revenge, not terror. . . . [Y]ou should transport all prisoners in the gaols and give full power to the generals."¹³⁶

The Irish, on arriving in Australia, were treated as a special class. As bearers of Jacobin contagion, as ideologically and physically dangerous traitors, they were oppressed with special vigilance and unusually hard punishments. They formed Australia's first white minority. From the outset, the Irish in Australia saw themselves as a doubly colonized people.

The colonization of Ireland—the absolute ascendancy of Gall over Gael—had been going on since the twelfth century, when the first English Pope, Adrian IV, encouraged his fellow Anglo-Norman, King Henry II, to invade Ireland and “proclaim the truths of the Christian religion to a rude and ignorant people.” When the English knights landed and started hewing their red way through the Gaelic resistance, Ireland had been Christian for seven hundred years. It took nearly a century to impose the Anglo-Norman feudal system on the Irish clans, but by the end of the thirteenth century it was done. The puppet Dublin parliament, owing its loyalty to the English crown, would last seven hundred years and only be dissolved by the Act of Union with England in 1801.

Throughout those seven centuries, no Irish Catholic could expect justice from its laws. As they tightened, so the rights of Irishmen dwindled, and by the end of the eighteenth century these ‘penal laws’ reached into every cranny of the Catholic majority’s life. Under them, Catholics were legislated down to helotry. They divided Ireland, as Edmund Burke remarked in 1792,

into two distinct bodies, without common interest, sympathy or connection. One . . . was to possess all the franchises, all the property, all the education; the other was to be composed of drawers of water and cutters of turf for them. Are we to be surprised when by the efforts of so much violence in conquest . . . we had reduced them to a mob?

Under the Popery Laws, no Catholic could sit in Parliament, on the bench or in a jury; none could vote, teach or hold an army commission. They were disabled in property law, which was rewritten to break up Catholic estates and consolidate Protestant ones. Protestant estates could be left intact to eldest sons, but Catholic ones had to be split between all the children. Thus Catholic landowning families degenerated into sharecropping ones within a generation or two.

These laws cut across all class barriers. They beat the Catholic peasantry “into the clay,” as the phrase went, but they also gagged and paralyzed the Catholic landowner, the intellectual, the entrepreneur. Thus, they unified the Irish Catholics more strongly than softer laws could ever have done and voided the question of a class struggle within the Catholic ranks. Hence the fervor with which working Irishmen supported middle-class leaders like Tone and O’Connell. This breadth of disaffection meant that Irish political prisoners transported to Australia ranged across a wide social spectrum, from peasant to lawyer. In March 1800, Governor Hunter was complaining that far too many of the Irish convicts were “bred up in gentle life,” and successive governors of New South Wales viewed the Specials, or educated Irish convicts, with extreme wariness; they might “contaminate” the rank and file with their ideas.

The expression of middle-class dissent from English colonial rule was the Society of United Irishmen, formed in 1791, an alliance of Dublin Catholics with Presbyterian merchants from Belfast, Down and Antrim. Its Ulster Protestant members had risen above their sectarian squabbles with the Catholic majority; they saw that English laws—especially, the crippling trade embargoes on Irish linen exports to America—oppressed them too. A free Irish Republic, they felt, was in the interest of all who made money from Irish resources and Irish labor, but what they needed was an alliance that cut across Irish religious divisions, taking its stand on Tom Paine and the *Rights of Man*.

The United Irish movement spread quite rapidly among the poor. Nobody could call the Irish peasantry of the 1790s politically educated, but it had a great deal to be angry about. It bitterly resented enclosure and tithing, the bailiffs with their writs of eviction, the landlord’s bullies with their dogs and shillelaghs. The English looked to the priests to keep the peasants subdued, but the clergy did so, not out of any love for the English, but from a Christian dislike of violence and a fear of what the military could do to their parishioners.

The seeds of rebellion were already there. Before the birth of the Society of United Irishmen was formed, protest movements had risen from the peasantry and been punished by prison, exile and the gallows. The Whiteboys or Levellers, peasant gangs who toppled the new enclosure-fences around old commons, appeared in Tipperary in 1761. In 1772 the Presbyterian Hearts of Steel tried to oppose rack-renting in the Ulster counties. The Rightboys, formed to protest enclosure in Kerry in 1775, were Catholic.

Such country dissidents could not work together. In Ulster, whose population was roughly half Catholic and half Protestant, the Catholic Defenders and the Protestant Peep-o’-Day Boys fought pitched battles, to the amusement of their landlords. The achievement of Wolfe Tone and the twenty-seven other Protestants who founded the Society of United Irishmen was to merge the factions in one common goal of reform, a “cordial union,” an Irish nation-state. The English were quick to strike at these nationalist subversives. The first convict ship to carry known political prisoners from Ireland to Australia was the *Marquis Cornwallis*, which sailed from Cove in August 1795 with 168 male and 73 female prisoners. Of the men, “several . . . were known by the name of Defenders, and the whole were of the very worst description.”³⁷ The Irish began to plot mutiny as soon as the ship sailed, and when informers disclosed the plan to the captain he had more than forty men summarily flogged. Two Irish soldiers who had aborted the mutineers, Sergeant Ellis and Private Gaffney of the New South Wales Corps, were flogged and ironed to one another with handcuffs, thumbscrews and rigid slave leg-

bolts. Ellis died after nine days; the captain then unshackled Gaffney from his corpse and ironed him to one of the Defenders, leaving them bolted together for the remaining five months of the voyage.

The Defenders continued to give trouble after they arrived in Australia. "Turbulent and worthless creatures," Governor Hunter called them in 1796, promising to watch them "narrowly." He had had to build new log house jails "since it has been found necessary to send to this country such horrid characters as the people call'd *Irish Defenders*, who, I confess . . . I wish had either been sent to the coast of Africa, or some place as fit for them."³⁸

There was good reason for their unrest, beyond the normal sufferings of transportation. Most of the Irish convicts already in the colony, who had come out on transports from Cork between 1791 and 1793, were doing seven years on ordinary criminal charges. But their records had not been sent with them, so no one knew how long they had to serve in Australia or when they were eligible for the tickets-of-leave that were usually given after four years' good conduct on a seven-year sentence. In one case, it took eighteen years for the lists of a shipload of political prisoners (*Anne*, 1801) to catch up. "The manner in which the convicts are sent from Ireland is so extremely 'careless and irregular,'" Hunter complained, "that it must be felt by these people as a particular hardship." No wonder that the radical Defenders off the Cornwallis found a ready ear among "non-political" Irish convicts who were already in New South Wales.³⁹

It was taken for granted that all Irishmen were "wild" and "lawless"; and the authorities in Sydney, who had enough difficulty with the relatively tractable English prisoners, were never glad to see them. When the Marquis Cornwallis arrived, Judge-Advocate David Collins cast a cold eye on "Defenders, desperate and ripe for any scheme from which danger and destruction might come." The Irish women were just as bad; they had plotted "the preparing of pulverised glass to mix with the flour of which the seamen were to make their puddings. What an importation!" Half-Irish himself, Collins despised the Irish prisoners: "They do not deserve the appellation of men."⁴⁰

Tension in Sydney between the chafed Irish and the English authorities became worse when the *Britannia* arrived in May 1797. This hellship, one of the worst in transportation history, arrived with 134 men and 43 women, mostly Defenders and other agrarian rebels. Within a few months, they had persuaded other Irishmen to escape inland. Sixty of them were caught and flogged, two were hanged. Others tried again, and were flogged too, since in view of their "obstinacy and ignorance . . . I conceived that there could be no better argument than a severe corporal punishment."⁴¹

By the middle of 1798, there were 653 Irish convicts in New South Wales, of whom some 265 were political prisoners.⁴² None of them knew what had happened in Ireland since they had been sent into exile. During the year 1796, the Defenders had secretly begun to merge with the United Irishmen, and Wolfe Tone had gone to France to persuade its revolutionary government to send an invasion fleet to Ireland. Once it came, he believed, the Irish middle class and peasantry would rise together. The French landing at Bantry Bay in 1796 was a fiasco, however, and the English Tories unleashed a storm of reprisals, setting Orange against Green, Protestant against Catholic.

The time was ripe for an alliance of Catholic and Protestant under the United Irish banner. In 1797 martial law was declared in Ulster, and William Orr, a Protestant United Irishman who would be transported without trial to Australia on the *Friendship* in 1800, greeted this as a sign. "All ground of jealousy between us and the Catholics is now done away," he declared.

[The English] have denied us reform and them emancipation. They have oppressed them with penal laws and us with military ones . . . [T]here is nothing surer than that Irishmen of every denomination must stand or fall together.⁴³

The colony had reached its flashpoint, and late in May 1798 the United Irish, who proved to have a better military organization than the English had ever dreamed, rose in rebellion. The fighting began in Kildare and flared from county to county. By July, all Ireland lay under martial law. The first victories of the rebels—at Three Rocks and Tubberneering, Wexford and Oulart—were soon converted into heroic legend by the "treason songs," to be sung in many an Australian humpy and rum shop throughout the next century; but in the end, musket was bound to prevail against pike. The momentum of the '98 rebellion was soon lost. Lord Cornwallis, the lord lieutenant of Ireland, wrote a heartsick letter to a colleague in England, asking him to judge how far worse the horrors of martial law became when that law was enforced by Irishmen, "heated with passion and revenge," guilty of "numberless murders . . . without any process or examination whatever".

The yeomanry are in the style of the Loyalists of America, only much more numerous and powerful, and a thousand times more ferocious. These men have saved the country, but they now take the lead in rapine and murder. The feeble outrages . . . which are still committed by the rebels, serve to keep up the sanguinary disposition on our side . . . [T]he conversation, even at my table, where you may suppose I do all I can to

prevent it, always turns on hanging, shooting, burning, etc., and if a priest has been put to death, the greatest joy is expressed by the whole company. So much for Ireland, and my wretched situation.⁴⁴

Such were the memories transplanted to Australia on the next convict ships full of Irish Defenders. Those sentenced to transportation in the wake of the '98 rebellion had left a gutted country behind them, devastated by fire, bayonet and the portable wheeled gallows, where whole counties looked like "the carcass of a goose, standing up." So the authorities could be a little more lenient. If every United Irishman had been indicted for treason, they could all have been hanged—but the jurors would still have had to go home to their villages and live among those who knew the accused. Juries avoided capital convictions, and an Onagh magistrate reported, "All the United Irish who were in on treasonable practices are only indicted for a lesser offence, so as to come under transportation, for that reason no objection lay against Jurors."⁴⁵ This practice makes it hard to distinguish, on the face of recorded charges, between "political" and "social" rebels—if, indeed, such a distinction in time of revolution makes much sense. Many of the prisoners who went to Australia on charges related to property damage or assault were probably, in their own eyes, as much political prisoners as Joseph Holt, the farmer who rose to lead the Wicklow insurgents after some Protestant militia burned his house in May 1798.

When nine ships appeared from the Pacific with the condemned men and women of the '98 rebellion on board, they brought the worst load of bitterness the System had yet seen. Of the 1,067 people on board, 775 were at a conservative estimate political exiles.⁴⁶ They presented a new problem. As a jail for passive English felons, Sydney in 1800 was fairly secure. But how to handle the Irish? In 1798 Hunter had already begged for fewer rebels: "The infant state of this colony will not admit of it being filled up with the very worst of characters."⁴⁷ The great fear was another rebellion. "The *Minerva* arrived about a month ago with the first cargo of rebels," Elizabeth Paterson, wife of the lieutenant-governor, wrote to her uncle. "They have already begun to concert schemes—I fear they will be a troublesome lot—I cannot say I like the place near so well as I did before."⁴⁸

The ship contained not only Irish rank and file but also some lesser leaders who had been named in the Banishment and Fugitive Acts: Joseph Holt, and a medical doctor from Cork named Bryan O'Connor; two seditious teachers, William Maum and Farrel Cuffe, a Kildare priest, James Harold, and a Protestant clergyman, Henry Fulton. Literate and thinking men like these were bound to be a nuisance, or even a real danger, in British eyes; presently Governor King would inveigh against

Maum, who had written "pipes" (seditious pasquinades) against him. "His principles and conduct have changed as little as the others, not can time and place have any Effect on such depraved characters. . . . [We] may treat such Incendiaries with Contempt."⁴⁹ Yet Governor Hunter had taken pity on them at first. They were soffhanded and "bred up in genteel life," he told Portland:

We can scarcely divest ourselves of the common feelings of humanity so far as to send a physician, a formerly respectable sheriff of a county, a Roman Catholic priest, or a Protestant clergyman and family to the grubbing hoe or the timber carriage.⁵⁰

Yet this restraint did not survive the rumors of Irish conspiracy. In September 1800 they grew loud, and Hunter set up a court of inquiry to look into them. The Irish, informers said, had made iron pikes on secret forges and hidden them around Toongabbie and Parramatta, ready for the rising of the "Croppies" (as Irish peasants, being sharecroppers, were called). There were signs, tokens and passwords. "A ship is in sight." "What ship?" "A store-ship." But after a week's interrogation, the court had nothing but rumors, and certainly no pikes. Nevertheless, it found that "seditious meetings" had been held, "tending to excite a spirit of Discontent which was fast ripening to a serious Revolt." Five "ring-leaders" were to get 500 lashes each, and the Catholic priest, Father Harold, must watch their torment "as a peculiar Mark of Infamy and Disgrace." Then, along with "General" Holt and a dozen other suspects, they would all be sent to Norfolk Island, "where the baneful influence of their Example cannot be experienced."⁵¹

Hunter might not have carried this out. But as the convicts' bad luck had it, his term of office finished on September 28 and his successor, Philip Gidley King, endorsed the court's suggestions. Meanwhile the Reverend Samuel Marsden was making his own inquiries among the Irish at Parramatta.

Marsden (1764–1838), a grasping Evangelical missionary with heavy shoulders and the face of a petulant ox, had sailed to New South Wales in 1793 as the protégé of William Wilberforce, who recommended him as assistant to the chaplain of the colony. Once there, the protégé showed few of his patron's instincts to mercy, but focused his considerable energies on getting land, breeding sturdy Suffolk sheep, preaching hellfire sermons and (as magistrate at Parramatta) subjecting convicts to draconian punishment—hence his nickname, "The Flogging Parson." Marsden soon became the chief Anglican clergyman in New South Wales, and his hatred for the Irish Catholic convicts knew no bounds. It spilled into his sermons, pervaded his table talk and was set down at length in a

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ranting memo to his church superiors in London which, for hagiory, rivals William Dampier's thoughts on the Australian blacks:

The number of Catholic Convicts is very great . . . and these in general composed of the lowest Class of the Irish nation; who are the most wild, ignorant and savage Race that were ever favoured with the light of Civilization, men that have been familiar with . . . every horrid Crime from their Infancy. Their minds being destitute of every Principle of Religion & Morality render them capable of perpetrating the most nefarious Acts in cool Blood. As they never appear to reflect upon Consequences; but to be . . . always alive to Rebellion and Mischief, they are very dangerous members of Society. No Confidence whatever can be placed in them . . . They are extremely superstitious, artful and treacherous, which renders it impossible for the most watchful & active Government to discover their real Intentions. . . [If Catholicism were] tolerated they would assemble together from every Quarter, not so much from a desire of celebrating Mass, as to recite the Miseries and Injustice of their Banishment, the Hardships they suffer, and to enflame one another's Minds with some wild Scheme of Revenge.⁵²

Marsden was set on finding the pikes, and his belief in conspiracy was confirmed by such vague observations as this from Hester Stroud, an illiterate prisoner off the *Sugar Cane*: "From what she saw of the Irishmen being in small parties in the Camp at Toongabbie and by their walking about together and talking very earnestly in Irish, deponent verily believes they were intent on something improper."⁵³ Gaelic, of course, was their native tongue and many spoke nothing else. But Marsden was so certain they were hiding something that he resolved to have some of them "punished very severely" until they talked. Joseph Holt—who, as a voluntary transportee, could not so easily be tortured—was brought up to Toongabbie to watch the lord's representative in Australia, the Flogging Parson, at work. In his description of Marsden's interrogations under the blue indifferent Australian sky one sees the heroic determination to resist the tyrant that some of these Irish felt and paid for, as their spines were slowly opened to the air and the blowflies. The first one up was Maurice Fitzgerald, a middle-aged farmer from Cork, transported for life on the *Minerva* and now sentenced to 300 lashes.

The place they flogged them their arms pulled around a large tree and their breasts squeezed against the trunk so the men had no power to cringe. . . . There was two floggers, Richard Rice and John Johnson the Hangman from Sydney. Rice was a left-handed man and Johnson was right-handed, so they stood at each side, and I never saw two threshers in a barn move their strokes more handier than those two man-killers did.

The moment they began I turned my face round towards the other side and one of the constables came and desir'd me to turn and look on. I put my right hand in my pocket and pulled out my pen-knife, and swore I [would] rip him from the navel to the chin. They all gathered round me and would have ill used me . . . [but] they were obliged to walk off. I could compare them to a pack of hounds at the death of a hare, all yelping.

I was to leeward of the floggers. . . . I was two perches from them. The flesh and skin blew in my face as it shook off the carts. Fitzgerald received his 300 lashes. Doctor Mason—I will never forget him—he used to go feel his pulse, and he smiled, and said: "This man will tire you before he will fail—Go on." . . . During the time [Fitzgerald] was getting his punishment he never gave so much as a word—only one, and that was saying, "Don't strike me on the neck, flog me fair."

When he was let loose, two of the constables went and took hold of him by the arms to keep him in the cart. I was standing by. [He said to them, "Let me go." He struck both of them with his elbows in the pit of the stomach and knocked them both down, and then stepped in the cart. I heard Dr. Mason say that man had strength enough to bear 200 more. Next was tied up Paddy Galvin, a young boy about 20 years of age. He was ordered to get 300 lashes. He got one hundred on the back, and you could see his backbone between his shoulder blades. Then the Doctor ordered him to get another hundred on his bottom. He got it, and then his baunches were in such a jelly that the Doctor ordered him to be flogged on the calves of his legs. He got one hundred there and as much as a whimper he never gave. They asked him if he would tell where the pikes were hid. He said he did not know, and would not tell. "You may as well hang me now," he said, "for you never will get any music from me so." They put him in the cart and sent him to the Hospital.⁵⁴

The frustrated Marsden reported to Governor King that "I am sure [Galvin] will die before he reveals anything."⁵⁵ King ordered a second court of inquiry, which concluded (once again) that although there was no evidence, things looked suspicious; so the "several atrocious offenders" on whom suspicion fell should be flogged again and sent to life exile on Norfolk Island, with "the strictest discipline to reduce them to due obedience, subordination and order." Thus, the Irish suspects were shipped off to the tender mercies of Major Foveaux.⁵⁶

None of this assuaged the fears of the free colonists, who remained—as Elizabeth Paterson wrote to a friend in October 1800—in "an uncomfortable state of anxiety. . . . [at] the late importations of United Irishmen. . . . Our military force is now very little in comparison with the number of Irish now in the Colony, and that little much divided. Much trouble

^{*} Both lived; Galvin received a free pardon from the compassionate Governor Macquarie in 1810, Fitzgerald in 1812.

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may befall us, before any succours can arrive. . . . [O]ther ships with the same description of people are now on their voyage to this place."⁵⁶

At Sydney Cove, the ships kept coming. The *Anne*, in 1801, brought "137 of the most desperate and diabolical characters . . . together with a Catholic priest of the most notorious, seditious and rebellious principles," wrote King, "which makes the numbers of . . . United Irishmen amount to 600, ready and waiting an opportunity to put their diabolical plans in action."⁵⁷ Anxiety was running so high that people could not even farm properly; the infant colony was glutted by "violent Republicans" and imperilled by no less than three Irish priests, the most recent of whom, Father Peter O'Neil, had been transported untried after being tortured for information in a Dublin jail, with 275 lashes on his back. (Father O'Neil was later pardoned and returned to Dublin at the end of 1802, much shaken by his experiences in Sydney and Norfolk Island.) King felt it was a breach of security to have priests in the colony. The Irish interpreted this as one more violation of their rights to Mass and the Sacraments. They petitioned King once, twice and again to let Father Dixon, transported on *Friendship* in early 1800, say Mass for them. King thought Dixon's conduct had been "exemplary," and so perhaps he would not inflame his flock with seditious notions. The governor weighed the matter. "An artful priest may lead [Irishmen] to every action that is either good or bad." But more than 25 percent of the convicts in New South Wales were now Irish, and their religious impulses must have some vent. To the disgust of Samuel Marsden, King permitted Father Dixon to say mass once a month, "under stipulated restrictions"—meaning police surveillance. The first Mass and the first Catholic marriage in Australia were celebrated in Sydney on Sunday, May 15, 1803.⁵⁸

Meanwhile the Irish had convinced themselves that the masters of convict ships had been under orders to starve and murder them by neglect on the outward voyage. They had reason to think so. When the *Hercules* arrived from Cork in 1802 it showed a 37 percent death rate; on *Atlas II*, 65 of 181 Irish convicts died. King found this "a situation shocking to humanity," but it was pointless to try and persuade the Irish that it was unintentional.⁵⁹

The surprising fact is not that the Irish eventually rose but that they took so long before doing it. It was not until 1804 that rebellion broke out, and it did not last long, for it was badly planned. In his dying confession to Samuel Marsden, one of the rebel leaders, William Johnston, said that the Irish had been talking about a rising all through February 1804 but had fixed no date for it. The idea was to take the relatively ill-guarded and remote settlement of Castle Hill, seize what weapons they could, link up with Irish convicts in Parramatta and then march all together on Sydney. A password was fixed ("St. Peter"). But because of poor commu-

nication between the settlements, the attempt was ill-coordinated and, worse, there was an informer: an Irishman named Keogh, who had been thatching a Hawkesbury farmhouse when a fellow convict approached him with word that the rising was planned for the 4th or 5th of March. Keogh took this news to the Parramatta barracks, and before long all the guards in Sydney and Parramatta were counting their ammunition.

On Sunday, March 4, a Protestant chaplain named Hassall preached to the "desperate characters" at Castle Hill, but only a fraction of the two hundred convicts there came to hear him, "from which circumstance I thought that some alarm would take place." The Reverend Hassall guessed right, for the Irish rose at Castle Hill at seven that evening. They set fire to a house to announce their revolt and then ran from cottage to cottage, grabbing what arms they could find—mostly scythes and axes, but a few muskets as well. A convict stonemason, Philip Cunningham, hopped up on a stump and harangued his mates—"He sang out, Now my Boys, Liberty or Death"—and away they marched in the dusk to Parramatta, singing their treason songs. On the way some of them burst into the cottage of Duggin, the hated government flogger at Castle Hill, and beat him up. They also found a full keg of rum and fortified, they split into parties and spent the night looting farms and exhorting other Irish assigned men to join them. Inspired by the rum and the headier intoxication of their liberty, they saw the roof beams of the burning sheds knockle under, black against gold-vermillion, into the heart of the fire, while trails of sparks wreathed upward into the lavender darkness and the Irish voices joined a capella in the rebel anthem of '98, "The Croppy Boy":

It was early, early in the spring
The birds did whistle and sweetly sing
Changing their notes from tree to tree,
And the song they sang was Old Ireland free.

It was early, early in the night,
The yeoman cavalry gave me a fright,
The yeoman cavalry was my downfall,
And taken was I by Lord Cornwall.

As the commotion gathered in the dark and the news of the rebellion filtered into Parramatta from the outlying farms, a cry ran from house to house: "The Croppies are coming!" The Reverend Marsden, with his wife and Mrs. Elizabeth Macarthur, prudently scrambled into a boat and started floating down the Parramatta River toward Sydney. Drums beat, fowling pieces were loaded with ball and the little garrison kept anxious

watch. The glow of burning sheds and shanties was seen in the distance. But meanwhile, a horseman had reached Sydney with news of the Castle Hill rising. Governor King learned about it by midnight, only five hours after it began, and he immediately had a detachment of four officers and fifty-two privates of the New South Wales Corps mustered out of barracks.⁶⁰

One is apt to think of the Rum Corps as a rabble of incompetents, but they performed well enough that night. Commanded by Major George Johnston, they set off at 1:30 a.m. and achieved a forced march from Sydney to Parramatta by dawn, with full equipment and musket. The town was intact when they arrived, and after a swig of water and a bite of biscuit Major Johnston split his detachment into two sections, sending one toward Castle Hill and leading the other at double time along the road to Toongabbie. But the Irish were not there either. They had moved on toward the banks of the Hawkesbury River, and Johnston and his men had to chase them for another ten miles.

The "croppies" made their stand, such as it was, on a knoll which later became known as Vinegar Hill, after the site of a famous rebel battle in Wexford six years before. They had been wandering about and drinking all night, and the first rush of excitement had long since dissipated. Sheepish and confused, they did not know what to do when the "lobster-backs" in their sweat-soaked red tunics fanned out at the bottom of the hill and Major Johnston (accompanied by his adjutant and, on foot, the Catholic priest Father Dixon, who wanted to negotiate a truce without bloodshed if he could) rode forward to meet them. The Irish leaders Phillip Cunningham and William Johnston stepped out. Major Johnston said he wanted to parley. Cunningham told him to come into the rebel ranks, "which I refused, observing to them that I was within pistol-shot and that it was in their power to kill me, and that their captains must have very little spirit if they would not come forward to speak to me."⁶¹

At this, Cunningham and Johnston naively supposed the major had come in a spirit of truce. They walked up to his horse, Cunningham protesting that his men would not surrender, "that he would have Death or Liberty." Major Johnston and his trooper promptly drew their pistols and clapped them to the rebel leaders' heads, forcing them back into the ranks of the government soldiers. Then Major Johnston gave the order to fire.

The scene is fairly well rendered by an illustration of the time. Cunningham, hat in one hand and sword in the other, cries, "Death or Liberty, Major!" while Johnston, pointing his horse-pistol, retorts, "You Scoundrel, I'll liberate you!" "Croppies lie down!" the trooper barks at the rebel Johnston, who replies, "We are all ruined." In the far distance, Father Dixon exhorts the rebels to "lay down your arms, my deluded

Countrymen." A redcoat in the foreground slashes a rebel across the scalp, crying, "Thou rebel dog," while the Irishman utters (in comic accent) a woebegone "Oh jesus." And in the middle ground, the line of serried redcoats is firing its volley as the motley Irish on the hill spout blood, stagger and fall.

In this way, fewer than thirty Botany Bay Rangers put 266 insurgents to flight within minutes. Untrained, poorly led and lightly armed with one musket for every ten men, the Irish caved in. "I never saw more zeal and activity than what has been displayed by the officers and men of the detachment for destroying or securing the runaways," Major Johnston reported with evident relish to King.⁶²

They strung up Cunningham, who had been badly wounded in the melee, from the stair of the Government Store in Parramatta—no need for trial. For the next few days, under martial law, the redcoats scoured the bush and farms, bringing all the croppies in. On March 8, King convened a court-martial to try the ringleaders: John Brannon, John Burke, George Harrington, Charles Hill, Timothy Hogan, Samuel Humes, William Johnston, Bryan McCormack, John Neale and John Place. There were no courtroom heroics and the trial was brief. Seven of the ten pleaded that they had been "forced" to join the rebellion. Only William Johnston admitted all charges and threw himself on the mercy of the court. Most of them were sentenced to hang in chains, as a special mark of infamy; the only ones not hanged were Burke and McCormack. The executions were carried out at Parramatta (Hill, Humes and Place), Castle Hill (Johnston, Neale and Harrington) and Sydney (Brannon and Hogan). In this way, the greatest example could be wrung from the hangings; everyone, in all three settlements, had a chance to see what the deluded Irish slogan of "death or liberty" really meant. For months to come, the rotting bodies would dangle in their rough iron frames: "Butcher'd by Scores in New Wales / Dead Men—by me—shall tell sad tales," wrote John Grant, the first exile to write verse in Australia, and explained how on his trips around Parramatta

the Path . . . rises suddenly to an Eminence, from where—Alas! how often!—as I glanced down at the little valley before me, through which I had to pass—the sight and smell of a man called Johnston (hanged there in chains from a high Tree for his part in the Rebellion last March)—would often halt my steps, hold my Gaze, and in fact bring the tears flowing from my Eyes! . . . [T]he excellent character of that man, added not a little to the Shock.—Several spectacles of this kind were exhibited, until the arrival of Mrs. Kent from India in the Buffalo with her Husband, when . . . she obtained, by her entreaties, an order from Governor King for the burial of all these Martyrs who were hanging in the Sacred Cause of Liberty.⁶³

Other United Irishmen were flogged nearly to death and sent to the mouth of the Hunter River, north of Sydney, to hew coal in a recently discovered seam, on a diet scarcely above starvation. As for the "less culpable" Irish, King had them worked in widely separated chain gangs on the rim of the little colony, where they were driven mercilessly "with no other intermission than the time allowed for their meals and the Sabbath."⁶⁴

So ended the only concerted uprising of convicts ever to take place on the Australian mainland. With it, the prospects of a Jacobin rebellion were extinguished. The System had learned some valuable lessons from it—for instance, the basic strategy that political agitators should never be left long in one place or with the same company. "Altho' there are some violent perturbators in this Colony," King remarked a year later, "however, by their being occasionally removed from one Settlement to another, there is no present cause for apprehension." The croppies would murmur and grumble and distill potteen from maize, but they would never rise again.⁶⁵

The English kept sending Irish political prisoners to New South Wales. From 1815 to 1840, the Irish countryside was in a state of more-or-less continuous civil war. At least 1,200 land-and-tithe protestors—probably many more, since not all political offenders were described as such in the ships' indentures after 1816—were shipped to New South Wales. They called themselves Caravats and Carders, Whiteboys, Rightboys, Hearts of Steel and Ribbon Men. The most dangerous, from the English point of view, were the Whiteboys, who pretended to be a trade-union association for the protection of Irish peasants, but were in fact enforcers and assassins, the ancestors of today's Provisional IRA, who took on the dirty work of crushing knees, gouging eyes and burning houses that more squeamish Republicans would not touch. In the early 1830s, the Whiteboys were thought to have killed, maimed and otherwise discouraged two-thirds of the English informers in Ireland.⁶⁶

But neither they nor any other Irish rebels transported after the 1804 rising at Castle Hill would pose much of a threat to the System, simply because they were dispersed in an expanding colony. Settlers pushed westward from Parramatta across the Blue Mountains and into the fertile Bathurst plains beyond. They went southwest to Berrima and Bowral, and eventually down to the wide sheep plains of the high Monaro. They colonized the Hunter River Valley, inland from Newcastle. All this new property was worked by convict servants, assigned men and women. Scattered in threes and fours through the immense bush, living in outback isolation, political prisoners had no social resonance: They were neutralized by geography as much as by law.

Yet the story of English oppression and Irish resistance did not evap-

orate in Australia. On the contrary: It survived most tenaciously as one of the primary images of working-class culture, flourishing long after the System itself had receded from memory. The Irish stuck to one another. They were clannish and had long memories: "much hatred, little room." They always felt they were being punished, not for their crimes, but for being Irish. In Australia, as in Ireland, each act of oppression contributed to a common fund of memory; fact might waver into legend, but the essential content did not change. By the 1880s, when the Protestant majority in Australia had all but sublimated the "hated stain" of convictry, the Irish still kept the memory of the System alive. Naturally, they also fostered the ennobling delusion that most Irish convicts had been sent to the Fatal Shore for political offenses, as though there had been no common thieves, muggers or rapists among the 30,000 men and 9,000 women who had been transported directly from Ireland. Of course, the numbers contradict the myth. Probably no more than 20 percent of the Irish transportees could have been called social or political rebels (except by those, if they still exist, who imagine that all crimes against property are political statements). And the hard core—those transported between 1793 and 1840 for political crimes (as distinct from actions related to riot, such as assault or destruction of property, which were usually treated as common felonies)—numbered less than 1,500.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the legacy of sectarianism in Australian politics, the sense of a community divided between English Protestant "haves" and Irish Catholic "have-nots," began with them and influenced the patterns of power in Australian life for another 150 years.

v1

THIS DID NOT HAPPEN with English political dissidents. But between 1800 and 1850, at the most conservative estimate, about 1,800 people were transported to Australia from England for political "crimes." Among them were representatives of nearly every protest movement known to the British Government, so that Australia received samples (if not big influxes) of most working-class movements. Frame-breaking Ludities were sent out in 1812–13, and food rioters from East Anglia in 1816. Fourteen members of the betrayed Pentridge Rising near Nottingham were exiled in 1817, and five dazed fanatics from the Cato Street Conspiracy—which had absurdly hoped to set off a general insurrection of English workers by assassinating Lord Sidmouth's cabinet as its members sat down to dinner—came in 1820. Radical weavers from Scotland in 1820 and from Yorkshire in 1821, rioters from Bristol in 1831 and Wales in 1835; Swing rioters and machine-breakers in the early 1830s,

the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, more than 100 Chartists between 1839 and 1848—all went to Australia. So did “politicals” from other countries. From 1828 to 1838, the Supreme Court at the Cape transported each year 30 to 40 members of what it called “the excitable classes”—South African blacks* who, although they seem to have had no political ideas, were believed to have transgressed the racial supremacist laws of the Cape colony; there, transportation was another threat to keep the Hottentots and Bushmen in line.⁶⁷

In Canada in 1837 and 1838, there were two risings against the Tory legislature, the Anglican Church and their seeming unbreakable power over law and land: one by “Lower Canada” (Quebec) militants, the other in “Upper Canada” (Ontario) by English-speaking Canadians backed by some Americans from south of the border. Both these insurrections of tradesmen and farmers were put down by the British Army, and 153 Canadian patriots were transported to Australia.⁶⁸

Of course, the number of Englishmen transported was only a minuscule fraction of those indicted for protest offenses. But the government, especially up to 1830, did not want to transport every English protestor; it wanted to demonstrate its weapons of repression while keeping intact, as far as possible, its reputation for “mercy,” which it could sustain by not pressing for extreme penalties in court.

Never had there been deeper unrest among the common people of England than between 1810 and 1845; hopelessness, poverty and resentment were endemic to postwar Britain, and they expressed themselves in a rising sense of class crisis that traced the graph of England’s economic malaise. The climax of this tension, between 1830 and 1845, saw more than 10 percent of the working population of England classified as paupers, thrown by the Poor Laws on the meager charity of the parish. Working people believed, with reason, that their government cared nothing for them, and manufacturers complained that official economic policy was strangling growth. Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that “in the post-Napoleonic decades the figures of the balance of payments show us the extraordinary spectacle of the only industrial economy in the world and the only serious exporter of manufactured goods unable to maintain an export surplus in its commodity trade.”⁶⁹ But for this, men were losing

* These were not the first black convicts to arrive in Australia; in the 1790s a small number of blacks, usually servants or slaves who had been brought to London from the West Indies and then been transported for theft, made their appearance in Sydney. One, a First Fleet convict nicknamed Black Caesar, had become Australia’s first bushranger by “eloping” into the scrub in 1789 with a stolen gun and making one-man raids on tents and vegetable gardens; when this “mere animal,” as David Collins referred to him, was captured, he proved “so indifferent about meeting death, that he declared in confinement that if he should be hanged, he would create a laugh before he was turned off, by playing some trick upon the executioner.”

the only jobs they could do. The bitterness of the silk-weaver thrown out of work by machinery came, not solely from his own poverty, but from the sense that a whole tradition of craftwork was being thrust into oblivion by inferior products. This despair was reinforced by the anomie of city life, the Machine, with its demand for new concentrations of labor in new places, was creating a society of people who no longer knew who they were or where they came from.

Such dissatisfactions ran so deep that governments from Pitt’s to Sidmouth’s invented a demonology to explain them: “Our” common people would never feel this if left to their natural inclinations, hence they have been wrought upon by foreign agents, the French; thus, all protest is tinged with treason. From the 1790s to the 1820s, the government found itself increasingly hampered by the apparatus of spies and agents it had set up to penetrate movements of working-class dissent. It was drowning in spurious information, distracted by the phantom of insurrection. This made it easier for it to ignore or misunderstand the clear import of demands for reform. It helps explain the often remarkable disproportion between the mild deeds of political protesters and the vindictiveness with which the social death of transportation was inflicted on them. It may also suggest why so many English political transportees, unlike their Irish counterparts, seem to have shed their “radical” attitudes once they decided to stay on as Emancipists and enjoy the high wages that free skilled labor could command in Australia. They had been protesting against want, not foreign occupation, and in Australia, want could be relieved.

The heyday of political transportation from England was the 1830s. The 1820s were by no means peaceful, although corn prices were lower, the hated Lord Castlereagh had been succeeded by the more moderate George Canning, and workers, especially industrial workers, seemed better off. This did not apply in the country, however. To William Cobbett—who had just returned from his American exile carrying the bones of Tom Paine in a box and had set out on the long journey on horseback through the shires that was to give him the material for *Rural Rides*—the once-sturdy countryfolk of England were “villains” and “serfs.” He railed against Abolitionists like Wilberforce who, he claimed, cared more for the condition of African slaves in the colonies than for the fate of English workers at home. Most rural workers were below the poverty line at a shilling a day or less; some earned only three shillings a week.

But the Tory politicians of the day saw the problem in terms of one hypnotic ideology: that of Malthus, who taught that it was futile to spend any money on poor relief, since it would only encourage the poor to breed and thus make the problem worse. If left to survive or starve, the poor would find their “natural” level. And since the out-of-work did not,

by definition, generate wealth, their survival was not an issue for the government.

Aggravated by a slump in the economy and a rise in staple prices toward the end of the 1820s, such was the background to the political unrest that after 1830 landed the largest single group of protestors in Australia. Most of them were tried and convicted in the southern counties, where farm wages were lowest, and their crime was complicity in what came to be known as "The Last Laborers' Revolt." The figurehead around whom they rallied was a fictional leader to whom custom gave the name of Captain Swing: a bogeyman to the propertied, in whose name threatening letters were tacked on gateposts and shoved under front doors in the dead of night. These were known as "Swing letters" and the disturbances they promised were "Swing riots."

Captain Swing stood for several issues. He expressed grievances against the loss of common land by the policy of enclosure. He protested against high wheat prices. The Corn Laws, framed to help English farmers by keeping cheap European wheat off the market, naturally worked against the poor in times of shortage; and by 1830 many farm laborers were deprived of their white bread. Efforts to feed them potatoes were indignantly rejected. The English worker believed his bread and cheese set him several cuts above the porridge-eating Scot or the root-grubbing Irish croppie. The loaf of wheat bread was, to him, a natural right, and the fact that landlords and gentry ignored such traditions did not make them unreal.⁷⁰ The protestor's weapon was fire: a match at the base of a hayrick.

The other issue behind the Swing riots was mechanization. The impact of steam-driven farm machinery on unskilled rural labor was disastrous. One threshing-machine, rented out and hauled from farm to farm, could put a hundred men out of seasonal work. The economist today sees this as the natural result of technology; the farmworker in 1830 saw it as a cruel denial of his natural right to work. Both are right, one in the historical perspective, the other in the immediate world of need. So, like the Luddites before them, the Swing rioters went for the machines, breaking the rollers, holing the boilers, jamming the gears with crowbars.

Most Swing threats were inspired by rural grievances. Thus on January 20, 1831, an eighteen-year-old solicitor's clerk named Thomas Cook, from Whitchurch in Shropshire, wrote a letter to a local cabinetmaker and auctioneer named William Churton:

We men of determination, firm, resolute, and undeviating, are now without scruple and determined that your property shall not be of long duration, nor yet your existence—property which has been got through robbery,

Roguery Churton has been your practice since first you were established in life, but no longer shall it be continued.

Mark, therefore, the time is at hand when your blood shall atone for your rash and untoward acts. We shall waylay your body, and bring your family to total subversion, which you know you are well deserving. . . . PS, we give you this previous note in order that you may prepare for that awful and sad end.

SIGNED: Men determined to right the oppressed. Agents to Swing. London."

Why make such threats to a provincial cabinetmaker? Because, although Churton was not a landowner, he had helped put out fires. During 1830–31 there were no less than sixteen acts of arson—rickburning and barnburning—in the vicinity of Whitchurch, which seems to have been a hotbed of rural political dissent. Churton was among the "respectables" who had called for more police protection and harsher punishment for incendiaries. So Thomas Cook was convicted at the Shrewsbury Assizes in March 1831 and sentenced to fourteen years in Australia, where in due course he would write his invaluable account of the System, *The Exile's Lamentations*.

Compared to Ireland thirty years before, the rioting of 1830–31 was mild; in any case, it was directed against property, not people. But it spread rapidly across the southern counties, where rural wages were about one-third the national average. Men marched, burned ricks and broke machines in Kent and Surrey, Shropshire and Lincolnshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Essex, Oxfordshire, Dorset and Norfolk. These "curiously indecisive and unbloodthirsty mobs"⁷¹ were harshly met by Lord Grey's new Whig government. It offered the enormous reward of £500 for the capture and conviction of arsonists and machine-breakers, and it sent army detachments and locally organized posses against them. Some counties raised their own squads of mounted yeomanry to ride down the protestors. Lord Melbourne enjoined all magistrates to maintain "a firm Resistance to all demands."

To frighten protestors, the Whig government now began an orgy of prosecution. Nearly 2,000 insurgents were tried in 34 counties. Of these, 252 were sentenced to death but, in the usual way of showing the Royal Mercy, only 19 of them were actually hanged and the rest had their sentences commuted to prison or transportation. In this roundup, 481 Swing followers were shipped out to Australia, for terms of seven or fourteen years.⁷²

Most of them were older than the normal run of transported felons—an average of twenty-nine years among those sent to Van Diemen's Land, as against the convict average of just under twenty-six years. More than half of them were married men. Many of them had letters of commen-

dation from former employers, and not a few were skilled craftsmen or "mechanics," the most desirable kind of assigned servant in Australia. This puzzled the magistrates: What could a millwright, a carpenter or a blacksmith have to fear from the threshing-machines? But these skilled and settled people could read; they knew they had allies in Cobbett and Tom Paine, and they were often the first villagers to speak of rights and to raise discontent among their less skilled and literate neighbors. The case of one Hampshire radical, William Winkworth, a shoemaker who read Cobbett aloud to a circle of "bumpkins" on Saturday nights, should be multiplied by many hundreds to grasp its social import.⁷⁶ Now their lives were shattered, their hopes gone, their families riven as the transport ships bore them away.

Not one of them seems to have sustained any overt kind of political activity in Australia. In fact the surviving letters from transported protestors of 1830-31—Richard Dillingham and Peter Withers in Van Diemen's Land—sketch a scene of resignation amid relative plenty. The 1830s were prosperous years on that green, fertile island, and the demand for skilled labor was high. Dillingham had been transported as a rioter, but he seems to have had few political opinions and no connection with organized protest; he found Van Diemen's Land to be a veritable Land of Cockaigne. In 1836 he was assigned as a market-gardener to David Lambe, a mild decent settler who had held the post of colonial architect early in Sir George Arthur's regime. He was "very comfortably settled," he told his parents through a scribe, less than a mile from Hobart:

As to my living I find it better than ever I expected thank God I want for nothing in that respect. As for tea and sugar I could almost swim in it. I am allowed 2 pound of sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ pound of tea per week and plenty of tobacco and good white bread and sometimes beef sometimes mutton sometimes pork. This I have every day. Plenty of fruit puddings in the season of all sorts and I have two suits of Cloths a year and three pairs of shoes in a year.⁷⁷

Peter Withers, from Wiltshire, adds to the picture: "I have got a very good place," he told his brother in 1833,

all the Bondage I am under is to Answer my Name Every Sunday before I goes to church, so you must not think that I am made a slave of, for I am not, it is quite the Reverse of it. And I have got a good Master and Mistress, I have got plenty to eat and drink as good as ever a gentleman in this country [has], so all the Punishment I have in this Country is the

thoughts of leaving my friends, My wife and My Dear Dear Children, but I lives in hopes of seeing Old England again."⁷⁸

Assignment, as we will see, was a lottery; Withers and Dillingham drew good masters, whereas Thomas Cook in New South Wales suffered under a bad one. "I want for nothing but my liberty," Dillingham remarked, "but though I am thus situated it is not the same with all that come as prisoners." Clearly, however, the System made no effort to secure English politicals as a group, as it had done to the Irish earlier. Individual masters might give ex-rioters a hard time because they feared unrest on their own farms, but this was uncommon. Generally, the English protestors, skilled family men with a stubborn sense of their own worth, worked out their sentences and lived on as Emancipists in Australia. Significantly fewer of them than of the ordinary criminal population committed second offenses. They had paid long and bitterly for their beliefs. As Peter Withers wrote, "16 years, that is a grate While." They were not ideologues or professional agitators, but laborers and craftsmen jealous of what they believed to be their ancient rights as Englishmen. Above all, they needed to work, and the stigma of "politics" was hard to shake: Australian squatters and settlers were even more conservative than the English squirearchy whose manners and customs they were learning to ape. "You are one of the Dorchester machine-breakers, but you are caught at last!" were the first words James Brine, one of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, heard from his new master on the Hunter River in New South Wales.

Thus most English protestors lived quietly on in Australia, doing the work England had denied them. They had no marked effect on the future politics of their new country. In England, nothing could stop the trade-union movement in the long run. But in the short run, transportation certainly worked as a tactic of repression. It knocked the fight out of its victims. At home, in the villages, it held up a frightening example to workers who had little means of knowing what had really happened to the transported men, since letters back from the Fatal Shore were rare. In Australia, it turned the protestor into a political eunuch without making a martyr of him. The wives of transported men, widowed and yet not widowed, taught their sons to avoid the ways of the dissenter; some of them were asked to do so quite specifically by their husbands. In 1835 a former non-commissioned officer, who had taken part in Swing activity and was transported for political insurrection to Van Diemen's Land (where he forged a deed and was re-transported to Norfolk Island), gave the Quaker missionaries James Backhouse and George Washington Walker a letter to take home to his wife. "You and I have lived for a long

time without God in our hearts," he admonished her. But in bondage he had come to see that his sufferings were meant "to bring me to a sense of my own depravity and wickedness."

You will make our children read, and get off, the above Scripture passages. *Never let them read any political works. Keep their minds from being entangled with political men, and their productions. This, you will not need to be told, has been the prelude to all my present misery.*"

Probably this fairly represents the usual feelings of transported ex-protestors. Budding radicalism withered in the antipodes, unless—as with the Irish—it had close bonds and ancient national grievances to prop and feed it. In convict Australia, repression won in politics, as in the rest of life.

Bolters and Bushrangers

MOST PRISONERS of the System acquiesced in their fate. They waited out their time, knowing that longer and worse constraint—the triangle, the iron gang, Norfolk Island—would be the price of rebellion. But in any carceral society, there is always a spark of genius for escape. The worse the odds, the more hope escape gives others.

In Australia it was easy to escape. The hard thing was to survive. The odds against surviving were high, but hundreds of convicts made their bets. Some confronted Australia's external wall, the sea: They stowed away, or hijacked ships, or built their own rafts, or stole a longboat. Others took to the land, even less charted than the sea. At first these runaways were called "banditti" (evoking ragged, romantic figures among dark caverns); more colloquially, "bolters." In time, the skulking escapee became that primal figure of popular Australian culture, the bushranger—enemy of flogger, trap and magistrate, the poor man's violent friend, the emblem of freedom in a chained society.

At first, from the 1790s to early 1800s, most of the runaways went inland. After a brief exhilaration they either died or wandered, broken, back to the settlement, "so squalid and lean," David Collins remarked, "the very crows would have declined their carcasses." There were reports that fifty skeletons, picked white by dingoes and birds, could be seen on a day's march to Botany Bay.

The most persistent absconders were the Irish, who in their ignorance had constructed a Paradise myth to alleviate their antipodean Purgatory. They kept sneaking out of the settlement in the belief, as one of them put it to Watkin Tench,

that at a considerable distance to the northward existed a large river, which separated this country from the back part of China, and that when