CONVICT VOYAGES LEARNING RESOURCE: AUSTRALIA

TEACHERS NOTES

Overview and summary

Convict transportation was an extensive practice that many European countries and their colonies used as a form of punishment for convicted criminals. Between 1787 and 1868 over 160,000 convict men, women and children were transported to Australia, a movement that Robert Hughes described as “the largest forced exile of citizens at the behest of a European government in modern history.” Over centuries the British transportation process was heavily influenced by developments within theories of punishment and the needs of its Empire. Though Britain’s strategic requirements tended to be centred on its sphere of influence, other motivations for transporting convicts were often more complex and ranged from the removal of unwanted criminals, to the use of convict labour and the expansion of the scope of power and control.

These transported convicts left profound legacies, affecting British, Australian, and global histories. The material histories of the convict transportation system persist in many of the infrastructure projects built with convict labour, including the prisons themselves. But the convict system also overlapped with the colonisation and settlement of Australia in a way that both shaped Australian identities and national narratives, and contributed to the violence and dispossession of many Indigenous peoples across the continent. The study of convict transportation and penal colony settlement in Australia is a key way of understanding many important aspects of imperial and colonial history, the development of globalisation, and the creation of contemporary systems of law, labour, and economics.

Key facts

- The nation we now know as Australia, was made up of several colonies in the nineteenth century, some of which were settled by convicts (penal colonies).
- New South Wales received 80,000 convicts between 1788-1840, and 3000 more to Moreton Bay and Port Phillip (1846-1850).
- Van Diemen’s Land (renamed Tasmania in 1856) received 67,000-69,000 convicts between 1803-1853.
- Western Australia received 9,000 convicts between 1850-1868.
- Sentences of transportation were for 7, 14 years or life but even those sentenced to shorter-sentences rarely returned home (passage was expensive), making it effectively a life-long banishment. Convicts rarely fulfilled their full term, and could qualify for a Ticket of Leave, Certificate of Freedom, or a pardon (conditional or absolute) that allowed them to earn money and live independently within the colony.
• The majority of convicts were sentenced for petty theft – between 1/3 and 3/5 of male convicts sentenced for larceny. Around 4,000 were political prisoners. Less than 5% were convicted for violent crimes.

• The majority of convicts to Australia were English and Welsh (70%), Irish (24%) and Scottish (5%), convicts were also sent from other British Colonies including India, Canada, New Zealand, the Cape Colony (South Africa), Caribbean and Hong Kong.

• The majority of convicts were men, but this varied depending on the colony. Around 25,000 (15%) were adult women. No women were sent to Western Australia, while New South Wales convicts were approximately 15% women, and nearly 15,500 women were sent to Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) by the time transportation was ended. Most of them were younger than 30, so they’d be able to work and have children. Due to the gender imbalance only one in four men married after arrival, compared to up to 90% of women.

• A fifth of Australians today are descended from convicts.

Learning Outcomes and Placement in Curriculum

This guide is designed to speak to three different levels of educational progression. These are: Level 1 - Early Secondary (roughly ages 12-16); Level 2 - Upper Secondary (roughly ages 16-18); and Level 3 - Undergraduate.

Level 1 – Early Secondary: At this level, discussions of convict transportation to Australia can constitute a depth study of both British and the wider modern world histories, linking the British Empire to the Pacific periphery during the 18th and 19th centuries. Students at this level will engage with the materials in such a way as to understand the connections between different aspects of 18th and 19th century British imperial history; between these histories at local, regional, national and international scales; between cultural, economic, social, political, religious and military aspects of the history of convict transportation and penal colonisation; and between short and long term timescales, appreciating the ways that convict transportation changed over time.

Level 2 – Upper Secondary: At this level, students undertake more advanced studies of multiple countries, and exposure to convict transportation history will help students study aspects of the past in breadth and in depth including both British and wider world history over a 200 year period. Students will be asked to link significant individuals, societies, events, developments and issues within the broad historical and geographical context of Australian penal colonisation, to identify developments affecting convicts, settlers, Aboriginal people, and other groups, and to understand and articulate a range of appropriate historical perspectives, for example material, economic, cultural, nationalistic, ethnic, political, religious, scientific, social or technological.

Level 3 - Undergraduate: At the undergraduate level, studies of convict transportation can be employed in many introductory history, geography, and sociology modules. Australian penal transport and colonisation can be provided as a case study in imperialism and colonialism, globalisation, migration and flows, histories of crime
and punishment, and many other broad subject matters. Interactive resources are ideal for seminar and workshop use, with students investigating both primary documents and contemporary research to develop nuanced understandings of how convict transportation helped to shape the modern world.

Across all levels, students will:

- Understand the complex, multiple histories of colonisation and the founding of Australia, including the role of convicts in displacement of Indigenous peoples and creation of settlements.
- Identify the roots of contemporary globalisation in the history of British imperialism and the building of global networks of migration and trade.
- Discuss social technologies of surveillance, discipline, and control, including transport ships, prisons, the use of guards and mounted police, and application of forced labour.

Scaffolding and scaling of lessons

This teaching resource is predicated on a level-by-level increase in detail and focus in scale to encompass increasingly complex demonstrations of social, political, and cultural interactions through the penal colonisation process in Australia.

Students at Level 1 (unfamiliar with any of the issues around convict transportation and penal colonisation) should study the broad context of Australia across the two hundred year period of active penal colonisation. Studies should focus on engaging with primary sources and material cultures of convict transport, including the reading on convict heritage sites from the Convict Voyages expert essay series (provided).

At Level 2, students should begin focusing on a particular region of Australia and/or time period to understand the local impacts and enduring importance of Australian penal colonies. The Convict Voyages expert essays (provided) focus on New South Wales and Western Australia, but instructors may choose to substitute an alternative region, or to make comparisons with Tasmania or other penal colonies (materials for these are also available on the Convict Voyages website).

At Level 3 (undergraduate level), students should begin undertaking sustained, focused studies of particular penal colonies and settlements, and connections between these places and the wider imperial world. The focus here should be on tracing the impacts of these prisons and convicts on local Aboriginal cultures and nations, the development of settler Australian identities, the material ties between imperial expansion and Aboriginal dispossession, and the technologies of surveillance, punishment, and reform that shaped prisons and relationships between wardens, guards, colonial officials, convicts, and wider family and community contexts. The Convict Voyages expert essays (provided) focus on Norfolk Island, Rottnest Island and Cockatoo Island, and are highly recommended as resources, although instructors may wish to focus on parallels with other penal islands, such as Robben Island (Cape Colony) or Sakhalin Island (Russian prison island).
**Key themes and links**

**Imperialism and colonialism:** Includes role of convicts in both construction of penal colonies and other colonial infrastructure, and also settler colonialism and transition to land holding. Students will discuss the role of convict transportation in both domestic (British) affairs and expanding imperial power abroad.

**Networks and population flows:** Includes communication between distant peripheries of empire and metropole. Students will consider how people were ‘selected’ for transportation to Australia, including understanding that many came from elsewhere in the British Empire (intra-colonial transport).

**Labour history:** Includes impact of convict labour on labour market in early Australia, and consideration of connected labour such as prison guards and mounted police. Students will trace the development of extractive, agrarian and early industrial economies through the role of convict labour in providing an inexpensive way to fill early labour market gaps.

**Memory and social history:** Includes the difference between perceived and actual percentage of early Australian settlers who arrived through convict transportation, and the role of convict transportation in developing narratives of settler sovereignty and Australian nationalism. Students will examine how narratives of convict arrival have overshadowed histories of conflict and conquest, and contributed to racial identities that manifested in ‘White Australia’ policies.

**Histories of race and difference:** Includes the racialised treatment of Irish and similarly ‘Othered’ British populations, reflected in make up of particular prison colonies. Also includes racist discourses used to justify the conviction and imprisonment of Aboriginal people, and the claiming of lands for penal colonies and settlements.

**Resources List**

**Expert Essays**

**Level 1**

**Australia: Convict Heritage Sites (by Eureka Heinrich)**

URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/convict-heritage-sites-in-australia

This essay serves as an introduction to the material and landscape evidence that remains of 18th and 19th century convict transportation and penal settlement in Australia, and discusses the role that these sites play in Australian national discourses. It is suitable for advanced students, for group reading and study, or for instructor background information.
Level 2
New South Wales: Transported to a “Thief Colony”, 1788-1849 (by Katherine Roscoe)
URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/new-south-wales-australia

This essay goes into detail about the conditions surrounding convict transportation to New South Wales, including the importance of convicts as labour, and the specific groups targeted for transportation. The spread of settlements between 1788 and 1809 is discussed, linked to global events impacting on the number of transported convicts over time. The space and arrangement of penal colonies is discussed, providing an opportunity to link to studies of human geography, criminology, and sociology. This reading should be appropriate for most students with supplemental discussion.

Western Australia, 1850-1868: The Merging of Penal Spheres (by Kellie Moss)
URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/western-australia-1850-1868

This essay explores the wider convict transportation systems using Western Australia as a nexus in a wider network of convict sites and routes. Intra-colonial transportation is investigated, and Western Australia is positioned as a space that emerged amidst conflicting connections across the British Imperial world. This reading is appropriate for most students and should be used as the basis for introducing global connections and networks through convict transportation.

Level 3
Cockatoo Island: Convict Labour and Secondary Punishment, 1839-1869 (by Katherine Roscoe)
URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/cockatoo-island

This essay goes into detail about the conditions in Cockatoo Island penal colony, and situates the colony in a network of wider penal islands. The focus is strongly on labour and how convicts were put to work major docks and other colonial infrastructure. This essay should be appropriate for most students, and is ideal for introducing the way that convict labour played into imperial expansion. The essay also introduces differences between convict labourers, including several Aboriginal convicts, and can serve as a jumping-off point for discussing race and difference.

Rottnest Island: A prison for the Indigenous Australian Convicts (by Katherine Roscoe)
URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/rottnest-island-prison-w-australia

This essay focuses on the treatment of Indigenous Australian convicts on Rottnest Island, a penal island built specifically to incarcerate Indigenous people from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Rottnest Island serves as an important case study in the role of the penal system in clearing the land for settlement in Australia, and this essay will continue to outline themes of race and difference, and prompt wider questions about the use of systems of ‘justice’ and ‘reform’ in colonial conquest. It should be appropriate for all undergraduate students.
Norfolk Island: A tiny fist of volcanic rock (by Tim Causer)
URL: convictvoyages.org/expert-essays/norfolk-island

This essay details the evolution of Norfolk Island, from an initial failed colony to the “most notorious penal station in the English-speaking world”. Norfolk Island was geographically isolated, in dangerous waters and separated from other New South Wales settlements, and in these conditions the British Empire created a penal colony with a reputation for incarcerating the worst of the worst. This essay details the types of prisoners sent to Norfolk Island, what their work lives and judicial punishments were like, and the role of Norfolk Island in the history of the wider region.

Statistics:

New South Wales – flows of convicts transported to NSW, 1819-1841
URL: convictvoyages.org/statistic/new-south-wales

Western Australia – flows of convicts transported to WA, 1850-1868
URL: convictvoyages.org/statistic/western-australia

Suggested Online Resources:

The National Archives at http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk - files HO 10 and HO 11 are available for free view online and include a large number of documents relating to prison transportation, including log books featuring names of convicts, places of conviction, names of particular ships and ports of origin, call, and final destination.

Trove (National Library of Australia online archive) contains a great number of digitized newspapers, including those from times and places relevant to penal colonization. The search engine is here: http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/

The Hyde Park Barracks Museum (Sydney Living Museums) hosts a page centred on ‘A Day in the Life of a Convict’ at http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/day-life-convict. This page includes audio files of transcribed letters, diary entries, ships logs, and other forms of correspondence. It also features both historical illustrations and contemporary recreations of convict life, and photographs of items of material culture including clothing and tools.

The Australian National Maritime Museum has a number of educational resources publicly available here: http://www.anmm.gov.au/learn/voyage-game. Instructors are likely to find the short, topical films (at the bottom of the page) especially useful.
**ACTIVITIES**

**Level 1 – Six Degrees of Convict Transportation**

The goal of this activity is to help students understand how the British Empire was interconnected during the 18th and 19th century, to personalize the issue of convict transportation and penal colonization, and to teach skills around using primary sources and material history as the basis of historical inquiry. Students will work individually or in groups with internet-enabled devices (including access to search engines and online archival resources) to investigate two primary sources provided by the instructor. These primary sources can include scans of historical letters and legal documents; photographs, maps, or charts; and perhaps most effective, photographs of material items such as prisoner clothing or tools. The instructor may choose how much information to provide about the source – students may be given little information to start with, and provided some starting points for investigation if they struggle or their research leads them off-track. The students will be asked to trace a connection, in six steps or less, between the two primary sources – this may involve connecting a historical figure from Britain to a particular place or event in Australia, connecting an object used in a penal colony such as a pair of manacles to the kit used by a surgeon aboard a convict transport ship that would have sent prisoners to the penal colony, or similar.

A list of resources/sites should be available. There are many places that these can be drawn from, with two useful sources being the Convict Voyages website gallery, and the National Archives website (see Resource List).

Students may be provided with a framework in which to consider intersections of concepts. Prompts can include:

- Considering the role of labour – what did the convicts do with their time, what tools did they use, what resources did this require, and what did they build?
- Tracing transportation routes and technologies – finding out where prison hulks sailed to and from, including whether prisoners came directly from Britain or if they originated in other colonies.
- Cultural significance and personal relationship – many convicts were preoccupied with preserving particular practices or maintaining connections to distant loved ones. What sorts of evidence is left behind that tells us about this?

Assessment can be conducted in multiple ways, with presentations being particularly useful. Students should be able to explain the historical, material, and cultural connections in a way that makes clear that different places are networked across space and time – the focus should be on explaining how objects, people, places and concepts relate.
Example ‘Six Degrees’ Activity Answer:

Students are presented with two objects:

- A 19th century letter requesting funds to send Ms. Susan Wood to Australia with her children – from the Australian National Archives: http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10596312

An appropriate response could read as follows:

**General answer:**
The link demonstrates the transition from being a convict sent to a penal colony to emancipation and free settlement.

**Background:**
- Family/Personal: Convict transportation and the subsequent assisted migration to their family shows how punishment led to international migration across British Empire.
- Government/Economic: Moreton Bay was a penal settlement to punish ‘worst convicts’ until 1842 when it became a free colony. This is partly because of gold rush which made the colony attractive to free settlers and unattractive for punishing felons.
- Heritage/Memory: convict heritage especially memorialised, even in cases when it is false (Sussex actually an emigrant ship). For example: having convict-arrows on the sails.

**Step 1: Susan Wood’s letter**
This is an example of “assisted emigration.” The cost of emigration was expensive: £35 compared to average yearly wage of approximately £24 (based on weekly wage of 9s 2d) in 1850. There is the possibility that Poor Law Guardians believe that, as a single woman with four kids, Susan be more of a burden if she was not assisted in her emigration. To show students this, they could do the following exercises:

- To calculate value in 2005 currency, try: nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/
- Average wages of a labourer in the 19th century can be found here: historyofwages.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/agricultural-labourers-wages-1850-1914.html
- Some general information on cost of living in 19th century can be found at: www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Coinage.jsp

**Step 2: Susan’s husband, James Wood**
This will enable the students to understand the forced migration of convicts. Students could be directed to the New South Wales State Archives and Records (see link below). Here they can find details on where and when James was tried, and on what ship he arrived.
• New South Wales State Archives:  

Step 3: The convict ship
Another avenue of research could be the convict ship that James Wood was transported on, the Bangalore. By researching the convict list of those on board the students would get a better understanding of where the convicts came from.
• Convict Records website (especially useful here):  
  convictrecords.com.au/ships/bangalore/1850

Step 4: The Moreton Bay Settlement
Students should trace how Moreton Bay went from penal settlement to a free settlement (Brisbane town), before separating from NSW in 1859.
• This link to a UNESCO archive is useful:  
  http://www.amw.org.au/content/convict-records-queensland-1825-1842
These penal settlement records are part of the ‘UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register,’ prompting questions like: is convict history ‘better’ remembered than free settlers? This also demonstrates the forced movement of convicts within Australia, and their use in establishing settlements: 80,000 convicts arrived in New South Wales (1788-1840), plus 3,000 shipped to Moreton Bay and Port Phillip District (1846-1850).
• Also if the students wanted to research more about the gold rush, they could link to the following source:  

Step 5: ‘Success’
A final link would be to discuss how convict heritage is being memorialized, both through positive retellings of convict stories, and also false histories leading to “dark tourism.” This would link the ship ‘Success’ in its present form, as a historical artifact and tourist attraction, to the history of penal settlement that included James and Susan Woods. Students could also discuss how attitudes towards convict histories have altered over the last century - they could be encouraged to look on Trove to find newspaper articles (see below for example) which highlight the change from convict stigma/stain to the interest that convict history now generates in terms of tourism and genealogy.
• Trove Article:  
  trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/49755314?searchTerm='convict%20stain' 
  &searchLimits=
Level 2 – Hindsight on History

In this activity, students will connect contemporary concepts, frameworks, and conclusions from historical study with inquiry into primary source documents to investigate the ways that discourses around convict transportation and penal settlement have changed over time. Students will need to consider the ways that perspectives have shifted based on changes in economy, political structures, socio-cultural narratives and population demographics, and technology and education over several centuries.

Students should begin by reading the expert essays on New South Wales and Western Australia (see Resource List) – if desired, students could be divided into separate groups, each investigating the regions independently of each other. Students should then visit a popular/public facing website or otherwise engage with a contemporary educational resource dealing with convict voyages to Australia. These can include the ‘Day in the Life of a Convict’ website or the short films on the Australian National Maritime Museum website (see Resource List), or a different documentary, television program, radio program, or periodical article. Based on these resources, students should come up with a list of key terms, and a summary of contemporary attitudes towards convict transportation – its importance and relevance and why it is important to study in the context of history, geography, and/or social sciences – this reflection can be tailored further to reflect specific learning outcomes if desired.

Students should then access historical newspaper articles relevant to convict transportation through the Trove website (see Resource List). Either the instructor can pre-select specific articles, or students can work individually or in groups to search the archives for articles from a specific place and time period and featuring key words such as ‘convict’, ‘prison’, or similar key terms drawn from the original readings and resources. Students should select enough articles of different sorts – features, opinions, notices, advertisements – to make a comprehensive argument about how different people in Australia viewed convict transportation and penal colonies. Students should summarize the differences in social discourses on convict transportation through a ‘compare and contrast’ argument, which can be text-based, visual, or mixed-media.
Level 3 – Convict Flows: A PBL Exercise

This activity is based on the framework of Problem Based Learning (PBL). Students should first be presented with the statistics for New South Wales convict flows (see Resources List). With only their base knowledge of convict transportation to Australia, students should be presented with the graph of convict flows, and their attention drawn to the very low value of 1153 transported convicts in 1824, and the very high number of convicts a decade later – 4128 in 1833. The students should then be given the challenge: explain why the number of transported convicts was so low in 1824 and rose so sharply over the following ten years.

The first stage of inquiry should consist of large group work to identify what kinds of things would need to be known to formulate an explanation. With the instructor acting as facilitator, students should brainstorm questions and considerations – for example: Did transportation technology change during that time? What major wars and international events were happening? Was there a change in what was considered ‘criminal’? These questions should be roughly grouped together on a board/visual aid.

Following this, students should be given the Norfolk Island expert essay by Tim Causer (see Resources List). Following reading this essay, students should return to the previous discussion, and revisit the questions discussed in light of new information from the article. This should lead to a refining of questions – the instructor should work to focus the group around three to five comprehensive questions to inform small group research work. For example, questions around various aspects of race and difference could be gathered under the general research question ‘How did British attitudes to race and difference change in the early 19th century and how was this reflected in changing patterns of convict transportation to Australia?’ This can be repeated a second and a third time by introducing the expert essays on Cockatoo Island and Rottnest Island by Katherine Roscoe (see Resources List), each one leading to further refinement of research questions.

If students are having difficulty generating questions, or should the instructor wish to prompt students, the following are all possible starting points for inquiry (some have full or partial answers included):

1) Cockatoo Island opens in what year? What happens the year after to convict flows to New South Wales as a whole?
   a. 1839 Cockatoo island opens; 1840 convict transportation to NSW ceases.

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1 Those not familiar with PBL may wish to review the following document: Savery, J. R. (2006). Overview of Problem-based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions. Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning, 1(1). Available at: pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ccaf/5b96e849f85544876cfa698e3dad845dd57.pdf
2) In the same year (1840) what happens in Norfolk Island (see expert essay)? What kind of convicts are arriving? What kind of convicts were originally sent there?
   a. If students go to the Norfolk Island expert essay they will see that “730 men transported directly to England and Ireland in 1840 for Superintendent Alexander Maconochie’s penal experiment, also known as the “Mark System”. Maconochie was a penal reformer who wanted to trial a radical system of penal discipline whereby convicts’ sentences were shortened by hard work and good behaviour: the governor of New South Wales (George Gipps) wanted to trial this on newly arrived convicts rather than ‘secondarily convicted’ ones, because he believed they’d be more malleable to change. They had to choose a new place within New South Wales to send the ‘secondarily convicted’, and that was Cockatoo Island.

3) What does this case-study tell us about the ongoing role of convicts in New South Wales (after transportation has ceased from Britain and Ireland)?
   a. Can search Trove to find many panicky newspaper articles about having Norfolk Islanders there. Norfolk Island was at the centre of the Anti-Transportation Campaign (as expert essay explains) so having an island in the middle of Sydney filled with the ‘worst of the worst’ convicts causes a moral panic.

4) Convict transportation does not begin to Western Australia until 1850, but the region is colonised by the British in 1829 – what purpose does imprisoning Aboriginal people on Rottnest (est. in 1838) serve in the interim?

5) What is the relevance of convicts being sent to build roads in 1850 (when European convicts first arrive)?
   a. Shift from prison governance based on humanitarian influences of 1830s to penological basis: seen as ‘lazy’ if Aboriginal convicts were not contributing. This shift is followed by a series of legislation to make punishing Aboriginal convicts easier than punishing European convicts, creating a legal racial double standard.

6) Rottnest prison continued to receive prisoners until 1931, long after the federation of Australia (1901) - to what extent is punishment and dispossession of Indigenous peoples a post-colonial (and ongoing) legacy of convict transportation?

Students should be broken up into smaller groups based on interest to pursue individual questions. Their research should form the basis of a group presentation that involves reference to primary source documents, conceptual frameworks (developed in academic publications and scholarly writing), and make connections between multiple concepts related to convict transportation. If desired, instructors may provide students with any or all of the resources listed here or on the Convict Voyages website as supplementary materials, or students may be left to conduct self-directed inquiry.