Australia: Convict Heritage Sites

Eureka Heinrich

What Remains?

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.” In Sydney town, the first of these exiles built their own homes, started families and established businesses while working to obtain their ticket-of-leave. As the system of transportation grew more tightly controlled, male convicts laboured to build government barracks where officers could better regulate their work and day-to-day lives. For those who absconded, or committed other crimes, fearsome places of secondary punishment were established. These isolated outposts, although notorious for their harsh punishments, in many ways mirrored those on the mainland. Settlements grew around convict-built barracks, prisons and storehouses, and convicts were also set to work exploiting natural resources such as coal and timber to fuel the colonial project. Female convicts worked and lived within female factories, institutions which exacted their labour in pursuits such as oakum picking whilst aiming to “reform” them for domestic service or marriage. Free settlers benefitted from the labour of male and female convicts assigned to them, and they lived alongside each other in homesteads and farms. Convicts also laboured to build roads, grand houses for governors and public buildings such as hospitals and churches.

Much of this physical evidence of the system of convict transportation has since been demolished. Bricks were re-purposed for other buildings, and sites built over and forgotten, reflecting the desire of many colonists to erase the memory of their society’s penal origins. Buildings that survived did so
in part because they remained useful to the growing colonies – barracks became immigration depots, and prisons were needed whether the population was convict or free. Soon after convict transportation ended in the mid-nineteenth century, more remote sites became picturesque holiday destinations, preserved by locals in order to profit from the interest of curious tourists. Today, much of what remains is designated as “heritage” – or “things worth keeping.” Australia’s convict past, once a cause for shame or embarrassment (and hidden in families histories), is now celebrated, and these sites are understood as the symbolic foundations of a nation. This essay introduces Australia’s convict heritage sites, including the “big eleven” which in 2010 were nominated together as the UNESCO Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property. It highlights the main issues and debates in the literature on tourism, heritage and history relating to these places through a number of case studies, including Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania, The Rocks in Sydney, and Fremantle Prison in Western Australia.

Changing Approaches to Convict Sites: From curiosity to cultural heritage

Although the concept of Australia’s “convict heritage” is a recent one, visiting convict sites is nothing new. Port Arthur, a penal colony established on the remote Tasman Peninsula in 1830, can lay claim to being Australia’s “oldest continual tourist attraction.” Historian Jim Davison notes it was included in guide books even before its convict prison closed in 1877, and by 1890, a daily steamship service from Hobart was not enough to meet the demand from those who wanted to see the convict “ruins” (a number of bushfires had artificially aged the crumbling buildings, making them appear far older than they were). Port Arthur’s notoriety, thanks to novels such as Marcus Clarke’s 1874 For The Term of His Natural Life (also popular on film), secured its survival and forced local authorities to begrudgingly maintain and repair a number of the structures that had not already been knocked down or salvaged for building materials. Beautification programmes in the 1940s and 1950s aimed to enhance the site’s aesthetic appeal, and to cater for the growing numbers of tourists. But it was not until the 1970s that a renewed academic and popular interest in Australia’s national history encouraged the view that Port Arthur and other convict sites should be protected, because of their significance to Australia’s national cultural heritage. In 1979 the Australian Government and Tasmanian State Government invested 9 million dollars in the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Plan, funding a 7-year project that Eleanor Conlin Casella argues “provided the training ground for a generation of archaeologists and heritage professionals in Australia.” The practice of heritage management – the protection and preservation of historic sites – dates from this time, and is guided by what is known as the Burra Charter. An important part of the charter is the requirement that “the contributions of all periods to a place must be respected.” Archaeological excavations and restoration programmes at the site of the First Government House (now the Museum of Sydney), Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney, and at Norfolk Island in the late 1970s and early 1980s all demonstrate a commitment to these new principles, as well as the belief that Australia’s convict heritage has a central and potentially profitable role to play as the focus for cultural tourism – what is sometimes referred to as the “heritage industry.”

Selling Out? The commercialisation of convict heritage

One of the major debates in the literature on convict heritage sites in Australia is how the history of these places can be interpreted and presented in a way that is both academically sound and
attractive to audiences. The Rocks, a harbour-side heritage precinct in Sydney, is a good example of these tensions.

The Rocks was home to the first generation of convict settlers, who built their own homes on the rocky outcrops and often worked where they lived – as bakers, butchers, stonemasons, blacksmiths and publicans among other professions. The area gained a reputation of disorder and disrepute and was characterised as a “slum” by the nineteenth century. Following cases of the bubonic plague in 1900 the government took back ownership of the land, demolishing the remaining convict-era buildings and other housing. In a country that was eager to forget its convict origins, The Rocks was a blight on the landscape, an unruly place that stood in the way of development and progress. By the mid-twentieth century, The Rocks’ proximity to the central business district put the area in the sights of developers, but an alliance between residents groups and the builders’ union prevented plans to build high rises and displace the local population (some of whom were descended from the first convict settlers). These protests in the 1960s and 1970s were part of the Green Bans Movement, and coincided with the introduction of national heritage legislation. Some 30 archaeological investigations were carried out from 1979, and uncovered a wealth of material sources that documented the lives of generations of Rocks folk, including early convicts. After negotiations with residents, the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority orchestrated a major urban renewal and redevelopment project that capitalised on the area’s convict origins and prime location near famous landmarks such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the new Sydney Opera House (opened in 1973), to attract tourists to “the birth place of the Australian nation.” This “new” Rocks exuded a sanitised and quaint “old world” feel, with cobbled streets, converted warehouses and small alleyways housing a range of arts and crafts shops, cafes, boutiques and restaurants. In the 1980s it was criticised by some historians as a “Disneyfied” version of the past. A survey carried out by social geographer Gordon Waitt in 1995 found that most visitors believed the representation of history at The Rocks to be “authentic,” prompting Waitt to warn: “the main danger of this official, commodified interpretation and representation is that it closes off other versions of history.”

There have been some important changes in the “heritage-scape” of The Rocks in the past 20 years, with the addition of The Rocks Discovery Museum and the Big Dig Archaeological Education Centre, both of which make use of archaeological evidence to question entrenched stereotypes about convicts and “slum-dwellers.” These representations are important. As historian Grace Karskens, who led the archaeological excavation at the “big dig” site in 1994 argues, most people think of “real convicts” as those who were in “the jail, the barracks or the gangs.” Because those buildings have survived, such understandings dominate people’s imaginations, but they do not reflect the lived experience of the majority of convicts in early Sydney. Another change in recent years has been an acknowledgement of the area’s long Indigenous history and heritage, and the role of convicts not only as “victims” of an unjust system, but as colonisers themselves. Rather than being “the birth place of the nation,” The Rocks website now recognises a dual significance “as the traditional home of the Gadigal, and the place of first European settlement in Australia.” However, earlier myths and stereotypes continue to hold popular appeal. A private company that runs ghost tours of The Rocks promotes its services with the words: “welcome to the convict colony, the birthplace of a nation, with a history of disease, disaster, violence and horrific murders... and where ghosts still linger.”

“Outstanding Universal Significance”: The world heritage listing

The Rocks exemplifies the way that convict sites have been used to symbolise a foundational national narrative. Recently, 11 of Australia’s convict heritage sites have also been
recognised for their importance in the *global* story of penal transportation. The 2010 World Heritage Nomination of the Australian Convict Sites was the result of a long process of planning and selection, begun in 1995, in which a range of convict heritage sites were considered by the Australian Government in order to choose those that were “most representative” of all the elements of the Australian convict system, including “penal stations, gang labour, assignment, female factories and the Tasmanian probation system.” Together they were nominated under two world heritage criteria: for their “outstanding universal significance” as “an exceptional example of the forced migration of convicts – an important stage of human history,” and “a significant example of global ideas and developments associated with the punishment and reform of the criminal elements of humanity during the Age of Enlightenment and the modern era.”

The “big eleven” comprise penal colonies-turned-tourist sites such as Port Arthur Historic Site and Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area on Norfolk Island, places of incarceration including Hyde Park Barracks and Cockatoo Island in Sydney, Fremantle Prison in Western Australia and the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site in Tasmania, and the lesser-known Darlington Probation Station on Maria Island off the east coast of Tasmania. Also listed are the Coal Mines Historic Site near Port Arthur in Tasmania and Brickendon-Woolmers Estates, two neighbouring agricultural properties in the north of Tasmania where convicts were assigned “private masters” to work, the Old Government House and Domain in Parramatta, west of Sydney, and the Old Great North Road, north-west of Sydney along the Hawkesbury River, which was constructed by convict road gangs. Some of these places loom large in the Australian imagination, as we have seen. But others were virtually unknown to most Australians, let alone international visitors, and the World Heritage Nomination process has played an important part in the way they have been interpreted and presented.

**UNESCO Australian Convict Sites**

*World Heritage Property*

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Fremantle Prison is one of the “newest” heritage sites on the list – until 1991 it was still in use as a prison. Although the prison was built by convict labour in the 1850s, it has a much longer period of
use by non-convicts, including migrants who were interred there during the Second World War as “enemy aliens,” as well as Aboriginal inmates. However, during the process of transforming the building from working prison to heritage site, it was the convict period that dominated the interpretation, and in the mid-2000s the site was re-branded as “Fremantle Prison – the Convict Establishment.” All tours available at the site relate primarily to its convict past (these include the Doing Time Tour and the Great Escapes Tour), and afterwards visitors can relax in the Convict Cafe. For Andrea Witcomb, who has written an article tracing the history and politics of the site, the World Heritage Nomination process compromised local values, and in the process, “layers of significance” in the history of the site were lost. Recent exhibitions have examined the history of Indigenous incarceration in Western Australia, and the experiences of inmates before the prison was closed in 1991, although these are temporary additions to the permanent convict story.

Witcomb’s call for the World Heritage criteria to better accommodate more recent and local histories echoes that of a working group of historians and local community members involved in the Coal River Heritage Precinct in Newcastle, New South Wales. The Precinct covers a variety of sites and remains of Newcastle’s convict settlement between 1804 and 1823, the second penal settlement in Australia. Although it was successfully nominated for inclusion in the New South Wales Heritage Register in 2003, subsequent national and world heritage bids have been rejected. Two of the historians involved in the working group, David Andrew Roberts and Erik Eklund, have argued in a recent article that heritage criteria needs to change in order to recognise different types of significance – not only the “original fabric” of buildings, but living, cultural, intangible and inclusive heritage. A “heritage of adaptation,” as the authors call it, could better explain how the legacies of Australia’s convict past have shaped the present, and importantly, can begin to explore how convict sites such as Newcastle’s coal mines have been part of the lived experiences of locals for generations.
Conclusion: Families, communities and identity

“I am an Australian and being here has meant a lot to me. I feel a great deal of respect for the convicts and what they went through. Even though they are felons, they are the backbone of our nation’s history.”

One aspect of Australia’s convict heritage sites that has been neglected in the literature is the relationship between personal identity, place, and convict ancestry. As the above quote (recorded by Megan Best) demonstrates, many Australians consider convicts to be the builders of the nation, and in this sense, visiting a convict heritage site may be akin to a pilgrimage. A 2005 study of motivations of participants in “dark tourism” found that almost a third of those surveyed at Port Arthur Historic Site were motivated by a “desire to gain knowledge concerning family roots.” At the Female Convict Research Centre in Tasmania, family historians have come together to share their research and to lobby for the preservation of the site their ancestors were associated with – the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site. Asking more questions about the connection between convict sites and identity may also tell us more about the types of heritage that are important to local communities, whether or not they are descended from convicts, and how the legacies of the system of convict transportation are shaped and reshaped throughout generations.

Further Reading


