Introduction

The Rocks. A simple, direct, plain-speaking name for the part of Sydney which grew on and around the craggy rocks on the western slopes above the town from the earliest years of white settlement. The name, like the neighbourhood, survived attempts to remove it; the Rocks could not be subsumed into wider Sydney.

Today the area regarded as the Rocks stretches along George Street North from Grosvenor Street, under the Cahill Expressway, which forms a kind of modern gateway, northwards to Dawe’s Point, where George Street turns under the deep shadow and distant roar of the Harbour Bridge. The old Campbell’s Wharf area, with its row of gabled warehouses on the waterside to the north-east is considered part of the Rocks. To the west, the high concrete walls of the multi-laned approaches to the Harbour Bridge, running parallel to Cumberland Street, mark off the western boundary in a final and devastating way.

But these are modern boundaries, allotted to the Sydney Cove Authority as the area of its administration. In its early years, and until the late 1820s and 1830s, the Rocks was far less linear in shape. It extended from Church Hill (at present-day Grosvenor Street, still steep, still churched) in the south, to around Argyle Street to the north. Beyond to the north were a few houses, and the lands, the go-downs (or wharves), and the residence and business seat of the merchant Robert Campbell, who was never a resident of the Rocks. George Street itself was not part of the Rocks either at this stage, for the place was focused on the slopes above. These included, particularly, the areas behind the first provision stores in (present-day) Grosvenor Street, behind the first General Hospital, on the outcrops up along what is now Globe Street, and around Harrington and Gloucester Streets behind the modern Archives building. There were rows of houses, too, still further up in Cumberland and Princes Street, from which the spread of the harbour, slapping, winking below, could be scanned for ships.
Fig. 1: The Rocks and Sydney: location.

Fig. 2: The Rocks, Sydney: modern Sydney Cove Authority boundaries shown in red, and original location, 1788-c1830, shown by shaded area. Source: Based on extract from 'Parish of St Philip', 1968, AONSW.
Fig. 3: The Rocks in 1835, showing the original, characteristically irregular street configuration. Some streets were radically altered in the first decades of the twentieth century, producing the present-day alignments (Fig. 2). By 1835 some allotments had been granted and built over north of Argyle Street and at Millers Point, then known as Darling Harbour. 

and their promise of news, goods, trading profits, new faces, old friends. Down to the west were the isolated rocky slopes of Cockle Bay.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Rocks became one of the most heavily populated urban areas in Australia, and it was reputed and feared as a slum by the 1880s. After an outbreak of Bubonic Plague in 1900, the whole peninsula was resumed by the government, the oldest and most decrepit buildings demolished, and the steady exodus of people began. But while Millers Point on the western side survived as an intact, functioning community, the Rocks under the control of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority since 1970, did not fare so well. Although it was preserved physically both by default through neglect, and by the active intervention of union Green Bans in the 1970s, the Authority discouraged the remaining residents and instead managed and developed the area as a historical tourist attraction.

The sea still lies below, the wharves and warehouses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century still surround it, albeit along a radically reshaped shoreline. Visitors throng George Street, the Rocks’ public face, with its array of Victorian and Edwardian shops and pubs repainted in heritage colours and reopened as souvenir and craft shops, galleries and cafes. Tourist buses lumber through the streets; on weekends especially crowds come to the Rocks to shop, eat, and stroll.

Higher up the slopes, along Harrington, Cambridge Gloucester and Cumberland Streets, and their connecting lanes, steep steps and footways, more of the genuine early townscape

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survives. The close-built terraces of houses and shops include a few built plainly in the 1840s and 1850s, the stuccoed, more decorative Victorian rows, and the well-intentioned liver brick public housing of the early twentieth century. The step-and-shelf arrangement which marked the area's physical development along the lines of the rocks tiers, is still abundantly evident, although examples of the poorest type of housing for which the Rocks was notorious have for the main part vanished. Gone too are most of the pre-1830 houses built by convicts and ex-convicts and their children: exceptions include Reynolds cottage in Harrington Street (c1830), while the gutted shell of Cadman's cottage stands below in George Street (Fig. 5). On the other side of the ridge in Kent Street, the semidetached cottages built by Rocks stonemason and publican Thomas Glover in 1822 are also still extant (Fig. 4). The foundations of houses built in the 1810s, and the postholes of still earlier huts were exposed during the 1994 Cumberland/Gloucester Street archaeological excavation, but they have been re-interred, and their fate is undecided. ³

From the many vantage points, the vistas over the Rocks, the great arch of the Bridge, and the city to the south change constantly, surprisingly. From Harrington Street the view down the narrow alley of the notorious 'Suez Canal' still reaches to the water, a rare remaining visual link. Otherwise you must climb up to the freeway to see the 'rich prospect over the Heads' so prized by the first Rocks inhabitants. The area is an anomalous, wonderful survivor on the northern edge of the city. Its early sins can be forgiven, or at least set aside under the mantle of the picturesque. It has great popular historical appeal as a remainder of a lost world, whose configuration and texture is so different to that of the modern city and suburb.

Fig. 4: Glover Cottages, Kent Street. These houses were built by the Rocks stonemason and publican Thomas Glover in about 1822. They were Sydney's oldest conjoined houses until the party wall was removed during 'restoration' in the 1980s.

(Photo G. Karskens 1994)

Fig. 5: Cadman's Cottage, below George Street, in the late 1960s, before 'restoration' which gutted the inside and removed the garden. The house is thought to have been built in 1816 for the Government Coxswain John Cadman.

Source: Author's collection.
Thousands of words have been written about the Rocks in newspaper articles, glossy brochures, booklets and the like, and millions of dollars paid out to conserve it. Yet, in spite of the rich material heritage, and slogans such as 'the birthplace of a nation', there is no scholarly history of the Rocks. There are popular historical images and themes, mostly presented as picture books, with names of famous inhabitants and something about their doings, and there are numerous, but fragmented, studies of individual buildings and sites (my own among them). My conversations over the last few years with those who work with the physical heritage of the Rocks - conservation architects and planners, archaeologists and museum curators - often turned on the need for an overall history of the place, so that the mass of historical, architectural and archaeological data now available might be drawn together and understood. In the absence of overview, their work is frustrated, for the meanings of the tantalisingly intimate artefacts, from houses and street patterns to old shoes and broken crockery, remains elusive, inconclusive. The old names are faceless, the historical figures unknowable strangers.4

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4 For example, the Sydney Cove Authority's lavishly illustrated The Rocks, Sydney's Original Village, Sydney, 1990. Unpublished reports about the Rocks include Grace Karskens, 'An Outline History of the Cumberland/Gloucester Street Site, The Rocks', unpublished report prepared for the Department of Public Works, September 1986; 'George Street North, The Rocks', unpublished report prepared for the Sydney Cove Authority and Conybeare, Morrison and Partners, November 1989. The Sydney Cove Authority holds many other studies such as these, undertaken by archaeologists, historians, planners and architects.

5 Pers. comm. Ann Toy, Curator, Historic Houses Trust; Noni Boyd, Conservation Architect, and Jane Lydon, Archaeologist, formerly of Sydney Cove Authority; Wendy Thorp, Richard Mackay, Dennis Gojak, consultant archaeologists. Work in this direction is being carried out. The findings of this study were applied in the research design and interpretation of archaeological sites of the Rocks. See Grace Karskens, 'The Cumberland Street/Gloucester Street Site, the Rocks: An Historical Discourse' report prepared for the Sydney Cove Authority, 1994; and Godden Mackay Pty Ltd and Grace Karskens, 'The Cumberland Street/Gloucester Street site Archaeological Investigation: Archaeological Assessment and Research Design', report prepared for the Sydney Cove Authority 1994. A general research framework was suggested in Grace Karskens and Wendy Thorp, 'History and Archaeology in Sydney: Towards Integration and Interpretation', Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society (hereafter JRAHS) Vol 78, 3-4, 52-75, 1992.
Fig. 6: Much of the modern Rocks combines early and modern textures and materials. The steps connecting Harrington with Gloucester Street are typical of the Rocks. They are rounded and worn, while new clay pavers form the footpath; new ashlar stonework sits above an early rock cutting. The 1844 Susannah Place terrace glimpsed at the top is now a museum.
(Photo G. Karskens 1994).

Fig. 7: A rare surviving glimpse of the water down the Suez Canal from Harrington Street.
(Photo G. Karskens 1994).
Ironically, the Sydney Cove Authority (the word ‘Redevelopment’ quietly dropped from its title only recently) appears to be distancing itself from the ‘history’ it is best known for, yet which is so little understood. ‘The historical aspect of The Rocks should not be oversold’ declared a recent document outlining a five-year marketing strategy, ‘It should be used as a backdrop’.6 Perhaps the ‘seedy, sick and sinful’ past is to be downplayed as an unfortunate sidelight; or perhaps history is too difficult and alien, and heritage too bothersome and limiting.

This study is thus pitched at two levels. One is to provide the first part of a much-needed history of the city’s earliest, oldest-surviving and best-known precinct. The temporal framework, 1788-1830, chosen for the methodological and broad historical/cultural reasons discussed below, allows for the investigation, verification or disproving of the many popular understandings, of the Rocks’ origin and reputation. What were the first settled areas? How old is its name? What did it look like? How was the environment altered? Was it the convicts’ side of the town, and if so, what kind of families and community did they create? How did they live? When was the Rocks’ reputation as the haunt of the town’s lowlife, (encompassing prostitution, drinking, gambling, violence, and a criminal underworld, as well as filth and poverty) established? Was there a basis in truth for this reputation? Was the Rocks comprised solely of low pubs and brothels, its people depraved, violent, almost inhuman?

These questions pre-empt the second level of enquiry: what can the Rocks tell us about the origins of Sydney? What kind of society was it? How did it function? How was it divided? What was the cultural identity of the convicts and ex-convicts who established and shaped the neighbourhood? Despite countless studies of the foundation of the convict colony, and

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more than two decades of urban social history, we still do not really know much about the vast majority of Sydney’s people as human beings. These people, who were regarded in their own time as ‘persons of no consequence’, have been portrayed variously as picturesque historical figures, paragons of female virtue, the faceless, indistinguished mass of the proletariat, victims of urban injustice and mismanagement, victims of sexual oppression. A close examination of the Rocks, a place well-defined physically, and in the mind, may allow the intimacy necessary for a deeper understanding.

What is known about the Rocks’ history? At a popular level, the name still conjures up a potent set of images among Sydneysiders. The Rocks was Sydney’s bad place, the haunt of lowlife, old filthy slums, twisted streets and blind alleys, bad air, poor health, plague and pestilence. The physical ills were symptomatic of moral degeneracy: fearful rookeries and low pubs were gathering places for thieves, prostitutes preyed on hapless sailors. Whatever basis in truth the area provided was fuelled and bloated over the nineteenth century by its critics, from the 1830 condemnation of Archdeacon Broughton, and Alexander Harris’ tales of brutish convicts and dying prostitutes in 1847, to the generations of newspaper journalists after a good story, journal scribblers hoping to publish, and preachers, charity workers and government officials with reform on their minds. The popular ‘history’ we have of the Rocks is a bundle of old social fears, literary conventions, moral and social crusades, fascination with other worlds.

It is curious that historians of Sydney have not investigated the Rocks, an area embedded so deeply in the city’s psyche. Perhaps it is so ‘well-known’, its reputation so widely accepted, no-one bothered to look more closely. The early twentieth century amateur historians, like

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Walk the Wicked Waterfront

Spend two hours on a guided walk of Sydney's wicked waterfront

Crimes and crims
Pubs and clubs
Opium dens, murders and mystery
Pox, plague and pestilence

Starting with refreshments at History House, 133 Macquarie Street, Sydney.
11.00 am and 3.00 pm Sunday 7, Wednesday 10, Saturday 13 and Sunday 15 April, 1991.
Adults $10.00, Children $5.00. Bookings are essential: (02) 24738001.

Fig. 8: A flier for a historic walking tour beckons the reader to explore the 'seedy, sick and sinful' past of the Rocks and waterfront areas. Something of the nineteenth-century popular fascination yet revulsion for the 'other' side of Sydney clearly lingers.
J. M. Forde ('Old Chum'), C. H. Berrie, J. H. Watson and William Freame walked the old streets, made notes and told tales of the 'olden days' in their newspaper columns, enthusiastically blending what they saw with facts and folklore,threaded through with the urgent understanding that the city was changing, and would never be the same again. Contributors to the Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society also often wrote about early Sydney, delving into the land titles records and other official records. In 1966, Unk White produced a small booklet, The Rocks, Sydney, which became very popular. It set a brief historical account beside Olaf Ruhren's exquisite sketches of the Rocks, not only picturesque old streetscapes and city rooftop views, but backyards strewn with the detritus of everyday life, steps worn and hollowed, cracked retaining walls, washing lines, with the modern city skyline a ghostly, slightly menacing backdrop. Somehow, the artist transformed these once-reviled images of 'slum' life into something charming in its irregularity; a modern, sanitised image of the Rocks was sealed.

Some of the general studies of convicts and convict life in early Sydney are essential for this study in terms of both suggesting models and providing the wider research context. Older studies tended to be obsessed with the moral standing of the convicts: what kind of human material were they? The argument swung over the decades from the oppressed and suffering

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Fig. 9: ‘From the Bridge Stairs’, one of Unk White’s 1966 drawings of Gloucester Street, depicting the picturesque detail, scale and arrangement of the Rocks streetscapes, while the modern city looms ominously behind.

convict, transported for the theft of a handkerchief or a loaf of bread, to the convicts as 'vile rabble' from a sinister criminal underclass of English society.\footnote{Barry Dyster summarizes the long-running debate about the character of convicts in 'Transported Workers: The case of Mayhew Versus Mayhew', \textit{Labour History}, No 60 1991, 84-89. Robert Hughes in \textit{The Fatal Shore} (London, Collins, 1987) resurrected the 'gulag' version of the colony for popular consumption.}

These negative images were particularly focussed on female convicts. Portia Robinson, in \textit{The Women of Botany Bay} (1988, republished 1993) sought to investigate and disprove the old 'damned whores' image (ironically taken up, unquestioned, by feminist historians in the 1970s) and did much to flesh out, humanize and qualify the role of women in the early colony. At base, though the argument remains a \textit{moral} one - were they good or bad? The Rocks is described as a kind of receptacle for the atypical, immoral 'street women'. Chapter 10 concludes with the assertion that the Rocks was where the 'street women' lived, the 'bad' women, as opposed to the 'respectable Women of Botany Bay'. This reliance on the well-known 'Rocks' stereotype, usually a brief reference in a larger narrative, is typical of most books dealing with early Sydney.\footnote{Portia Robinson, \textit{The Women of Botany Bay: A reinterpretation of women in Australian society}, fp 1988 Melbourne, Penguin, 1993, p214. Kay Daniels makes this point succinctly, writing of the 'long-established pattern in which historians when writing about women feel compelled before all things to sort the "good" woman from the bad, the prostitute from the respectable "family woman", and to establish the existence and then contrast the character and experience of these two "groups" of women'. See her 'Prostitution in Tasmania', in Daniels (ed.) \textit{So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australia} Sydney Fontana 1984 p22, 25. Michael Cannon's \textit{Who's Master? Who's Man} (Melbourne, 1971) is another typical study where the Rocks makes a brief appearance, and only in terms of its traditional reputation for poverty and lowlife.}

Connell and Irving in \textit{Class Structure in Australian History} outlining a general Marxist model, simply characterise convicts as a proletariat. Hence they assume that capitalism, the industrial revolution and a modern class system was not only fully formed in England by the 1780s, but
transplanted holus bolus to Botany Bay. Here the Rocks also rates a mention: it may have been an ‘attempt by working men and women to carve out their space for living from a highly repressive environment’. This remains an invitation to further research only; the cultural dimension of working lives is not further discussed.13

Stephen Nicholas and his co-authors also took an economic direction in the debate, and examined the convicts, at least after 1817, as workers. Arguing from statistical evidence, rather than ideological stance, they concluded that ‘the proportion of convicts in the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled occupational categories was roughly the same as the percentages of each skill class for the English workforce’. The convicts thus were not unskilled ne’er-do-wells, but brought ‘useful skills’ with them, and three-quarters of the English convicts could read and/or write, ‘a significantly higher percentage than the average for all English workers (58%)’. In many cases the crimes were work-related - pilfering of goods, tools or material, stealing from masters - suggesting that many were actually in work when arrested.14 Deborah Oxley has extended and deepened the argument to recognize the many and valuable skills brought by female convicts.15

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15 Deborah Oxley, ‘Packing her (economic) bags: convict women workers’, Australian Historical Studies, No 26 No 102 April 1994, 57-76.
There are also two scholarly studies dealing with the Rocks in the second half of the nineteenth century which deserve mention for their methodological approaches.

Max Kelly’s essay ‘Picturesque and Pestilential: The Sydney Slum Observed 1860-1900’, (1977) sought to recall, once more, the poor, overcrowded, insanitary conditions in which the city’s working classes were forced to live. This was the ugly truth behind those picturesque facades. Kelly’s study offered a timely critique of the old myths of Australian cities as ‘workers’ paradises’, and the new myths engendered by the restored and smartly painted heritage streetscapes.16

In Alan Mayne’s Representing the Slum: Popular journalism in a late nineteenth century city, the newspaper reports about the Rocks and places like it in Sydney are re-read not so much as sources, but as documents about the minds of the journalists and, by extension, of their largely middle-class audiences. The reports are dissected and analysed for their literary themes and imagery. History becomes a play in which the slums are inhabited ‘not by socially credible individuals, but by theatrical types appropriate to the settings in which they appear’.

It is not Mayne’s purpose in this book to tell us anything new about the ‘socially credible individuals’, the real people of the Rocks, and his analysis of the texts is admirable. But in this avowedly post-modernist view, in which the only certainty is the existence of the text itself, the people become even more distant and submerged than the exploited figures in the social history of the 1970s and 1980s. Are they really utterly lost to us? Do the journalists

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ever unwittingly let something of the real past slip through their armoury of literary devices? \(^{17}\)

The methodological issues and problems of urban histories to date are evident in the historiographic discussion above. With regard to the study of the Rocks itself, in most cases the existing studies are pitched at a level too broad to deal with individuals and communities, and simply fall back on convenient stereotypes. They are not intended as socio-cultural studies, and hence rarely question ‘givens’ such as class and gender, let alone culture. More specific studies of Sydney have tended to rely on official, easily accessible records, like government enquiries and reports. Strictly old-style Marxist interpretations tend to represent the people as constant, undifferentiated victims. In Mayne’s analysis, they disappear altogether. For the main part, however it may be observed that few historians have taken the time to collect and collate the scraps, the gleanings available about the lives of early Sydney people.

One of the exceptions is Portia Robinson. The Women of Botany Bay is empirically based on an enormous amount of research. The problem is that the net falls too widely, so that while many of Sydney’s early women fall into it at one time or another in their lives, most also quickly slip through it, leaving only a little of their experience for us to ponder. But it would be impossible to reconstruct the entire lives (in the fashion, for instance, that Babette Smith achieved in A Cargo of Women) of thousands of women. \(^{18}\) A better methodology, then, might include intensive, ethnographic-style research into a limited area which was both spatially and mentally well-defined. It is thus partly ‘community’ history, except that the pursuit of ‘community’ (whatever that might mean) is not the sole aim. Further, the means of assessing and interpreting the mass of available material is ethnographic as well as

\(^{17}\) Alan Mayne, Representing the Slum: Popular journalism in a late nineteenth century city, Melbourne, Melbourne University History Monograph Series, 1990, p103.

empirical. The sources, including documents, maps, pictures and material evidence, provide the bare ‘facts’ of time and place and so on, but they are also holograms of their times. They contain or suggest the myriad ‘vivid glimpses...of people doing things’, actions and gestures, both small and informal, or ritualised and public.19 All the ‘small things forgotten’ retrieved from archaeological excavation, the ‘slants and tangents’ unintentionally conveyed in the structures and words of the documents, the patterns and ambiguities of townscape configuration, are clues by which a cultural reconstruction may be built up, layer by layer.20

In this way, too, a new direction towards a cultural understanding of early Sydney is possible, for the ethnographic endeavour bypasses the moral pendulum, swinging endlessly between the search for ‘vice’ and ‘respectability’, ‘villainy’ and ‘blamelessness’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It opens a window on the way people considered themselves, what they thought was important, the way they interacted with one another, in the context of their locale and society as a whole. Rocks people begin to emerge as human beings: their struggles and feuds, personal relationships, love, loyalty and loathing are all in evidence, and are usually inextricably bound to the place where they live. An understanding of the spatial dimension is therefore vital.


As this study examines so many aspects of everyday life, there are many contextual studies, dealing with everything from townscape to child-rearing, which are useful and relevant as interpretive tools. These are discussed and cited in the text. On a broader level, the context provided by British and American social and cultural studies is essential for framing the underlying questions, and for comparative case studies in methodology. The broad area of enquiry concerns the impact of the industrial revolution, or lack thereof. This issue is essential to the more intimate study of the Rocks, for if the early colony cannot be termed a modern 'class' society, was the nature of its society and culture then preindustrial? To what extent? What were the signs?

Stuart Blumin in The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900, recreated the preindustrial city of America as a backdrop to his exploration of the emergence of the new middle class during and after the industrial revolution. By focusing on changing social, economic, spatial and cultural patterns, he sketched out urban environments which were relatively small, where people of all ranks, from unskilled labourers to wealthy merchants and professional men lived in close proximity to one another and to their places of work. For artisans in particular, home and work were inseparable, as workshops were found in the homes. People lived close by the streets, they moved about on foot, and many everyday transactions occurred there. The city was, in short, 'small in scale, small in the scale of its enterprises and largely lacking in the specialised area homogeneity that would later characterise large parts of the modern metropolis', while the society might be described as 'face-to-face', with the frequent interaction of people of different social standing on a personal, though by no means egalitarian, basis.

The industrial revolution brought with it urban and social revolution. The newly expanded cities needed new means of production, management, distribution and transport. Blumin traces the evolution of the new middle class from the old middling folk, and the means of its
self assertion and self definition through work, consumption, residential location, formal and involuntary association and family organization and strategy. In each case there is clear evidence of the divergence of society and culture and the growth of separatism. The middle classes disassociated themselves from manual work by becoming entrepreneurs who bought, sold, distributed, insured, and so on, the products of other people’s work. They distinguished themselves physically from the old cities and from working people by building suburbs, apart from, yet still a part of the city. They adopted new outlooks and habits, or refashioned old ones, for practically every aspect of their lives, from carefully controlled and ritualized modes of social interaction to the manner in which the dead were mourned and buried.\footnote{Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989. For the emergence of the nineteenth century American city, see also Gunther Barth, City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980; Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will: Work and Leisure in an Industrial City, Cambridge Mass., Cambridge University Press, 1983; Herbert Gutman, Work, Culture and Society in Industrialising America, New York, Vintage Books, 1977.}

Historians of eighteenth century England agree that the century was one of remarkable changes, predating and precursing those that Blumin describes for nineteenth century American cities. What remains controversial is the extent to which the industrial revolution changed the structure of society (from rank to class), cultural identity, and the shape of the towns and cities. McKendrick argues convincingly that consumer/commercial revolution in England during the eighteenth century had already fostered the foundations of modern ideas about change and progress, gentility, fashion, bodily comfort and appearance. These had obvious ramifications for attitudes to material things as well as the growth of affect in personal and family relationships.\footnote{Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth Century England, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. See also Fernand Braudel, Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800, Glasgow Collins 1974. For the revolution in personal and family relationships, see Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800, London, Penguin, 1977.} Significantly, this commercial revolution predated the rise
of heavy industries and the factory system emerging generally ‘as a marked feature of British industrial activity after 1780’. But the latter changes were by no means all-encompassing, for business and manufacturing were, to a large extent, still carried on in old ways, employing preindustrial work, transport and power-source patterns.

Historians disagree about when precisely the social and cultural impact of the industrial revolution, in the sense of a new class system related to the means of production, and fostering mass class consciousness, emerged. E. P. Thompson argued in his seminal *The Making of the English Working Class* that the modern working class not only had early antecedents which predate the industrial revolution, but had emerged fully formed by 1830. Peter Linebaugh in his *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* presents evidence of urban working-class consciousness and action in London through his study of those 1,242 men and women hanged at Tyburn between 1703 and 1772. Yet, for the rest of the country, David Cannadine in his study of the invention of the traditions of the British monarchy in the nineteenth century argues that, at least until the 1870s, the uneven development of the economy and slow adoption of steam power meant that while Britain may have been the ‘workshop of the world’, the workshops were both small in size and relatively few in number. Engels’ Manchester, with its massive mills and segregated suburbs, was the exception rather than the rule.

In 1851 agriculture was still the largest employer of labour, and ‘country towns large and small...were still the norm, so far as urbanization in the mid-nineteenth century was

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concerned'.

Society, by and large, was still traditional in the sense of being a 'localized, provincial, face-to-face world.' Finally, Patrick Joyce in his *Visions of the People* has demonstrated that even in heavily industrialised Manchester, traditional regional and localized traits, dialects and attitudes, were still the dominant forces of everyday life there throughout the nineteenth century. The language of the emerging working class associations was not that of modern class struggle and antagonism, but was still focused on traditional concepts of universality, the common good of the organic society. Joyce argues that modern class did not really emerge until after the First World War.

How might we describe the cultural identity of early Sydney, founded at a time when so many social, cultural and economic changes were underway in England? In June 1804 a Rocks woman named Mary Jones, most likely a First Fleet arrival, died 'at a very advanced age' and her funeral 'was performed...with a splendour suited to her avocation during her latest years'. It comprised, wrote Sydney Gazette editor George Howe, employing his customary ironic twists, 'from twelve to fifteen spotless damsels robed in white' following the coffin down the Rocks and along the High Street towards the burial ground. The moral character of these Rocks women was thus, by reverse implication, considered 'loose and disorderly' and promiscuous. Their white robes (or were they fashionable gowns?) flying in

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the face of moral order and pompous ritual, they were presenting the ‘world upside down’,
the traditional inversion of the festivals and fairs of Britain and Europe. The ancient grim
humour of momentary, farcical reversal, the gestures of opposition acted out within the
parameters of cultural reciprocity, had been transported intact to the straggling new colony.  

The town through which they carried Mary Jones’ body was, similarly, fundamentally
preindustrial in social organization and physical shape. Socially it was divided not according
to the three classes so familiar to us (upper or ruling, middle and working) but according to
rank. Both elite and the plebeian ranks still commonly described and considered society as
comprising two great orders, the higher and the lower, with no separate middle class as we
know it. The artisans, small shopkeepers and a few clerks who began to appear were
‘middling’ people, part of the lower orders. One historian has described this eighteenth
century social arrangement as ‘a sort of disorderly cohesion’, for the many, minutely divided
ranks within the orders, constantly slipping and shifting over one another, appear from our
own perspective to be disorderly. Yet its cohesion lay, not in the ‘bonds of authority’, but
in the shared understanding of society and a particularly English sense of individual liberty.
The ranks were understood to be interdependent, therefore having a common interest, and
still bound by certain reciprocal rules of patronage and deference, or, at least, shows of
defence. Hence it was a society which predates modern concepts of mass class antagonism,

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suggested that the white clothing worn by the women could have been white gowns
of flimsy fabric so fashionable at the time. Worn by women of the lower orders,
these too would have been signs of reversal through public display. Compare with
Malcolmson, Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850; John K. Walton and
James Walvin (eds), Leisure in Britain 1780-1939, Manchester, Manchester University
Press, 1983; Peter Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, London, Temple
the idea that people of different classes, dividing a society horizontally, could have conflicting economic interests.  

The society was also divided along the plane of gender. Men of both orders to some extent shared certain paradoxical views on what women should do, how they were supposed to behave, and what their role was in the early settlement. On one hand women were clearly regarded as the 'civilizers', those who would allow convict men the happiness of a settled domestic life and families. These households were the basic units of the patriarchal society, and essential to the colony's normality and progress.  

Women were thus allowed to live in the early houses quite independently, caring for their increasing numbers of children. To the annoyance of the Governors, they then made the houses their refuges, refused to come out, to go to work or attend church. Women, like men, enjoyed drinking, dancing and singing late into the night, they could be violent in their personal dealings, and were sexually uninhibited. They were frank in their search for economic security through permanent relationships, though the permanence of legal marriage was often not a viable option, and probably not entered into lightly. On the other hand women's 'independence' was tempered by the vulnerable position in which they stood, and the terrible and humiliating punishments meted out to those who were seen to transgress the ideal of womanhood. For, paradoxically, men also held deep-seated beliefs that women were naturally disorderly, sexually uninhibited, and hence the

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corruptors of society. Those well-known early accounts we have of convict women as 'damned whores' stem partly from these fears and expectations. 31

Women responded to the paradoxical nature of their position in the colony by making the best of it. They suffered the punishments, remaining defiant, but they also took advantage of the freedom allowed them to set up households. Many women, like men, simply appropriated land on the Rocks, set up businesses, and brought up their children. Those who had successful defacto relationships worked as partners in business with their husbands. In terms of cultural identity and behaviour, however, they were not particularly quiet, sober, 'moral' or 'respectable' in the later middle-class sense, which is why they cannot be understood in these terms.

Culturally, as this study will explore, there is strong evidence for the continuity of pre-modern ways and mentalité. The town itself, although enlivened by modern attitudes to commerce and trade, still took a traditional form. Its ranks were to some extent integrated, with the official and business elite clustered in the centre, the middling and lower orders around them and then the ragged 'no-mans land' on the fringes. 32 The division between urban and rural


was not complete. Many Rocks people also owned small farms on the Cumberland Plain, visited them regularly, and were interested in rural matters and stories. The people were unused to being closely governed, and failed to observe orders; yet they had deep regard for the rule and execution of law. Courts were crowded with townspeople witnessing proceedings, and punishments were still carried out in public and focussed on atonement and retribution through physical pain, suffering and death. Work patterns were largely traditional: many people were illiterate and organized their work and businesses through personal dealing, word of mouth, mental arithmetic. Work time was not strictly observed, nor was it completely separated from home life and leisure. Attitudes to sex, marriage and children were largely unaffected by modern ideas of 'respectability'. In the face of life which could be brutal and easily cut short, they were utterly pragmatic in action and outlook. In terms of popular culture, both convicts and the small elite immediately established their traditional pastimes, which had at their core the notion of pleasure and entertainment for its own sake, for enjoyment. They had little time for formal religion, for regular church-going and pious behaviour; the Irish were said to be superstitious. Drinking alcohol was a normal and essential part of everyday life: before during and after work, for socializing, as medicine


for the sick, and comfort for the dying. When disease or death struck, people largely adopted
the traditional, stoic acceptance of fate.

Yet, there are strong traits of modernity too. Nicholas’ portrayal of convicts as workers,
although it employs convict workers, rather flat economic terminology (convicts are
‘productive workers’, education is ‘human capital formation’) has important directions and
clues for understanding their cultural identity. Those in work, particularly the skilled and
semi-skilled artisans, and servants in the homes of the wealthy, were the ranks which
McKendrick particularly noted as participants in the emerging consumer economy. On the
Rocks we find a large proportion of the convict and ex-convict population from the skilled
and employed parts of the lower orders of the urban areas of England and Ireland. They were
tradesmen and tradeswomen, and domestic servants, people who had worked in the booming
shipping industries on the ships and wharves. They came out of commercialised, though not
yet industrialized, England and Ireland, and their actions show that they were quite familiar
with the concepts of the early capitalist phase: commercialisation and consumerism.

Some were ambitious, energetic and had brought some capital with them. Those Rocks
people who advertised in the newspaper, wrote memorials, were included on lists for leases,
land and licences, were restless small-scale entrepreneurs who spent their lives in the colony
in businesses and trades. These activities, well-described in books like The Sydney Traders,
bespoke attitudes involving modern notions of change, the possibility of improvement through
individual enterprise.37 They were eager to acquire land and goods, constantly on the lookout
for opportunities, whether through patronage, business or marriage, legal or illegal, and strove
constantly against others and external forces for material well-being. They preferred to live
in the town and were avid consumers of material goods. They were interested in fashion and

37 D. Hainsworth, The Sydney Traders: Simeon Lord and His contemporaries 1788-1821,
Melbourne, Cassell, 1972.
in seeing and learning new things, and in endowing their children with skills, good marriages and property. Some of those who became wealthy eventually made conscious public efforts to distinguish themselves from the labouring mass of the lower orders, to define themselves as respectable in their own terms. These were real inversions, possible in New South Wales, rather than dramatic, fictitious ones.

So Rocks people clearly cannot be described simply as some kind of medieval survivals, wholly untouched by those great eighteenth century changes. E. P. Thompson, ruminating on the difficulties of defining ‘traditional’ or ‘preindustrial’ plebeian culture, offers a fusion, the new overlaying the old:

It is not any ‘traditional’ culture but a rather peculiar one. It is not, for example, fatalistic, offering consolations and defences in the course of a lifetime which is utterly determined and constrained. It is, rather, picaresque, not only in the obvious sense that people are more mobile, go to sea, are carried off to wars...In more settled ambiances - in the growing areas of manufacture and of free labour-life [still] proceeds along a road whose hazards and accidents cannot be prescribed of avoided by forethought...Hence experience or opportunity is grabbed as occasion arises, with little thought of the consequence.\(^{38}\)

These dynamics of opportunism and movement within the bounds of uncontrollable external events and forces also lie at the heart of the behaviour and experience of Rocks people.

The primary sources for this study include those early colonial records which mention, list, deal with or transcribe the words of Rocks people; and those which provide useful contextual or illuminating material about the town and society generally. The official correspondence in Historical Records of Australia was essential for the latter. Sources such as the Sydney

Gazette from 1803 to c1830 and the recently issued index to the Colonial Secretary’s correspondence (1788-1825) were also combed for material of all sorts, from information for the reassembly of personal and family histories, to general material about social structure and interaction, work practices, family life, crime and punishment, the developing townscape, material life, attitudes to health, disease and death; and so on. Perhaps the richest for ethnographic research and reflection were the Coroners’ reports and the court reports. Research through the court transcripts was guided by key names, references in the Gazette, related cases, by cases discussed in Paula Jane Byrne’s Criminal Law and the Colonial Subject; and by simply browsing. But the evidence has always to be treated with some caution, since witnesses and accused often had reasons to exaggerate or lie.¹⁹ This is not so problematic in the Coroner’s inquest transcripts. Here people relate in their own words the everyday actions, journeys, observations, reflections and emotions surrounding the circumstances, witnessing or discovery of a death. Mostly they have little reason to lie. These records are among the most vivid and detailed we have about the colony’s first thirty years, and the events are retold from the perspective of the people.⁴⁰

Another useful and exciting discovery was the Constables’ Notebooks for 1822/23 in the Colonial Secretary’s correspondence.⁴¹ These notebooks, completed in two phases, contain a house-by-house list of all the Rocks inhabitants, collected for the Census and probably also

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³⁹ Paula Jane Byrne, Criminal Law and the Colonial Subject: New South Wales 1810-1830, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p10. The court records referred to include committal and trial papers, depositions of the Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, and records of the Sydney Quarter Sessions, 1788-c1830, held in Archives Office of New South Wales (hereafter AONSW). Details of court proceeding were also often published in SG.

⁴⁰ Coroner’s Inquest Reports, see Colonial Secretary’s Correspondence (hereafter CSC), 4/1819, Reel (hereafter R) 6021, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML); and Coroner’s Inquests 1788-1825, 2/8286-90, R2232-33, AONSW.

⁴¹ District Constables’ Notebooks, 1822 and 1823, in CSC 4/1218-9 R1254 AONSW.
as an initial attempt to survey the area and sort out the tangled claims to the allotments. As well as straightforward name-collection, the Constables wrote down each persons' status, the ship they arrived on, the name of its captain (to help distinguish the different arrival dates of the same ship), the length of the person's original sentence, and finally some remark on their occupation or employment.

Unlike alphabetized lists of names in the musters and censuses, or lists of household heads or ratepayers in later Ratebooks and directories, these lists, arranged according to household, street by street, allow us the luxury of information about the people of the Rocks at this one particular moment of its development. The well-known and obscure, new-born babies and old people who had come in the first fleets, the drifters and the settlers, servants and masters, landholders and lodgers, all are listed in the context of who they lived with, and amongst their neighbours. By reassembling the data alphabetically using a computer, a reasonably accurate estimation of its social profile has been possible, starting with basic breakdowns such as status (convict, ex-convict, free arrival, born in the colony) the proportions of men, women and children and so on. The list also offers insights into the nature of household formation and structure. A comparison of each name with the 1828 Census provides the important perspective of mobility and stasis, with related implications for the nature of the community.

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42 Byrne (p77) has also carried out household analysis of the Notebooks for the whole of Sydney, and observes that the data is 'by no means accurate nor to be regarded as such'. While this is certainly true for the town as a whole (many streets are missing), the lists for the Rocks area are fairly complete, including all streets and lanes. There do appear to be some unexplained omissions: Rocks people Mary Bryant/Eagan, Mary Redmond, Thomas Lynch and Arthur Martin are recorded as living there both before and after the survey, yet they are not listed. They may have been away at other settlements or at their farms at the time. Nevertheless, the Notebooks provide a good overall picture, in that most residents are listed, as well as reasonable samples for the more specific studies.

Patterns of occupation often demonstrate webs of family, ethnic and local interaction, and suggested avenues for further family research. As the list runs in street order, an analysis of the social character of each street has been possible, and certain clusters of households sharing trades or callings, or similar times of arrival, or Irishness became visible. By comparing the list with Harper's detailed map of 1823, subsequent surveys and title information, it has been possible to pinpoint the location of the households of the best-known families, and have a fair idea of the location of the rest.

My interest in the everyday, and in family and household life led inevitably to family history. Dossiers have been collated on around four hundred individuals and families of the Rocks, from the sources listed above, and others, as well as the Mutch Index of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and similar sources. Published sources such as the Australian Dictionary of Biography, pioneer registers, and several individual family histories were also consulted; most valuable was Michael Flynn's painstaking biographies of Second Fleet convicts.

The structure of this study reflects the important aspects of life on the Rocks and in Sydney during the early colonial period: townscape, community, family life and working life. The themes and questions raised above about the divisions and commonalities of Rocks society - rank, status, gender, age, authority and culture - are examined in each of these spheres of everyday life, partly to avoid an over-mechanistic analysis, and partly to try to recreate the Rocks as a whole, as it would have been experienced. The sheer bulk of the evidence, and the time and words it takes to collect, collate and interpret this material is one reason the

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44 Graeme Davison has collated a list of inhabitants for 1828 from the Census, but this material was unavailable for consultation. Pers. com. Graeme Davison, Monash University. The material was also unavailable from the Census editors, pers. com. Keith Johnson, 1993.

study is limited to the period before 1830. The other reason is that the 1830s mark the beginnings of significant cultural and social change in Sydney. Hence, the epilogue looks, briefly, forward to the end of transportation, the emergence of a middle class and the rise of respectable culture. These had deeply significant implications for the popular portrayal and understanding of the Rocks and its people over the next hundred and fifty years.