

Convict Geographies of Early Colonial Sydney



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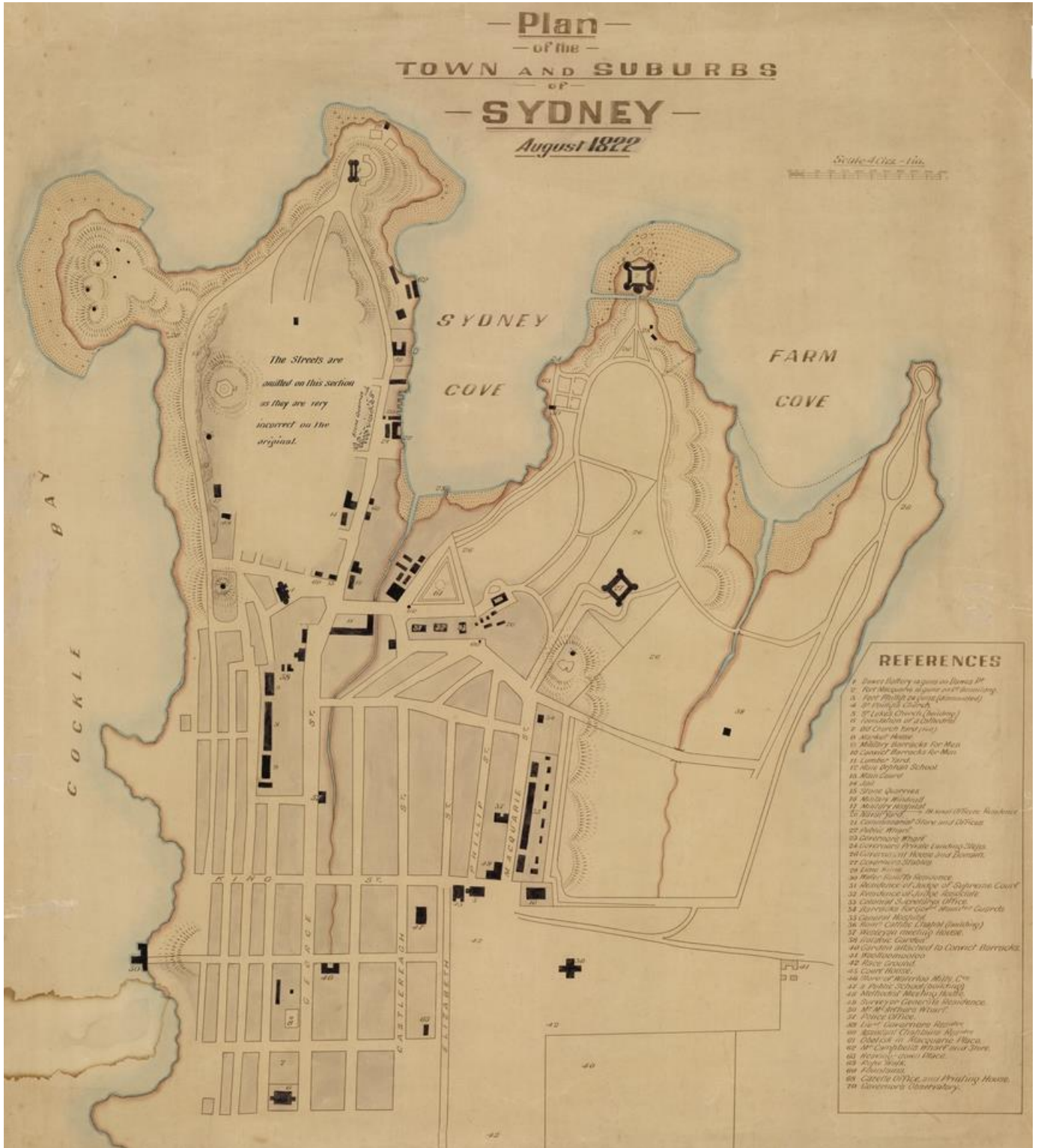
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Abstract

The convict's environmental, spatial and administrative knowledge of early colonial Sydney was far richer than is generally acknowledged. Not only were the convicts thinking and feeling individuals transported to a foreign land against their will, but the natural world was, in a very real way, all around them. Through their work, their use of their 'own time', leisure, and in their pursuit of prohibited activities, the convicts were actively perceiving and reacting to the environment and developed their own understanding of landscapes of the colony and its hinterland. The colony became a place of places that were intimately known and understood, threaded through with action, imagination and cultural designs. The convicts had an internalized consciousness of the spaces and places of the early colony and its hinterland.

Map 1. Plan of the Town and Suburbs of Sydney, August 1822. Available online through the State Library of New South Wales <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/album/ItemViewer.aspx?itemid=957958&suppress=N&imgindex=1> accessed 22 August 2013.



Introduction:

‘This Long and Wished for Country’¹

It was the convicts of early colonial Sydney who cut down the trees, worked the earth, planted the maize and constructed the first dwellings and store houses. It was they who were watched and guarded, their movements and activities subject to regulation and control. It was the convicts who absconded, who stole their neighbour’s belongings, who escaped, who snuck about the woods, met up to gamble, and stole away at night. It was they who were sent out to cut rushes, grazed sheep and cattle, stole fence posts for firewood and dug loam from the woods and commons. ‘Looking for greens’ was a regular activity and the swampy road down to Botany Bay was well-travelled. Main roads were used as grounds for entertainment and as legal or ‘nefarious’ thoroughfares, though the back-routes, and best gardens to steal from, were also well-known.²

Too often it has been forgotten that the convict’s worked with tangible things in real places, and that their culture and leisure had spatial and environmental dimensions. That the convict’s work-sites were also places of knowledge, and that the natural and social landscapes were interconnected and overlapping spheres, has often been overlooked. Classed as felons with prescribed, unwelcome and unfamiliar limits on their autonomy and the subject of official censure, a need for covert activity and a thorough knowledge of the spaces and people of the early colony developed. Moreover, as the main work force in the colony, it was the convicts who developed a detailed understanding of labour needs, the difference between masters and employers and, along with it, the varying relationship between incentive and reward. This paper, then, insists upon the recognition of these transported felons’ environmental, spatial and administrative knowledge. It argues that the landscape of early colonial Sydney began to take on differentiated hues – it was a

¹ William Noah, *Voyage to Sydney in the Ship Hillsborough* [1798-1799] and *a Description of the Colony* [1799]. (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1978), p. 61.

² Karskens first used this term in an article published in a journal that later formed a chapter in *The Colony*. ‘Nefarious Geographies: Convicts and the Sydney Environment in the Early Colonial Period’, *Tasmanian Historical Studies* 11, (2006): pp. 15—27.

place of places – and that public and private, legal and illegal, night time and day, useful and useless were well-known and understood by the first convicts.

Australia's convict historiography is long and complex, following the twists and turns of the colonies', then nations', society and culture. While it is not my intention to provide a full historiographical sketch, certain movements bear consideration. Convicts have been entangled in the discourse of humanitarianism and they have been avoided – they were considered not quite the grandparents to found a nation upon. Consequently, the convict's moral worth was, for a long time, the main element of any historical discussion.³ While Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend* shifted the historical conversation by arguing that they were the 'founding fathers' of the 'national type' - a 'practical man, rough and ready in his manners' or what became the trope of the dinky-di, anti-authoritarian mate with cheerful sense of a 'fair go' – his audacious arguments are usually met with cheery-half grins and are summarily dismissed, his observations on the convicts forgotten.⁴

Alan Atkinson's 1979 article on convict protest began a shift in convict historiography, a shift from 'the character of the convicts themselves' to questions related to 'the nature of convict work'.⁵ In his exploration of methods of resistance amongst the convicts and the extent to which there was any class solidarity, we heard the convict voice: that they felt they had a *right* to money, tea, sugar and tobacco and that they subscribed to a 'moral economy'.⁶ Importantly, Atkinson's argument was possible due to an 'imaginative' exploration of previously untapped source material.⁷

³ For an exploration of the 'convict stain', see Tom Griffiths, 'Past Silence: Aborigines and convicts in our history-making', in Penny Russell and Richard White (eds.) *Pastiche I: reflections on nineteenth century Australia* (St. Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1994), pp. 7—23. Russell Ward makes this comment about grandparents. Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 32.

⁴ Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* [1958]. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1—2. Grace Karskens, too, notes that Ward was an 'exception' in the historiography. 'Shifting the shape of Australia history: Convicts, the early colonial period and the making of Australia', Allan Martin Lecture, 2012 at the Australian National University. (Canberra: School of History, Research School of Social Sciences, 2012), p. 13.

⁵ Robert David Andrews, 'The 'Knotted Hands that Set Us High': Labour History and the Study of Convict Australia', *Labour History* 100 (2011), p. 34.

⁶ Alan Atkinson, 'Four Patterns of Convict Protest', *Labour History* no. 27 (1979), pp. 28—51.

⁷ Penny Russell, 'Introduction: Australian History', in *Pastiche I: reflections on nineteenth century Australia* (St. Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 2.

John Hirst's *Convict Society and Its Enemies* continued this motif of agency and provided a history of personal situations and of the cultural milieu. Hirst's work included negotiations with masters over rations, instances of insolence, of convicts preferring to cook for themselves despite official misgivings, and of nocturnal wanderings to sly grog outlets.⁸

More recent scholarship on the convicts has continued these ideas of convict agency and activity. William Robbins' examination of the convict system with the analytic framework of work-management has demonstrated the extent to which the convicts could influence the system.⁹ The rising emphasis on Australia's history and heritage by local, state and national bodies led to increased state funding. With this help, Grace Karskens has produced two works on the Rocks in which the convict world-view and life, material culture and dwellings intermingled to create a fascinating and rich history. The convicts were 'normalised': they had homes here, married, played and feuded here. They lived out their pre-industrial culture that was at once community-oriented and consumption-based and created their own rowdy neighbourhood and way of life.¹⁰

Karskens' scholarship, most recently in *The Colony*, has moved convict historiography further forward as she integrated archaeology and material cultures with documentary evidence.¹¹ Karskens' work revealed that routines of everyday work and living forged relentless and important networks of knowledge and construction, sometimes in line with, and sometimes at odds with, the planned, official vision. Karskens has demonstrated that understanding convict life is not a matter of looking at exceptional cases or symbol-rich experiences. Rather, it is about looking at 'desire lines' made by walking feet, or, to cite Nathan Perl-Rosenthal's recent analysis of generational change in scholarship, the 'symbol-poor, conceptual non-complexity of everyday routines and

⁸ John Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore: Australia's First Colony, being Convict Society and its enemies: a history of early New South Wales (1983) and The strange birth of Colonial democracy: New South Wales 1848-1884 (1988)*, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008).

⁹ William Robbins, 'Governor Macquarie's Job Descriptions and the Bureaucratic Control of the Convict Labour Process,' *Labour History*, no. 9 (2009): pp. 11—28 and 'The Lumber Yards: a case study in the management of convict labour 1788-1832,' *Labour History* 79, (2000): pp. 141—161.

¹⁰ Grace Karskens, *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: a history of early Sydney*. (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, University of New South Wales Press, 2009).

networks'.¹² Unlike the 'deep' readings that anthropologically-informed historical studies have generated, this method refuses to place the 'symbolic or semiotic dimensions of culture' above the more ordinary actions of everyday.¹³ This is not to say that understanding the convict experiences means rejecting close-reading, but that it must be 'counterbalanced ... by attention to how even seemingly symbol-poor practises can create meaning by instantiating social and intellectual relationships'.¹⁴

With all this in the mind, the following chapters return to questions raised by Russell Ward half a century ago, still under-explored and under-acknowledged: how did they, the convicts, 'react to the unfamiliar environment'?¹⁵ And it returns alongside more of Ward's observations, that 'without diminishing class consciousness and hostility, the new environment made society much more fluid' and that 'it tended ... to augment the... self-reliance... of working people'.¹⁶ While Karskens has certainly approached these questions, as they were not her sole concern in *the Colony* there is still more room to examine, specifically, the development of the convict's geographies of Sydney – the development of their sense of place. It is this gap, a spatial and environmental understanding of the how the convicts experienced this 'unfamiliar environment' in wider Sydney, that the following chapters continue to flesh out. And it returns to these concerns within the framework of the many historiographical developments in the past half century. It is an Australian historical scene marked by professional and ethical considerations raised in the wake of long and

¹² Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 3, Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, 'Generational Change', *American Historical Review* 117 no. 3, (2012), p. 811.

¹³ The most famous examples of this approach are Clifford Geertz, 'Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,' *Daedalus* 101, no. 1, *Myth, Symbol and Culture* (1972): pp.1–37, and Robert Darnton's, *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history*, [1984] (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

¹⁴ Perl-Rosenthal, 'Generational Change', p. 809.

¹⁵ While I explore some of Ward's premises, there are significant gaps omissions and fallacies in his work. Penny Russell discusses some of these issues, and his place within the historiography, Penny Russell, 'Introduction: Australian History', p. 3. See David Andrew article for a brief history of Ward's work, reception and legacy. 'The Legend Turns Fifty', *Inside Story: Current Affairs and Culture from Australia and Beyond*, 27 November 2008.

<<http://inside.org.au/the-legend-turns-fifty/#sthash.SBe86yFz.dpuf>> viewed 25 August 2013.

¹⁶ Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 42.

bitter debate; debate about the extent and terms of frontier violence, a historical scene aware of narratives on the ‘other side of the frontier’.¹⁷

Historiographically, the ‘geographic imagination’ inspired by Fernand Braudel has become imbued with the spirit of the spatial ‘turn’, a continuing linguistic emphasis has brought a new understanding of colonial and imperial discourse.¹⁸ Environmental history has brought with it a return to materialism unseen since the heyday of Marxist historians. The rise of ‘green and black politics’ and an increased concern about the reality and legacy of the dispossession of the Indigenous Australians has seen renewed interest in the environment and how claims to land ownership develop.¹⁹ The ‘truth’ of Australia’s history was debated in the so-called History Wars of the 2000s, but it has only been after the heated debate subsided - the ‘post-history war’ era, if you like - that it has really begun to be addressed.

Historians like Mark McKenna, Penny Russell, Grace Karskens and Bill Gammage have all been deeply influenced by the above historiographical developments and all have approached the concerns at stake by addressing how the Indigenous Australians as well as the *Berewegal* - the newcomers - developed a sense of belonging and attachment on top of land that was already known, owned, and loved. Theirs is an approach that addressed the History Wars’ concerns in a different way, in a way that acknowledges multiple, competing claims of ownership and the reality of dispossession.²⁰ It is an approach that has required an exercise of geohistoriography, a

¹⁷ See Bain Attwood and S. G. Foster’s edited collection of essays for a survey of the historiographical scene and debate about these issues. Bain Attwood and S. G. Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003). See also Penny Russell, ‘Introduction: Australian History’, in Penny Russell and Richard White (eds.) *Pastiche I: reflections on nineteenth century Australia* (St. Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 1.

¹⁸ For a stimulating discussion of the tension between ‘objective’ history and ‘unreal’ history, see Carla Hesse, ‘The New Empiricism’, *Cultural and Social History* no. 1 (2004): pp. 201–207. For some fascinating works on British colonial discourse, see Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*. (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁹ See, for example, Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 189-191. See also Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 12. Henry Reynolds work on Aboriginal Australian’s agency after 1788 has, as Tom Griffiths has pointed out, influenced two generations of historians and his impact can be compared to that of E.P. Thompson. Cited in Lyndall Ryan, ‘Conference Report: Race, Nation, History: A Conference in Honour of Henry Reynolds, Canberra, 29-30 August 2008’, *Labour History* 95, (2008), p. 248.

²⁰ By examining plant growth, fire and land patterns, topography, photos, art as well as the documentary record, Gammage was able to build an intricate and textured study of methods of Aboriginal Australian land management practises. Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011). Mark McKenna in *Lookin’ for Blackfella’s Point: an Australian History of Place* (Sydney: University of New South Wales

neologism recently coined to denote a new recognition of the constructedness of human and geographic categories and indebted to the ‘discovery in Western thought’ of the linguistic and cultural basis of our referents²¹. These historians have an awareness of and a willingness to shift geographic timescales, relegating the past 200 years of European-turned-Australian occupation of the continent to a blimp on the geographic timescale while, at the same time exploring, materially and discursively, the development of feelings of belonging and place that have developed amongst the *Berewegal*.²²

It is at this nexus, noting the constructions and trends of discourse, ‘webs of significance’ and that tangible places and environmental realities are integral to meaning-making for individuals and cultures, that this paper stands. As Karskens has reminded us, Sydney was experienced emotionally, intellectually as well as sensually by the convicts.²³ Exploring the convict’s ‘mental map’ of Sydney is thereby, in part, a ‘cartographic enterprise’, tracing how action, imagination and cultural ‘webs’ infuse spaces into places with personal as well as public or communal meaning and associations. It is posited on the fact that belonging and environmental knowledge is not a solely a discursive construct, a ‘process of abstract, symbolic attachment but an internalized consciousness of space based on movement in and through it’.²⁴

While this paper is primarily about the convict experience, race relations are not separate from its concerns. Material culture was not only a key component of convict life but also of Aboriginal Australian’s lives and the following chapters touch upon intra-white as well as cross-cultural relations. Moreover, it was space - Indigenous known and managed land - that was the

Press, 2002). Penny Russell, *Savage or Civilized: Manners in Colonial Australia*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010). See also Eric Rolls for a methodology of way of thinking that have impacted these works Eric Rolls, ‘The nature of Australia’ in Griffiths, Tom and Libby Robin (eds). *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), pp. 35—46.

²¹ This phrase is taken from Haydan White’s understanding of Foucault in ‘Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground’, *History and Theory*, 12, no. 1(1973), p. 24.

²² See Robert J. Mayhew for a discussion of geohistoriography. ‘Historical geography, 2009–2010: Geohistoriography, the forgotten Braudel and the place of nominalism’, *Progress in Human Geography* 35 no. 3 (2010): 409—421.

²³ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 42.

²⁴ This idea of ‘belonging’ and ‘movement’ is taken from Greg Nobel and Scott Pointing in ‘White Lines: The Intercultural Politics of Everyday Movement in Social Spaces’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, (2010).

very object of cultural conflict as well as the arena in which it took place.²⁵ It is important to see that Aboriginal Australians have a place in intra-white relations, as class fissures were not separate from their presence in early colonial Sydney. Yet this paper is primarily about convict place-creation and as such has only approached race-relations in a limited way.

For different reasons, my exploration of the female convict experience is also limited. While they did, in some instances, work in same natural and spatial environment as men, their world was primarily domestic and their everyday work and leisure hours were not out doors to the same extent that the men's were.²⁶

If the historian draws from the theories of action and place underpinning anthropologically-infused ethnographic history – 'reading against the grain' – and looks at the number, distribution and repetition of certain activities from the myriad glimpses of convict activity contained in the records, an understanding of the convict's geographic familiarity can be gleaned.²⁷ The First Fleet, and those who came immediately after, were obsessive recorders and cataloguers. Some came to these shores with commissions to write while others kept private journals. As the historian Gavin Edwards has noted, the plan for Port Jackson was an 'ambitious and problematic attempt to found a new – and a new kind of – society from scratch...' and was as deliberate and 'fresh' as the French Revolution.²⁸ Many of the records are self-conscious and follow generic conventions in which descriptions of land, natural history, local people and the virtues of the British people were obligatory.²⁹ From the officer's vivid environmental descriptions and their accounts of 'improvement', much can be gleaned. Much can also be taken from the details of everyday life and economic transactions recorded in the newspapers. The countless

²⁵ Eric Rolls, 'More a New Plane than a New Continent' [1985], in Stephen Dovers (ed.), *Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), p. 35.

²⁶ There is a vast literature on the female convict's world. Karskens work on the domestic sphere of woman in the Rocks neighbourhood. Karskens' work reflects, in part, the shift to the private and domestic sphere as a result of feminist historians of Australian history such as Kay Saunders, Anne Summers, Miriam Dixson and Marilyn Lake.

²⁷ Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', p. 593.

²⁸ Edwards, 'Watkin Tench and the Cold Track of Narrative,' p. 74.

²⁹ Gavin Edwards, 'Watkin Tench and the Cold Track of Narrative,' *Southerly* 60, no. 3 (2000): pp. 76–77. Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740 – 1830*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), pp. 129-133.

depictions of Sydney Cove also add to this rich tapestry of place and geographic familiarity. They illustrate not only the convict's activities but the environmental and spatial dimensions of their work, leisure and illicit behaviour.³⁰ By reconstructing the environment and structures of early colonial Sydney, by piecing together the dotted references to their movements and sayings in journals, newspapers, paintings and their own limited written record, the convict's spatial and environmental understanding emerges as retrievable, rich and fascinating.³¹

Lefebvre's point that, 'Social relations... have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself', has been particularly informative.³² While qualitative analysis of symbol-rich cultural activities is in some cases limited, quantitative repetition of certain activities and behaviours has allowed a 'thickness' of description in another sense, filling in many parts of the cultural puzzle. From the details of everyday patterns of convict work, life, culture, and the circumstances surrounding their more covert movements, this paper argues that the convicts developed a complex, highly differentiated geographic familiarity.

Exploring the convicts as actors and as opportunistic individuals who exercised autonomy wherever and however they could incorporates the motif of convict moment and knowledge put forward by Alan Atkinson in 1979 and again by John Hirst in 1983.³³ This paper also accepts, incorporates and builds upon Brian Fletcher's thesis that the convicts and officers mutually transformed the colony through the relations of commodity-exchange and incentive.³⁴ More

³⁰ Primarily, the illustrations referenced in this paper are images reproduced in an edited collection. See the book itself for references to the images themselves, most of which are at the Mitchell Library. Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987). Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', p. 593.

³¹ In her article, 'nefarious geographies', Karskens was able to integrate art and history to build a rich account – one that looked at the environmental context and the dynamics of control and escape. In *Dancing With Strangers*, Inga Clendinnen gives a fascinating account of the personalities of the British officers in the *Accounts*. Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing With Strangers*. (The Text Publishing Company: Melbourne, 2003. 2005 ed.). pp. 57—66.

³² Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. (Nicholson-Smith, Donald. tr)(Maiden: Blackwell publishing, 1974, 1991 ed.).

³³ John Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore: Australia's First Colony, being Convict Society and its enemies: a history of early New South Wales (1983) and The strange birth of Colonial democracy: New South Wales 1848-1884 (1988)*, Melbourne, Black Inc, 2008.

³⁴ Brian Fletcher, *Landed Enterprise and Penal Society: a History of Farming and Grazing in New South Wales Before 1821*, (Parramatta: Macarthur Press, 1976).

particularly, it builds upon Grace Karskens' approach and examination of the Rocks area, wider Sydney in *The Colony*, and her call in 2012 to 'overcome our own disconnect with the early colonial past' through an understanding of, to cite Rhys Isaacs, 'people... *doing things*'.³⁵ In doing so, this paper undermines the lingering claim that the convict experience is largely unknowable.³⁶

There are, however, distinct bounds and constraints in this paper. In terms of context and scope, it remains focused on Sydney and its immediate hinterland. A similar exploration of the settlements at the Hawkesbury, Norfolk Island and Rose Hill would be fruitful and interesting. Temporally, the following chapters explore convict Sydney up until the late 1820s, a good way into Macquarie's term of office. By the end of his tenure, Sydney had transformed from a penal settlement to a colony and, with the numbers of emancipists increasing, the nature of the social fabric and the opportunities for work began to inexorably shift.

The prologue sets the environmental and spatial scene for the following four chapters because, as David Carr has convincingly argued, we 'distort' historical agents if we present their mental worlds at the expense of their spatial realisation. The first chapter examines the material, visceral realities of convict work. It explores the environmental knowledge it was predicated upon as well as the administrative knowledge it necessarily engendered. The second chapter, building upon this premise of convict knowledge, explores the convicts' perceptions of their working worlds and, in particular, seeks to restore an understanding of the environment as a fundamental component of the relationship between exertion and incentive. The third chapter delves into the convict's use of their 'own time' and focuses on its physicality, spatial projection and the networks of mobility and knowledge their activities suggest. The last chapter examines the convict's illicit behaviours, demonstrating, in another light, the extent of their environmental, administrative and social knowledge as well as the extent of their autonomous behaviour and personal perception. In their own dynamic and logic, 'thickly described' behaviours and actions, embedded in time, place

³⁵ Rhys Isaacs, cited in Karskens, *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), p.7.

³⁶ For a recent example of this, see William Robbins, 'Spatial Escape and the Hyde Park Convict Barracks,' *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 7, (2005): 81–96.

and culture, reveal much about the convict's understanding, and the spatial reality, of their lives in early colonial Sydney.

Prologue

If the convicts of early Sydney are to be taken seriously as thinking, feeling, learning individuals and agents, a thorough grasp of their world must be appreciated. It was a world as real to them as ours is to us and it was in this world that worked, moved and learned.¹ It was a world close to nature - a world powered by wind and the ‘muscles of humans and beasts’ – and a world close to administrative demands and needs.² Just as these elements were inextricably entwined, so too were the convict’s lives entangled in these realities.

The main cove of Sydney was marked by a slow-running stream. Considering the nature of his human cargo, and desiring to separate the most desperate of the convicts from the main body and from the woman, Phillip had formulated an idea for settlement that included one well before he left Portsmouth. He hoped that founding the river would act as a physical barrier between the classes of the First Fleet, a separation that could be further reinforced by a guard. Indeed, he did find one – clearly seen in the image below (figure 1.). Yet what became known as



Figure 1. Sydney Cove, Port Jackson. 1788. An illustration taken from Lieutenant William Bradley’s manuscript, *A Voyage to New South Wales: the Journal of Lieutenant William Bradley RN of HMS Sirius 1786-1792*. (Sydney: Ure Smith Pty Limited, 1969), after p. 84.

¹ David Carr, ‘Place and Time: On the Interplay of Historical Points of View’, *History and Theory* 40, no. 40, Agency after Postmodernism (2001), p. 156. Richard Grassby has similarly argued that cultural historians ‘elevate abstract ideas above things, symbolic meaning above utility, and imagination above empirical facts’. Grassby, Richard. ‘Material Culture and Cultural History Author’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 4 (2005), p. 591. Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 42.

² Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 167.

the Tank Stream was no Thames. It originated in marshes near present day Hyde Park, slowed to trickle in the hotter months and, according to one description, any ‘self-respecting convict could leap it in normal weather’.³ The main body of male convicts were placed on the western side of the cove with a guard between them and the marine’s camp, then on the east side of the stream a smaller group of the convict artisans were placed. Between them and the female convict’s tent was another guard, the judge’s accommodation and, in the earliest months, the surveyor’s marquee.

As the camp was surrounded by bush, also seen in figure 1, this separation of the sexes and surveillance from the guard houses was a farce; on the very same night as disembarkation the woman received solicitations, not necessarily unwelcome, from the opposite sex who skirted through the bush.⁴ The pursuit of female company would remain a key generator of convict movement for many years and thick bush and scrub would continue to facilitate illicit activity.

Near the water on the east was the governor’s canvas tent – later his house – and the blacksmiths, the commissary, the store, the governor’s tent, and his garden grounds. Behind this, on the next cove to the east, the tidal inlet and bay was dubbed Farm Cove after the first farming grounds developed there. Immediately adjacent to this were the grounds that became the Government Domain in 1810 and the Royal Botanic Gardens were developed on the old public farm at Farm Cove in 1816.

The next cove to Farm Cove was Garden Island Cove, later known as Palmer’s Cove, and later still as Woolloomooloo (see map 1, p. 4). It was ‘vacant’ land until, in 1793 under the governance of Grose (1792-1794), 100 acres were granted.⁵ The area now known as Vaucluse began as two farms granted in 1793 and 1795. The whole area was linked via what is now called

³ James Semple Kerr, *Design for Convicts: An account of design for convict establishments in the Australian Colonies during the transportation era* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1984), p. 2

⁴ Kerr, *Design for Convicts*, p. 3. This is the infamous ‘orgy’ of the first night, written about with salacious aplomb by Robert Hughes in the *Fatal Shore*. Karskens has recently combatted his interpretation in *The Colony*, p. 313.

⁵ Margaret Steven, ‘Palmer, John (1760–1833)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/palmer-john-2533/text3437>>, accessed 4 September 2013.

Old South Head Road after continual developments to a track that developed to reach the lookout called the South Head.⁶

From May 1788, when a James Bloodworth was discovered to be a bricklayer, a ‘gang of labourers’ was sent down a mile south of Sydney to a mound known as Brickfield Hill in the vicinity of today’s Surry Hills.⁷ One of the gentleman described it as being a mile or two from the main town through a pleasant wooded road.⁸ By 1804, it had seventy-two dwellings and a ‘villatick appearance’ (see figure 2).⁹



Figure 2. The little village near the Brickfields can be seen in this detail, taken from *Brickfield Hill and Village on the High Road to Parramatta*, 1796, reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 80.

A little further down from the Brickfields lay the lands known as the Kangaroo Grounds or the district of Bullanaming. Here, what is now Parramatta road passed through 400 acres of Crown Land surveyed and allotted by Governor Phillip in 1793.¹⁰ The road followed the ‘path of least resistance’ and detoured around hills, creeks and marshes.¹¹ At the Kangaroo Grounds, the

⁶ Sydney Gazette, 20 March 1813.

⁷ Collins, *Account*, p. 28.

⁸ Worgan, *Journal*, p. 44.

⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 15 April 1804.

¹⁰ Newtown, p. 1.

¹¹ Newtown, p. 2.

well-spaced trees and undulating grasslands made the area look like a gentleman's estate.¹² When it was leased out to various officers from 1792, this became a reality.¹³ It was by travelling through the Kangaroo grounds that one reached Botany Bay to the south, passing through treacherous marsh and swamp in the process.¹⁴

Another portion of the Kangaroo Grounds operated as a government farm. Grose Farm once operated where the current St. John's College stands. By 1806, fifty of the five-hundred acres has been cleared.¹⁵ In 1820, one hundred and fifty men lodged here in various outhouses and it had become a place agriculture favoured by the convicts to other gang-work.¹⁶

To the west of Sydney Cove lay the scraggy sandstone cliffs of the Rocks. Karskens attributes its irregularity to the topography as well as the 'disposition of its inhabitants'. As has been amply demonstrated in Karskens' work, the Rocks was predominantly the convict's and ex-convict's ghetto - though by no means were they the only residents - and it was a place of noise, disorder and turbulence. Here, the terrain was steep, the arrangement of the 'look-alike houses' was 'riotous' and the behaviour of the convicts, soldiers and sailors who caroused there was a cause for the authorities' concern.¹⁷ Warehouses, stores and yards lay at the water's edge. Wattle-daub and thatch huts dotted the first rocky ridge, slopes, ledges and outcrops, and the top of the tier was named Windmill Row after a windmill, finished in 1797, was constructed at its south end.¹⁸ The streets were a 'constant source of complaint well into the 1840s, for they remained uneven and dangerous, and were often rank with the stench of dead animals, and... excrement'. Rocks

¹² Bill Gammage explores the European perception of these 'gentleman's estate and explores how they were created and managed by the Indigenous Australians. See Chapter 1, 'Curious Landscapes', *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, pp.5–17.

¹³ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 138.

¹⁴ Richard Chasman and Chrys Meader, *Marrickville: Rural outpost to inner city*. (Marrickville: Hale & Iremonger, 1990), p. 36. Bladen, F. M. (ed.), Phillip to Sydney, *Historical Records of Australia* I (hereafter HRA), Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer, 1893), p. 23.

¹⁵ Val Attenbrow and Cheryl Stanborough, 'A Pre-Colonial History and Description' in the appendix to Rosemary Kerr and associated, *University of Sydney Grounds Conservation Plan* (2002), p. 17.

<http://sydney.edu.au/facilities/documents/docs/gcp_appendix1.pdf> accessed 4 February 2013.

¹⁶ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 33.

¹⁷ Karskens, *The Rocks*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Karskens, *The Colony*, pp. 18—19.

butchers slaughtered in their backyard or the streets and made no effort to clear the mess. By 1803 the general term 'the Rocks' was well in vogue and no amount of Macquarie's quibbling about exact names and streets saw this internalized. In 1824, one cooper's address was still 'Back Windmill, Church Hill'.¹⁹ It was here that woman and tradesmen who were not required by government – tailors, shoemakers and the like – made their homes, the latter paying a weekly gratuity to overseers and clerks who would apply for them purely for the purpose of receiving this sum and letting them 'be at large'.²⁰ The better conducted grass-cutters were also allowed to lodge in town as were the married men.²¹ Margaret Catchpole, a convict woman writing about the view from her ship in 1801, was put in 'very good spirits' as it was 'a place so very like my own native home...a great deal more like England than I ever expected to have seen'.²²

Yet convicts who were able to lodge in town were not restricted to the Rocks. Pitt's Row, now Pitt Street, also contained the private homes or lodgings of many convict men and woman. It lay between High Street or Sergeant-Major's Row - now George Street - and Chapel Row - now Castlereagh Street. The argumentative John Macarthur, a lieutenant turned entrepreneur and pastoralist, refused to live on Pitt street describing it as 'the haunt of all the vile and atrocious characters in the settlement' including 'prostitutes of the lowest classes', or, most likely, woman who cohabitated with other men.²³

The cove behind the Rocks was named Cockle Cove, and one could reach it by going over the rocks, traipsing around the point of the cove – Millers Point - or by boat. The name extended to today's Darling Harbour. Here, craggy rocks, secluded beach and grassy knolls became a place

¹⁹ Karskens, *The Rocks*, p. 21, p. 33.

²⁰ John Thomas Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales* [1823]. (Adelaide: Library Board of South Australia, 1966), p. 18.

²¹ Thomas Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry*, p. 28.

²² Catchpole to Mrs Cobbold, 21 January 1802. Letters to Mr and Mrs Howes, Mrs Cobbold and Dr. Stebbens, Mitchel Library A1508, transcripts online <http://images.sl.nsw.gov.au/Ebind/safe1_14_a138/a138000.html> accessed 15 June 2013.

²³ Geoffrey Scott, *Sydney's Highways of History*, p. 62.

to pasture. Free-stone was sourced here till a quarry was opened and a wharf to land goods constructed in 1811 (see figure 3).²⁴



Figure 3. Church Hill, now Grosvenor Street at the edge of the Rocks, leading to second government mill. Stone can be seen lying about from various construction work and a convict can be seen carrying stone. *Sydney Church and Regimental Mile from the Main Guard* by Sophia Campbell, c. 1817. Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 193.

The shore opposite Cockle Bay was home to the Ultimo Estate, the 34 acres grant given the Surgeon John Harris in 1804. It overlooked Blackwattle Creek and, being close to Parramatta road and Grose Farm, was also in the vicinity of the Blackwattle swamp – a sticky mire home to snakes.²⁵

This, then, was the real, contoured, spatial world of the convict's work, leisure, life and wanderings in early colonial Sydney.

²⁴ *Sydney Gazette* 13 October 1810. Tench, *Account*, p. 71.

²⁵ Brian Fletcher, 'Harris, John (1754–1838)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/harris-john-2164/text2773>, accessed 4 September 2013. *Sydney Gazette*, 13 January 1805, 4 January 1812.

Chapter 1:

‘Felling the ponderous gum-tree’, ‘breaking the stubborn clod’: Convict workers and geographic familiarity

The images shown below capture myriad glimpses of convicts ‘doing things’.²⁶ The images form part of panorama facing east, south and west that were put together by a topographical draughtsmen in 1817. While they illustrate urban development and progress, they also provide clues to another world – a world of environmental and administrative knowledge, a world of possibility and mobility for the convicts of early colonial Sydney.²⁷ To the east, a gang of convicts is at work with chisels and picks. They are quarrying and recessing stone before carting it away for construction work. One man, a convict, dozes while his companions work around him – he is hidden by a rocky ledge. Two men stand talking close by, talking and watching. They appear to be overseers, the men chosen to supervise the convict gangs who were thought to be the most skilled and honest. In the lower right, two men are carrying timber: the raw materials of the New South Wales were handled and known. Standing at this point, just south of the present-day Observatory,

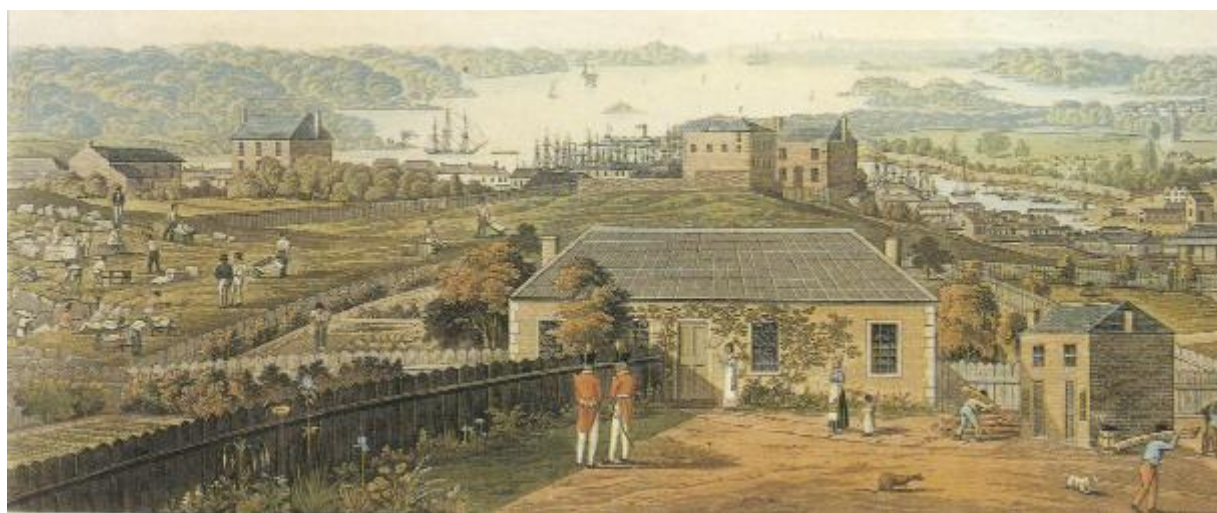


Figure 4. *The Entrance of Port Jackson, and Part of the Town of Sydney, New South Wales*. Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 203.

²⁶ Rhys Isaacs, cited in Karskens, *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), p.7.

²⁷ For more information on Major Taylor’s panorama, see Power House Museum, , ‘Aquatint of Port Jackson and Sydney’, <<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=326892#ixzz2gKzEjaMI>>, 30/09.13. Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 202—210. For a recent example of Australian historians engaging with art and a substantive claim of the realism rather than romanticism, see Bill Gammage, chapter 2, ‘Canvas of a continent’ in *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, pp. 18—100.

the comings and goings of the ships at Sydney Cove, the well-kept lawns of government, and fences and roads were visible – Sydney was able to be observed (see figure 4). The western views is fascinating. It shows a convict gang that is mostly idle – one only is chipping the log while the others are resting on or around it. Other men, probably convicts, are travelling upon the land carrying wood or sacks. Another tends livestock as they graze on the grassy areas (see figure 5). Yet this panorama was completed in about 1820, over thirty years since colonisation. Much was built, deteriorated or demolished in that space of time and Sydney was markedly different to the cove seen and possessed in January 1788. It was the convicts who, more than any other group, were the literal workers and effectors of this transformation.



Figure 5. Detail of the third image in the panorama, *Part of the Harbour of Port Jackson, and the country between Sydney and the Blue Mountains, New South Wales*. Convicts can be seen in the green areas working, carrying, resting and chatting. Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 207.

As men in work-gangs, as those working the public farms and as assigned servants or artisans, it is important to recognise that the convict's work had material, spatial and administrative dimensions. They handled, sawed, smelted, carried and dragged: they were learning. This chapter explores how the convict's routines of every day work fostered specific understandings of the natural and human environment. This chapter asks 'pragmatic' questions of how and why towards work and workplaces, questions rooted in 'real places', administrative bounds, environment and

the convict's own experiences and perceptions.²⁸ As Grace Karskens has written, the convicts' patterns of work were largely traditional. Work, business, leisure and knowledge were lived in worlds not of books but of concrete experience, word-of-mouth, trial and error and opportunism. Just as pre-industrial time was largely relational rather than clocked, the convicts' geographic and spatial knowledge was relational and experiential rather than theoretic or vicarious.²⁹ It was through routines of work that 'social and intellectual relationships' were forged, routines, environmental and topographical realities internalised.³⁰ And as it is action, imagination and 'webs of significance' that create associations inscribed into the landscape as spaces become places, the specific nature of convict work – what they worked with and how – can reveal something of the development of the convict's geographic familiarity. Yet this is not to suppose that certain tasks, areas and perceptions of them were fixed. With the passage of time, changes in administration and the urban development of Sydney, the more diverse, complex and nuanced the convict's geographic opportunities, perceptions and familiarities became.

All convicts were exposed to the material properties of Sydney's vegetation. While Russell Ward noted that the 'brute facts of Australian geography' was one of the most important factors shaping outback life, the facts of Australian geography – brute or not – were just as pertinent in the immediate cove and hinterland in the first decades after 1788.³¹ In the earliest week and months, Sydney Cove had to become a camp. Only after this stage could it become a colony of bricks, stone and spires.³² When told to go and find their own accommodation for the 'exigency of the moment', the convict's had little to work with but nature's raw materials. It was from these raw materials that 'little edifices quickly multiplied on the ground'.³³ The colonisers soon

²⁸ These are the questions that Noah Millstone calls 'pragmatic', questions like, 'How does it work? How does it happen?'. Cited in Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, 'Generational Change', *American Historical Review* 117 no. 3, (2012), p. 811.

²⁹ See E. P. Thompsons, 'Time, Work and Industrial Capitalism,' *Past & Present* 38, no 38, (1967), p. 58.

³⁰ Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, 'Generational Change', *American Historical Review* 117 no. 3, (2012), p 809.F

³¹ Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 11.

³² For more detail on the early 'camp' stages of the colony, see chapter 3, 'The Camp, the Canvas', in Karskens, *The Colony*, pp. 61—82.

³³ Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 57.

discovered that the wood of the cabbage palm was soft and easy to cut and handle and, being readily available, it filled the sides and ends of the first primitive dwellings. It was often plastered over with clay as nearly all other timber was inadequate.³⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, the cabbage trees around settlement – thought to have grown around the Tank Stream- had largely disappeared by the time Captain Hunter (later Governor) made his sketch seven months into settlement.³⁵ The name Cabbage-Palm Bay has remained at one beach near Manly.

Gum-rush grass served as the thatch for roofs. It was carefully sourced, cut, bundled, tied and laid (see figure 6). Some convicts chose to cover their thatch with clay, but the weight of this in heavy rain saw whole chunks slide off in a gooey, heavy mess and any rain at all saw it drip from the lattices.³⁶ As many discovered the hard way, thatch was also ready-made tinder. One report tells us that within a three to four minutes a blacksmiths' shop made of 'common brush wood' was burnt entirely to the ground, a scene engendering much activity as those nearby rushed in to save the bellows and other tools inside.³⁷ If Captain Watkin Tench anxiously sat out thunder storms praying that a stray bolt of lightning would not burn his dwelling, surely the convicts – men as well as woman – felt the same.³⁸ Indeed we know that some convicts experienced the extremities



Figure 6. Clearly visible are the thatched roofs, wooden fences and attached fireplaces of dwellings near the Rocks. Detail from *Eastern View of Sydney* by Edward Dayes, c. 1796. Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 72.

³⁴ See James Boyce for a discussion of convict accommodation in Tasmania and the development of similar geographic awareness. James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008) pp. 120—122.

³⁵ J. F. Cambell, 'The Valley of the Tank Stream,' *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 10, part 2, (1924), p.69.

³⁶ Collins, *Account*, p. 23.

³⁷ White, *Journal*, p. 151.

³⁸ 'Under wretched covers of thatch lay our provisions and stores, exposed to destruction from every flash of lightning and every spark of fire.' Tench, *Account*, p. 134.

of nature's fury when, seeking shelter under trees during storms, they were struck dead to the ground.³⁹ When a hut did burn down, its unhappy occupants were forced to seek shelter somewhere else and begin the laborious process of building again - risking the security of their provisions and clothing in the process. They were further inconvenienced when regulations banning fireplaces within thatched homes were issued.⁴⁰ Thankfully, it was soon found that good shingles could be made from the casuarinas and she-oaks.⁴¹ In all of this everyday activity, working at close quarters in and with the raw materials of Sydney was commonplace.

Similarly, in the earliest weeks and months, the land began to be cleared by the colonists – the convicts included. While the trees around the shore were mostly spread apart, lacked underwood and many were 'clear of branches to an amazing height', these displaced Britons had landed in the middle of summer and this was their first experience of clearing Sydney's trees.⁴² They may have been well-spaced, but their girth and density well made up for it.⁴³ Moreover, no matter how thin the convict's sawed timber planks or how well they dried them, they simply would not float.⁴⁴ Cutting trees involved sawing a foot or two from the base and then hauling away to a pre-prepared saw-pit. Once at these spade-dug pits, the log was laid over it and sawing began. One sawyer stood at the top of the pit and was responsible for the cut. The other stood in pit and worked the other side of the saw. It was a dirty, messy job considering the sand and clay constituted soil around Sydney and much of the wood was dense and heavy.⁴⁵

To make matters worse, the timber of the dry-schlerophyll forests of the coasts were found to be mostly useless for building. Though the timber was fine-grained it was 'riven' by veins of red

³⁹ Tench, *Narrative*, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Account*, p. 32.

⁴¹ Norman Selfe, 'A Century of Sydney Cove and the Genesis of Circular Quay', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 1902, p. 55.

⁴² White, *Journal*, p. 145.

⁴³ Arthur Phillip, *The Voyage of Arthur Phillip to Botany Bay* [1789]. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970), p. 29.

⁴⁴ John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, Sydney [1790] (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962). p. 119.

⁴⁵ Phillip to Sydney, *HRA I*, p. 19. Barrie Dyster, *Servant and Master: Building and Running the Grand Houses of Sydney 1788-1850*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989), pp. 130–131., J. H. Maiden, *The Useful Native Plants of Australia*, (Sydney: Turner and Henderson, 1889) p. 332. Tench, *Narrative*, p. 65.

gum that ran in scroll-like rings and cracked and splintered when dried, falling apart or warping.⁴⁶ Still other trees proved hollow inside, despite the fact that a convict team could spend days grubbing out the root.⁴⁷

Through trial, error and exploration, a 'species of pine tree' was found that had suitable timber and it was 'chiefly used in the framework of houses, and in covering the roofs, the wood splitting easily into shingles'.⁴⁸ The Cabbage-Tree, growing two or three metres in height and being soft, easily cut to make walls. While most the timber was unserviceable when green, the carpenters thought that proper seasoning would improve it.⁴⁹ In this manner, general botanical lessons were acquired oftentimes by men as well as woman - woman spent more time in huts and would have noticed their disintegration more. From the very beginning, then, the convicts were working with, and learning about, their environment.

Yet certain employments, as well as the change from a multi-functional to an increasingly specialised and differentiated workforce, fostered specific understandings of the landscape and environment. Lumber yards existed from the earliest days of the colony sawing timber for infrastructure. As W. R. Robbins has demonstrated, the lumber yard's expansion and increasing sophistication was a consequence of the increased specialisation and output required for grand public buildings as well as private homes and project. Specialisation was premised upon the expanding knowledge of timber available in the colony and its quality, type and use. By 1820, sawyers were cutting soft and hard-wood alike.⁵⁰ And, by the same time, specialisation had increased so that at the lumber yard and at the blacksmiths there were:

⁴⁶ Tench, *Account*, p. 230. White, *Journal*, p. 145.

⁴⁷ John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* [1790], Sydney, Angus and Robertson and published in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, 1962. p. 133.

⁴⁸ Collins cite in Helen Proudfoot, 'Fixing the Settlement Upon a Savage Shore: Planning and Building,' in Graeme Aplin (ed.) *Sydney Before Macquarie: A Difficult Infant*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1988), p. 59.

⁴⁹ Worgan *Journal*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Bill Robbins, 'The Lumber Yards: a case study in the management of convict labour 1788-1832,' *Labour History* 79, (2000): pp. 141—161.

carpenters, joiners, cabinet makers, wood turners, sawyers, wheelwrights, cart-makers, barrow makers, blacksmith, whitesmiths, showing smiths, smith for all sorts of country work, tool makers, nailers, bell founders, iron and brass founders, brass finishers, turners and platers, iron and brass wire drawers, tool sharpeners and steelers, tin men, painters and glaziers, farriers and horse shoers, saddlers and harness makers, bridle bits and stirrup makers, bellow makers, pump borers, tailors, shoemakers, gunsmiths, file makers and cutters, comb makers, block makers, coppers and millwrights, machine makers and anchor smiths.⁵¹

That the authorities were aware of the need for experience with the colonial timber also comes through in the records. It was remarked in 1852 that English workmen were ‘helpless’ with the timber of Australia until they were instructed by ‘bush hands’.⁵²

Knowledge of the properties of Sydney’s timber had developed to the extent that Patrick Riley, a convict carpenter, claimed to have a knowledge of all the woods procured here’. While he was working in Newcastle, the type of knowledge he had is illuminating. Rosewood was particularly fit for fine furniture, veneering and turning, the flooded Gum was ‘well adapted;’ for making agricultural implements and carts. He was even able to differentiate between types of flooded Gum: that which grew on rocky land was tougher and more useful than the short-grained timber that grew on lower land. From May to June he considered the best time to harvest wood. Pine was best for flooring, gum tree for roofing, beef wood for shingles and mangrove for wheel work and stokes. He considered that most timber was not aired enough due to the great demand from the Sydney headquarters and that all the timber at Newcastle was of a better quality than that at Sydney. Similarly, Major Druitt records that mangrove wood was used to fashion tools for the stone masons and mallets for cutters in Sydney.⁵³ William Noah, too, records that which timber was useful for windows, shutters, tables, besteads and the like.⁵⁴ Riley’s and Noah’s own words point

⁵¹ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 27.

⁵² Samuel Sydney, cited in Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 9.

⁵³ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Noah, *Voyage*, p. 74.

to the development of a nuanced environmental understanding as well as the market needs in different places around the colony.⁵⁵

There were many other outdoor convict gang activities, especially for the unskilled or those whose skills were not needed. They too meant demanded physical toil and a close acquaintance with the properties of the flora, fauna and topography of Sydney through such work as quarrying stone, clearing land or digging gravel.⁵⁶ The timber of the cedar was not so dense, but iron bark, stringy bark, and blue and red gum were notoriously hard. They rendered the nails, axes and shovels brought out from the Motherland, already of poor quality, blunt and clumsy.⁵⁷ Then the wood had to be cross cut, split it into billets using iron wedges and loaded on the carts.⁵⁸ Alternatively, if you were part of a gang that was transporting logs from the dock yard to the lumber yard, they had to be rolled along rough roads as it was not until 1794 that there were sufficient oxen in the colony to drawn timber-carriages (see figure 7).⁵⁹



Figure 7. Oxen and convicts drawing a cart at the Brickfields. Detail taken from *Brickfield Hill and Village on the High Road to Parramatta*, 1796, reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 80.

⁵⁵ Patrick Riley, *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, pp. 112-114.

⁵⁶ Nicholas, Stephen. 'The Organisation of Public Work,' in Stephen Nicholas (ed.) *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 154–155.

⁵⁷ Phillip to Nepean, *HRA I*, p. 156.

⁵⁸ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 5, p. 30. Collins, *Account*, p. 280.

The ship's long boats were often used to transport convict works to the lower stretches of the harbor where cabbage palm grew in abundance.⁶⁰ Here, it was cut and transported back to the main settlement for the earliest houses. There were also gangs of grass cutters sent to the north shore of the harbour to collect feed for the Government horses and cattle and who came and went from Sydney at irregular hours imposed by the tide.⁶¹

Being part of a convict gang that was building or improving roads and bridges often meant regular assembling and disassembling of temporary huts of eucalypt branch, bark and fern straw between places of work to sleep in at night.⁶² Those working on the roads or bridges, especially in the earliest years, used the resources from the surrounding environment. It often meant seeking for and conveying materials from the adjoining land such as iron stone, sandstone or gravel or cutting and carrying heavy timber and logs for the bridges and swampy place.⁶³ If a certain task required a certain type of timber – such as iron bark for logs to lay across 'morasses' or casuarina and ironbark trees for those splitting-shingles - it was convict eyes that sought for it, distinguishing it by its height, feel, colour and location from the surrounding vegetation. By 1819, Major Druitt could say that 'all the valuable wood Eight miles of Sydney' had been cut down for some years past.⁶⁴

At Brickfield hill, where the land was discovered to have a suitably high proportion of clay to sand, a gang of convicts was learning about the properties of Sydney's soil. A delicate proportion was necessary if the bricks were not to shrink too much while cooking or to become too heavy and brittle to work with.⁶⁵ Given the degree of specialist knowledge required, the master brick-

⁶⁰ Collins, *Account*, p. 25, p. 43.

⁶¹ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 28.

⁶² John Thomas Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales* [1823]. Adelaide, Library Board of South Australia, 1966, p. 26.

⁶³ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 5, p. 26.

⁶⁴ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 5. As the availability of these timbers in Sydney decreased and the specialisation of the work increased, timber for shingles – or finished shingles themselves – were supplied by dealers in the town. Barrie Dyster, *Servant and Master: Building and Running the Grand Houses of Sydney 1788-1850*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989), p. 130.

⁶⁵ *The Perth Gazette and the Western Australian Journal*, 31 August 1833.

maker had many convicts placed beneath him. Samuel Wheeler had twenty-one hands beneath him in 1790 who were occupied cutting wood and digging clay. His task was to burn thirty thousand bricks per month. In 1790, John King was able to make eleven thousand bricks per week with the assistance of sixteen men and two boys.⁶⁶ It took months to acquire the skill of hand-moulding tiles while firing the kiln took years of experience. Before the bricks could be put in the kiln, the soil was thrown into shallow pits where it was mulched by men's feet of the base of small trees to become a paste.⁶⁷ Any stones, grit or organic matter were removed to prevent fractures in the bricks later on. The clay was then pressed into sanded moulds before being placed on a pallet and dried.⁶⁸ Though the temperature was around a thousand degrees Celsius, it was possible for seasoned veterans to judge the heat of a kiln to within ten to twenty degrees and to smell a scent like 'fresh bread' when firing was nearly done.⁶⁹ In brickmaking, too, it was convict strength, touch and skill that was working with and transforming the raw materials in and around Sydney Cove.

While qualities of the soil were being learnt by the brick-makers and the quality of stone by masons and quarrymen, the geographical familiarity gained by those employed as shooters for the officers or the governor was also great.⁷⁰ Their job explicitly required mobility and facilitated wandering well past the fringes of settlement to search, hunt, and learn about habits of the game around Sydney. Hunting kangaroos required unusual hours as they hid during the day but emerged at dawn and at dusk to feed. Consequently, a system developed that where one would sleeping during the day and watch for Kangaroos in the early morning and at night. Convicts could and did go with the officers and marines on hunting expeditions. McEntire a convict and the governor's

⁶⁶ Tench, *Account*, p. 193.

⁶⁷ From around the 1830s, clay or pug mills – a hollow cone with knives arranged inside through which the loam was forced and purified – came into operation. The first reference to 'pug mills' in the newspapers in the early 1830s, and the Perth article referenced above speaks of the pug mill being a recent addition to the industry. *The Perth Gazette and the Western Australian Journal*, 31 August 1833. Ron Ringer, *The Brickmasters, 1788-2008*. (Singapore: Dry Press Publishing, 2008), p. 13.

⁶⁸ Barrie Dyster, *Servant and Master: Building and Running the Grand Houses of Sydney 1788-1850*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989), pp. 132–133. Ringer, *The Brickmasters*, p. 13 – 15.

⁶⁹ Warwick Gemmel, *And So We Graft From Six to Six: the Brickmakers of New South Wales*. (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1933), p. 7.

⁷⁰ Tench records that free-stone was in abundance. Tench, *Account*, p. 71.

game shooter, was the first European to shoot a Kangaroo and emu.⁷¹ We have records of quails, pigeons, doves, plovers, cockatoos, lorikeets and other parrots, crows and hawks all being shot by the colony's shooting parties.⁷² The movement of another gamekeeper, Patrick Burn has also inadvertently been recorded: He walked passed Cockle Bay 'up the country' to go looking for ducks.⁷³ When rations were short in the 1790s, the best of the convict marksmen were selected to range the woods in search of these lean quadrupeds.⁷⁴ The geographic familiarity engendered by such mobility and the knowledge of Sydney's flora and fauna must have been considerable.

The movement of the tides also brought the movement of boats and a working knowledge of Sydney's waterways. Fishing was a routine activity from the earliest days of settlement. It was such a commonplace activity that there are few detailed records, but nonetheless some glimpses have survived. Men 'hauled the seine' all around Pork Jackson and one record notes a circuit of 'many miles' and from twenty to thirty hauls between eight in the evening and four in the morning.⁷⁵ Environmental familiarity grew through such practises to the extent that there was a consensus that the fishing was better at Botany Bay, that there was more fish in the summer and that there could be great gluts – enough to burst nets - as well as scarcity.⁷⁶ Further evidence of this is recorded in an account of one net being so full that the fishermen had to wait for the tide to leave to retrieve their catch without breaking their net.⁷⁷ Stingrays and the like provided a source of nutrition, novelty as well as sportsmanship and one battle between a seine attendant and a particularly large stingray is recorded as if it were a cockfight or a horse race.⁷⁸ The much celebrated c.1813 painting of Williams Dawes, *Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour* (see figure 8.),

⁷¹ John McEntire's name is spelled variously in the officer's accounts as MacIntyre and McIntire. Worgan, *Journal*, p. 23. Tench, *Narrative*, p. 66.

⁷² Worgan, *Journal*, p. 21.

⁷³ Patrick Burn, cited in A. J. Gray, 'Patrick Burn, Licensed Game-Killer at Sydney Cove 1788-1791,' *The Australian Genealogist* 9 (1958), p. 4.

⁷⁴ Tench, *Account*, p. 165.

⁷⁵ Tench, *Account*, p. 273.

⁷⁶ Collins, *Account*, p. 66.

⁷⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 28 October 1803.

⁷⁸ Collins, *Narrative*, p. 34. *Sydney Gazette*, 30 September 1804.

illustrates the variety of the fish able to be caught. Captain Watkin Tench lists light horseman, bass, mullet, sole, leather jacket, short, sharks, rock cod, grey mullet, bream, and john dory as a common catch.⁷⁹

Examining the sheer number of convict men working on boats is illuminating. In 1819, fifty-two men travelled between Pennant Hills, Parramatta and Sydney gathering and transporting lime and timber. Thirty-eight men in eight boats were, on a daily basis, cutting grass for horses and draught cattle. They lived and worked by the tide rather than the tattoo.⁸⁰ The chief-engineer's boat had four men for his boat, the naval officer had six, the row-guard had eight, and the dock-yard and harbour had a further three boats. Then, there were the men in gangs building wharfs and unloading boats- and the men and woman who were banned from the wharfs as 'indolent spectators' and loiterers.⁸¹



Figure 8. William Dawes, *Fish Catch and Daves Point*, c. 1813. Reproduced in Ron Radford and Jane Hylton, *Australian Colonial Art 1800-1900*. (Adelaide: Art Gallery Board of South Australia 1995), p. 46.

⁷⁹ Tench, *Account*, p. 69, 272.

⁸⁰ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 28.

⁸¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 22 July and 12 August 1804.

Working on farms was an entirely different experience altogether. Soil, water, weather, nutrients, stumps, animals and breeding were primary concerns here. There were two government farms in the early years, Grose Farm and at Farm Cove. Hand-held hoes were used to turn up the heavy and clay-like soil. Grubbing out tree roots proved too difficult here and so crops were sown between the stumps.⁸² Until Major Druitt's arrival in 1817, the only task for the convicts here was to tend the animals and gardens for their own maintenance.⁸³ Major Druitt, the new civil engineer, thought Grose Farm should produce grain rather than be indebted to the grass-cutters on the north shore.⁸⁴ Upon his arrival a gang of thirty men were ordered to not only clear but remove stumps to allow for the use of ploughs. They covered the stumps with earth, thereby retarding the air-flow, before they lit the mound and all contents slowly reduced to ash.⁸⁵ Four months after Druitt's order in 1818, fifty-two acres of land had been cleared, ploughed by bullock and cropped with Indian Maize. He had convicts manure and till the soil to combat its clay and heat-baked nature, sow, cut, plough and crop again along beds of just over a meter. Each time it was a different crop, and with each variation convicts to whom agriculture was an unknown were learning.⁸⁶

The experience was similarly agricultural for assigned servants on gentleman's farms. On one particular extensive gentleman's farm the convicts worked the land over the years with wheat, maize, potatoes, barley, oats, peas, beans and minded the garden and orchard. This meant ploughing, sowing, reaping, carrying and stacking grain, threshing, pulling and husking corn and the like.⁸⁷ Others worked with horses, cows, oxen, sheep, goats, pigs, parrots, black swans and green-tinged ducks of the Bass Straits.⁸⁸ They procured fuel and water, attended livestock, tended the officer's gardens, cultivated the land allowed to officers and cleared timber.⁸⁹ By 1811, one

⁸² Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 31.

⁸³ Tunnicliffe, *Grose Farm*, Part III in *Hermes*, p. 261.

⁸⁴ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 30-31.

⁸⁵ Tunnicliffe, *Grose Farm*, Part III in *Hermes*, p. 262—63.

⁸⁶ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, Sunday 7 December 1806.

⁸⁸ Allan Shepherd, *The Story of Petersham 1793 – 1948*, Leichhardt: Council of the Municipality of Petersham, 1948, p. 12. Lt James Fincuan, cited in Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife*, p. 63.

⁸⁹ Hunter to Portland, *HR4 I*, p. 558.

account of the colony noted the ‘general course of cultivation adopted’ on farms, a course ‘justified by experience’. Month by month, he described what should be planted, reaped and harvested. He also recorded what months the ground was best prepared and the fruit trees examined.⁹⁰ This suggests that the experimentation of the early years had yielded some environmental knowledge and that some consensus for farming norms had been reached.

The behaviour of William Wilkinson, a convict who admitted his skill as a millwright only after he perceived that it could prove a lucrative, points to another aspect of work in the early years of the colonial Sydney; that it afforded more knowledge than that required by the convicts’ literal trade, the natural environment and its social opportunities. It also afforded intimate knowledge of administrative priorities as the chain of command was short and direct with little opportunity for anything but transparency. As builders and workers traipsing around the cove and hinterland, the convicts knew where physical infrastructure existed and at least in some instances, their internal mechanisms.

In the earliest months of the colony, with winter fast approaching, building a barrack for the soldiers became a priority. Despite the authorities’ best intentions, the planned eight houses were reduced to four. Though several groups were sent to dig saw-pits for the cutting of timber and around eighty were dedicated to its erection, and despite having the ship’s carpenters direct the undertaking, the inadequacy of the timber and the scarcity of skilled artificers saw the scale of the work cut back and substantially delayed.⁹¹

As late as 1793 there was only one man skilled enough to mould tiles. When there was a shortage of these in the construction of a barracks for the officers towards the close of this year, he must have felt the pressure because great damage was caused if substantial amounts of rain fell

⁹⁰ D. D. Mann, *The Present Picture of NSW* [1811], (Sydney: John Ferguson, 1979), pp 37—39.

⁹¹ Tench, *Sydney’s First Four Years*, p. 57.

on untiled buildings.⁹² This concern was mutual and Lieutenant Collin's anxiously narrated that the tile-moulder could only produce thirty-thousand bricks in six weeks, including the one-in-five destroyed in the process: the building itself may have been constructed in a month, but it took much longer to be covered.⁹³ Later, a shortage of bricks at the kiln saw Bennelong's long-abandoned hut removed to the south-head where a column needed repair.⁹⁴ As the need for more permanent dwellings grew, it was they gangs who constructed a new kiln at the Brickfields so that three times as many bricks could be burnt.⁹⁵

The nature of the early colony's needs were especially reflected in the uses to which Grose Farm was put and was experienced directly by the convicts employed there. A basic mix of agriculture and animal-husbandry soon developed. Sixty acres of timber was cleared, twenty acres were sown with Indian corn and sheep, cattle, horses, poultry, and pigs were all present. Mixed-farming was an inexpensive, low-risk way to experiment with yield and different produce in a still unfamiliar environment.⁹⁶ Indian maize became the crop of choice here and though it was a 'most ornamental crop' with 'long, broad green leaves and a crowning spire of blossoms...', it appealed little to the culinary sensibilities of either the convicts or officers. Despite this, Phillip was forced to turn to it in 1792 to ward off starvation as Indian corn seemed to thrive best on roughly turned ground.⁹⁷

The colonial record is full of such examples of convict awareness of administrative desires. They proclaimed the finding of 'large fresh water rivers, valuable ores, and quarries of limestone, chalk and marble' precisely because they knew such items were desperately required.⁹⁸ When five

⁹² Phillip to Grenville, *HRA I*, p. 194

⁹³ Collins, *Account*, p. 206.

⁹⁴ Collins, *Account*, p. 254. Bennelong, an Indigenous inhabitant of Sydney Cove with whom there was much official conversation and intimacy, was built a hut at the spot he chose, where the Opera house now stands or, as it was known prior to this, as Bennelong Point.

⁹⁵ Collins, *Account*, p. 57.

⁹⁶ Worgan, *Journal*, p. 44. Angus McGillivray, 'From Sodds to Seed-beds: Cultivating a Familiar Field at Port Jackson,' *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 5, (2004), p. 16.

⁹⁷ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 137.

months into settlement it was decided that moving between the two sides of the cove via water was too taxing, it was a convict gang that was busily employed cutting timber to form a bridge at the head of the Tank Stream.⁹⁹ During the drought of the summer 1789-90 in which the stream turned to a rivulet at best, it was the stonemason and his gang that came to the rescue. Picks and other tools were used to chisel ten-foot reservoirs for water.¹⁰⁰ Whether the need was to hut the regiment as soon as possible given the damp weather that gave rise to sickness, to construct store rooms of stone to move away from dangerous thatch and the depredations of rats, or perhaps to assess their return of wheat as the government foresaw a shortage, it was the convicts who learnt of the priorities and administrative needs of the governing individuals.

In his 1823 report on the colony, Commissioner Bigge, ever scathing, did note a species of improvement in the colony. He observed that many workmen who before coming to New South Wales were unskilled were now versed in the 'art of stone-cutting, brick-making and brick-laying' and that there had been 'an evident and striking improvement ... in almost every branch of mechanical industry'.¹⁰¹ The tangible realities of their working lives as assigned servants, those working the government farms, artificers or mechanics, created meaning. It was the convicts who were 'felling the ponderous gum-tree' and 'breaking the stubborn clod'.¹⁰² Governor Macquarie himself was well aware of this state of affairs and in his response to the above report, a response in which his civility was strained, he noted the natural consequence of the convict's working lives: a sense of knowledge and place that was shaping the character of the colony.

You already know that nine tenths of the population of this colony have been convicts, or the children of convicts. You have yet perhaps to learn that these are the people who... have tilled the ground, who have built shops and houses.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Cambell, 'Valley of the Tank Stream,' p. 76.

¹⁰⁰ Cambell, 'Valley of the Tank Stream,' p. 77.

¹⁰¹ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 33.

¹⁰² Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 134.

¹⁰³ Macquarie, cite in Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 33.

Through their work, then, the convicts became intimately acquainted with the natural environment as well as, in many instances, administrative decisions, desires and priorities. The land and landscape came to be known through the convict's working experiences.

Chapter 2:

Idling and Incentive: Convict Perceptions of Work and Place

One of Australia's first historians, an editor and amateur historian by the name of Charles White, noted that there existed a 'passive conspiracy to work' amongst the mechanics, that a man was considered 'disgraceful' if he did any more than he was 'absolutely compelled', and that it formed a 'point of honour to do as little as possible at all times'.¹² It was this, he argued, that gave way to the system of hawking in which, by a 'regular system of signs and manoeuvres...the approach of any officer, or ...person before whom it was considered desirable that some show of activity should be maintained, was rapidly communicated from one part of a building or public work to another.'³ A perception of their work had been created amongst these mechanics, the character and just rewards of those governing had been decided upon: a culture of work had been created.

Since Charles White's time, much has been written on the dynamics of the labour market in early colonial Sydney. William Robbins, in particular, has used modern work management theory to analyse the system in place in the early years, while Alan Atkinson and John Hirst pointed to the specific dynamics and outcomes in a more generalised way.⁴ More neglected is the role the environment played in the relationship between exertion and incentive and the convict's knowledge and perception of various types of work and activity informed by different, as well as shared,

¹ For a biography of Charles White, see Theo Barker, 'White, Charles (1845–1922)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/white-charles-4834/text8067>, accessed 4 September 2013.

² Charles White, *Early Australian History: Convict Life in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. Parts 1 & 2. The Story of the Ten Governors and the Story of the Convicts* [1889]. Available online at Project Gutenberg <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1204081h.html>> accessed 29 July 2013.

³ White, citing Bennet in *Early Australian History*.

⁴ See Robbins, W. R. 'The Lumber Yards: a case study in the management of convict labour 1788-1832,' *Labour History* 79, (2000): pp. 141—161, 'Spatial Escape and the Hyde Park Convict Barracks,' *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 7, (2005): 81—96, 'Governor Macquarie's Job Descriptions and the Bureaucratic Control of the Convict Labour Process,' *Labour History*, no. 9 (2009): pp. 11—28.

experiences of the environment. This chapter argues that the convicts not only developed intimate spatial and environmental knowledge through their practises of work but that, just as material and mental worlds are essentially inseparable, the convict's developed nuanced perceptions of different work activities.⁵ By looking at the convict's 'immediate practical concerns' - a 'culture-related interpretation... of participant's versions of their world' - the convict perception of work becomes less hazy.⁶ The convict's had an in-depth knowledge of the labour forces, raw materials and environmental realities of their working world.⁷

William Robbins has made convincing argument that the entire system of convict work in early colonial Sydney was more sophisticated and offered a higher degree of worker choice than workplace protocol in the emerging British industry.⁸ Though some convicts experienced the unlawful application of their master's wrath, overall the convicts were not, as Hirst has argued at length, slaves to be whipped at will.⁹ Gang and artisan work may have been relatively well-supervised, but the same cannot be said for those privately employed on government or officer's farms.¹⁰ The economy 'developed dynamically' and 'labour practises were adjusted to the productive process rather than controlling or inhibiting it'.¹¹ Early on, the authorities had to come to terms with the reality of the situation in early Sydney: they were not privy to the most basic labour control – the power to permanently dismiss.¹² Consequently, the system of tasking the convicts developed within the first two months as keeping the convict's to set times for work proved overly laborious.¹³ Though

⁵ Karskens, 'Engaging Artefacts: Archaeology, Museums and the Origins of Sydney,' *Humanities Research: Museums of the Future, the Future of Museums* IX, no. 1 (2002), p. 30.

⁶ Greg Denning, cited in Rhys Isaac, 'On Explanation, Text, and Terrifying Power in Ethnographic History', p. 23.

⁷ Graeme Aplin, 'People in an alien landscape: Early Sydney's Environmental Context', in Graeme Aplin (ed.) *Sydney Before Macquarie: A Difficult Infant*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1988), p. 25.

⁸ 'Management and Resistance in the Convict Work Gangs, 1788- 1830', *The Journal of Industrial Relations* 45, no. 3 (2003), p. 360.

⁹ Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies*.

¹⁰ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, pp. 56—57.

¹¹ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 57

¹²

¹³ Collins, *Account*, p. 17.

Governor Hunter spent four years trying to reinstate a full day's work, he failed: the convicts infinitely preferred to be tasked.¹⁴ Given that task-work was the province of skilled workers within the prevailing socio-economic system and did not extend to agricultural workers, this pointed to a new independence, hitherto unknown, for many of the convicts.¹⁵ Yet there were many other variables shaping the colonial experience to one that was, to some degree, empowering for the convicts. The management system of overseers was flexible, there were fluctuations in the official hours of work, and the amount tasked changed when rations were cut.¹⁶ Furthermore, many convicts had large amounts of 'own time' and most boarded independently, especially before the Hyde Park Barracks was built in 1817. The convict's concerns – effort versus reward – could be influenced: it was not an unchanging, unchangeable system¹⁷.

The relative intensity of different jobs was well known to the convicts. There were officially recognized, and convict experienced, gradations of labour. The work done by the wood cutters was the heaviest, closely followed by the carting stone in barrows to Macquarie fort, the work that was done by brick makers, and collecting and washing shells to burn lime.¹⁸ The more strenuous types of labour were considered effectual punishment as, understandably, the convicts craved the lightest possible labour where the personal reward was little. In 1819, Major Druitt was in the practice of sending 'mutinous or insolent' or 'idle and lazy' men to the gangs, though court records show that such punishment was metered out from the earliest years of the colony.¹⁹ Other gradations were based

¹⁴ For a biography of Hunter, see J. J. Auchmuty, 'Hunter, John (1737–1821)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hunter-john-2213/text2873>, accessed 27 August 2013.

¹⁵ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 29. On 23 July 1809, the following appeared in the *Sydney Gazette*. 'In consequence of the present reduced Ration of Grain and the shortness of the days, the Servants employed in Public Labour will leave off Work at One o'Clock, until further Orders.'

¹⁷ See Alan Atkinson regarding types of convict resistance as recorded in the county bench books. He identified four types of convict protest; attack, appeal to authority, withdrawal of labour, compensatory retribution. 'Four Patterns of Convict Protest', *Labour History* no. 27 (1979), pp. 28–51.

¹⁸ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Druitt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports* p. 28–29. See *Sydney Gazette*, February 1805, 9 March 1806, 2 January 1813.

on skill and physical strength. Skilled men were required for ‘quarrying, blasting and raising stone’, and had to possess strong constitutions as they worked in the summer’s heat. Labouring was generally for the ‘strong and healthy’ while weaker men were put to less intensive work like weeding the government grounds. Those who were disabled were given work as stockmen or watchmen.²⁰

Horses and oxen were rare in the early years of the colony, so it was men who hauled the heavily laden carts. Each cart could hold seven hundred tiles or three hundred and fifty bricks, the weight of which was around three quarters of a tonne. It was standard practise for the men and carts to make nine trips per day, five of bricks and four of tiles.²¹ Similarly tough was the experience of convict workers who built a barracks for the officers in 1793. Two hundred and twenty-eight men were required to transport bricks for a kilometre to the barrack-ground. Practically, this meant three brick-carts, either carrying seven hundred tiles or three hundred and sixty bricks, pulled by teams of twelve men. In addition, four timber-carriages – each drawn by twenty-four men – were required. The level of exertion was considerable and was not over-looked by the convicts. They were developing detailed, first-hand knowledge of the spectrum of work and the labour needs in the colony.

Equally distasteful – with an immediate environmental contact - was the work of lime gathering and burning. Aboriginal middens along the salt-water coastal areas were the first source of oyster shells.²² Convict women, in particular, were given this job. The shells needed to be washed and crushed before being burnt in pits. Here, it was mixed with water and sand – or hair – and left for several days to become slaked lime.²³

²⁰ Drutt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports* p. 28.

²¹ Gemmel, *And So We Graft From Six to Six*, p. 2.

²² Phillip, *The Voyage of Arthur Phillip to Botany Bay*, p. 70.

²³ Gemmel, *And So We Graft From Six to Six*, p. 3.

When Major Druitt required his sawyers to start cutting a proportion of hard wood every week, wood that was sturdy and necessary for roofs, floors and building joints, he remarked that these men caused the most trouble and entertained the strongest habits of ‘insolence and mutiny’: they did not approve of the change in exertion expected of them.²⁴ While Druitt does not place ‘quarrying’ on his tri-part list of ‘severe employments’, cutting, blasting and raising stone sixteen feet of stone a day, or thirty feet of rough work for a stone mason, was not comparable to work, for example, on the government farms.²⁵

Not only was the amount of exertion for the above-mentioned tasks high, but there was little incentive offered. Phillip’s lament was that he could achieve more with ten good farmers than a thousand convicts.²⁶ Two decades into settlement it was still thought that, on the whole, a convict laboured at least one third less than ‘an able bodied man working for himself’ and ‘scarcely ever had there been a thorough day’s labour obtained from them’.²⁷ The practise of hawking was rife in the gangs and in the lumber yards. And yet, as Collin remarked with exasperation, ‘for the individual who would pay them for their services in spirits, they would labour while they had strength to lift the hoe or the axe; but when Government required the production of that strength, it was not forthcoming’.²⁸ As John Hirst notes, the work done in their ‘own time’ for private buyers was better than that done for the government; the quality of bricks and nails were better, the grass cutters saved the best of it for themselves and gave the lesser quality to the government. Work on the public farms was poor, the

²⁴ When further instruction arrived that stated that only two convicts could be supplied for a two year period at the expense of the Commissariat, acting on these orders was deferred or they were simply ignore. *Annandale* still had twelve assigned convicts three years after the additional instructions arrived.²⁴ Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife*, pp. 34—35.

²⁵ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 29.

²⁶ Phillip cited in Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 28.

²⁷ John Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore: Australia’s First Colony, being Convict Society and its enemies: a history of early New South Wales (1983) and The strange birth of Colonial democracy: New South Wales 1848-1884 (1988)*, Melbourne, Black Inc, 2008, p.

²⁸ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 25.

²⁸ Collins, *Account*, p. 408.

land was just ‘scratched over’ by hoes.²⁹ This attitude was especially palpable amongst the sawyers in the public lumber yard. If it rained at any time in the morning, this was used as a reason by which their days’ work could be completed – yet the weather was not so poor that they were unable to perform private work for payment.³⁰

The mechanics were a special case. Skilled mechanics and quarrymen were much needed during Macquarie’s governance from 1810 to 1821 and were kept beyond their term of service due to a labour need. To add insult to injury, the convict mechanics were well aware that their skill – if self-employed – was a lucrative one. They could earn up to ten pounds per week in town or, more clandestinely, they could be ‘assigned’ to someone and then, for a small fee each week, be left to practise their trade and be at large.³¹ Ensuring that newly arrived convict-ships did not communicate with those already in the colony became a matter of great importance as many would conceal their skill or profess skills they did not have in the hope to stay in Sydney.³² Given the knowledge that their skill was lucrative, that many skilled convicts were kept on well beyond their term (either through governmental need or through their inability to prove that their time of service was up), a sense of injustice was common amongst mechanics. It was this pressure that contributed to the melting-pot of ‘commanding, competing and subordinate masculinities in an especially concentrated form’ in early Sydney.³³ And it was such factors that led to the creation of that culture, referenced in the introductory paragraph, amongst the mechanics: the ‘passive conspiracy to work’, the practice of hawking, and that

²⁹ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 29.

³⁰ Hunter to Portland, *HRA II*, p. 214.

³¹ Druitt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 9. Robbins, ‘Management and Resistance in Convict Work Gangs’, p. 367. Again, see Alan Atkinson for an exploration of this theme amongst assigned servants in rural areas. ‘Four Patterns of Convict Protest’, *Labour History* no. 27 (1979), pp. 28—51.

³² Druitt, *Evidence to the Bigge Report*, p. 7.

³³ Raymond Evans, and Bill Thorpe. ‘Commanding men: Masculinities and the convict system,’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 55 (1998), p. 17.

it formed a 'point of honour to do as little as possible at all times'.³⁴ The chief engineer gave the following opinion on the convict's perspective:

The distribution of the convicts in the first instance, the resumption of their services at subsequent periods, the extension of them beyond the term assigned to others, have contributed to create an universal impression upon the minds of the convicts that skilfulness in work, rather than immoral conduct, was the cause of their first enthrallment, and the measure of its continuance. This feeling produces discouragement, carelessness, and not infrequently malicious and wanton destruction of the property of government.³⁵

While Collins lamented that the convict labour-force 'never felt themselves interested in the effect of their work' this is not entirely true.³⁶ The practice of convict's working in their 'own time' had prevailed from the earliest times, though it varied amongst the different types of workers. Wages had been set for the benefit of their employers, and the lists and fees show not the only the type of work, but also their gradation in terms of difficulty: those that required more exertion also required more remuneration. Such work included felling forest timber, breaking up new ground, stripping corn, chipping in wheat, reaping, threshing, planting corn, milling pulling and husking, pole splitting; shingle splitting. Some work was seasonal, leading to a higher demand for labour, and, as the convicts were well aware, market leverage. Ever opportunistic, the convicts demanded higher wages than was government set and legal during November and December when the harvest had to be reaped, threshed and stacked. So prevalent was the habit of demanding higher wages, or withholding labour if it was not met, that Governor Bligh issued a detailed edict with stringent consequences for non-compliance in 1806. Wages and conditions were set for farm work and anyone in breach of these were to be severely punished.³⁷

³⁴ Charles White citing Bennet in *Early Australian History, Convict Life in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*.

³⁵ Charles White citing a parliamentary paper in *Early Australian History, Convict Life in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*.

³⁶ Collins, *Account*, p. 408.

³⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 15 January 1804.

Certain trades meant certain extra incentives and opportunities. William Bryant was a fisherman and his skill was so necessary that he was given the task of managing the government fishing boats. Despite ‘encouragements’ – a private hut for him and his family, the go-ahead to keep some for himself and certain other liberalities – he nonetheless kept quiet about a large proportion of his catch and smuggled them away to private buyers.³⁸ If you were a part of the grass-cutting gang, special concessions were also made. Once the amount tasked had been reached, any surplus was allowed to be kept. This became a profitable enterprise as the grass-cutters kept the best to themselves. Moreover, if they fulfilled the amount tasked for Friday and Saturday by the Friday, they were allowed to use the boats as they pleased the following day.³⁹

Convict overseers also received special treatment. Some could make the ‘idle and worthless shrink’, could ‘proportion their labour to their ability’ and had ‘a perfect idea of the labour to be required from... the without being hated. Other overseers never contributed a single bushel of grain into the public granary and most were found wanting in ‘industry or probity’.⁴⁰ For the most part, Phillip suspected that the overseers were linked by present or past crime to those in their charge and that, consequently, they lacked the moral authority to enforce industry as they did not want to risk their own crimes coming to light.⁴¹ Some overseers allowed the practise of ‘hawking’ to continue, while others never turned their eyes from their men and held irregular musters at night to limit nocturnal wanderings.⁴² If they were ‘attentive and well-behaved, they were given one man on the store and one man off. Moreover, they were allowed to carry on a trade in the town and return there each night to their wives. Overseers were chosen on the basis of skill as well as diligence and ‘sobriety’

³⁸ Collins, *Account*, p. 44.

³⁹ Robbins, ‘Management and Resistance in Convict Work Gangs’, p. 370-371.

⁴⁰ Phillip to Grenville, 17 July 1790. *HRA I*, p. 195. A. J. Gray, ‘Dodd, Henry Edward (?–1791)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dodd-henry-edward-1984/text2411>, accessed 8 April 2013.

⁴¹ Phillip to Grenville, 17 July 1790. *HRA I*, p. 195

⁴² Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 28.

and many aspired to the position.⁴³ During Macquarie's era, assistant convict-overseers received no pay or remuneration of any kind yet found incentive through thinking that if they were well-behaved they would be promoted to permanent overseer.⁴⁴ George Johnston, knowing the importance of a diligent overseer for his Annandale estate, employed a strict overseer, one 'accustomed to Stock, and well versed in agriculture', who demanded that the convicts stuck to their work or risk having to start it again. This convict was liberally rewarded.⁴⁵

Similarly, the perception of financial reward led one convict blacksmith to produce one iron hand-mill each week after his government duties were over. These mills were dispersed throughout the settlements and he was handsomely paid 2 guineas apiece.⁴⁶ William Wilkinson, who arrived in Sydney in 1790, kept his skill as a millwright dormant for a full year until, perceiving the recurrent need for a means to grind grain and dissatisfied by the production of the only public mill in the colony, he approached Lieutenant-Governor Grose proposing to construct one.⁴⁷ Wilkinson, perceiving a generous reward no doubt, had other convicts grind stones and cut, transport and prepare timber free of charge.⁴⁸

The convict's perception of work – the level of exertion versus the level of return – was also subject to the administrative priorities of the governing authorities. Sometimes the priority was productivity – though this was always a concern at the lumber yards – and at other times reformation and punishment.⁴⁹ While in Phillip's time most convicts were employed by government, the granting

⁴³ A. J. Gray, 'Dodd, Henry Edward (?–1791)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dodd-henry-edward-1984/text2411>, accessed 8 April 2013.

⁴⁴ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife*, pp. 35–37. *Sydney Gazette*, Saturday 23 November 1811

⁴⁶ Collins, *Account*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ Norman Selfe, 'Some Notes on the Sydney Windmills', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 1, (1902): pp. 97–98.

⁴⁸ Collins, *Account*, pp. 197–198.

⁴⁹ John Hirst discusses this changing relationship in. See also Robbins, 'Management and Resistance in Convict Work Gangs', p. 158.

of land to officers from 1792 and Phillip's departure saw private estates and trade prosper. When Governor Hunter arrived in 1795, he was bowled over by the progress made on the land - 960 acres had been cleared in one year alone.⁵⁰ Phillip had been gone a mere three years yet under the liberal-minded governance of Grose (1792-94) and then Patterson (1794-95) land was granted to colonial officials. A capitalist system began to emerge through the establishment of the relations of commodity-exchange and 'comforts' were issued with a generous hand.⁵¹ Consequently, the number of convicts in public employment declined while the number in the private sector rose dramatically.⁵² For the convicts, this greatly impacted the cost-benefit analysis of their exertion. Officers were assigned thirteen convicts each, ten for agricultural purposes and three for domestic tasks. For those on task work there was plenty of time for leisurely pursuits after jobs were complete – changed regulations noted that convicts were assigned for six months longer than required for the settlers and officers to establish themselves.⁵³

Many of the officers cut deals with the convicts to achieve their ends. Workers on the Annandale estate were placed on a mix of set-time and task work while those who cleared the ground were also paid in spirits, 'slops and flour' and vegetables.⁵⁴ The Chaplain Marsden lamented that both wages and rum were needed as without them, 'the spirited indolent convict cannot be excited to exertions'.⁵⁵ At one stage the officers wanted work done to such a deadline that they promised that they could have days off equal to that which they had spent working. Grose was so concerned when the convicts claimed sixteen days reward that he offered them half a pint of spirits per day if they still

⁵⁰ Portland to the Governor, *HRA I*, p. 470.

⁵¹ Fletcher, *Landed Enterprise and Penal Society*, p. 64. Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 126.

⁵² Robbins, 'Management and Resistance in Convict Work Gangs', p. 367.

⁵³ Hunter to Portland, *HRA I*, p. 383.

⁵⁴ Allan Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife: the Johnstons of Annandale*. (Balmain: Barbara Beckett Publishing and Annandale Urban Research Association, 2008), pp. 36—37.

⁵⁵ Marsden, cited in A. G. L. Shaw, *Convict and the Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and other parts of the British Empire*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1977), p. 72.

completed their government tasks.⁵⁶ The result of such working conditions was such that by 1809, Colonel Paterson could say:

...the exertions of the whole colony are not, as formerly, solely directed to agriculture... We have now adventurers in shopping, traders, shopkeepers and mechanics of every description.⁵⁷

That the convicts approved of this arrangement can be gauged by their response to imposed change. When Governor Hunter recalled numbers of convicts from private settlers for public works and farming, they immediately became ‘turbulent’ and ‘refractory’ and often absconded, deserted or dilly-dallied. The convict voice is almost audible in Hunter’s letter of 1797 to Portland, the Secretary of State, in so far as he relates, ‘There is reason to believe that their present conduct is much instigated by those who feel their concerns affected both such regulations’.⁵⁸ In short, it was an enormous disruption to the development of the convicts’ liberty.

As John Hirst argued in *Convict Society and Its Enemies*, New South Wales did not become a free society, its ‘freedoms were established from the earliest times’.⁵⁹ The convicts, as the main labour-force in the early colony, developed differentiated working landscapes and geographic familiarity. Entwined in their geographies was the dynamic relationship between incentive and reward and what this was posited on; environment, location, the type of work and workers, the energy required and personal gain. It was this that led Governor Macquarie to remark that it was ‘unjust and injudicious’ to let conditions in the public service be poorer than those in private.⁶⁰ The convicts of early colonial

⁵⁶ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Lieutenant Paterson cited in Shaw, *Convict and the Colonies*, p. 74.

⁵⁸ Hunter to Portland, *HRA II*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Governor Macquarie, cited in Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore*, p. 39.

Sydney were actively learning about, influencing and seeking to alter the dynamic between exertion and reward in their favour.

Chapter 3:

Own Time, Own Place: Convict Leisure, Life and Landscapes

Landscapes are far more than the built or environmental realities of a particular place in time. They are perceptions of these realities informed by the background, personality and immediate practical concerns of those involved.¹ While routines of work were a key factor in the convicts' development of geographic familiarity and the 'internalised consciousness' of the topographical, environmental, and administrative terrain, everyday convict life and leisure also contributed to the convict's perception of specific landscapes and spaces of early colonial Sydney. Whether driven by an entrepreneur's spirit, the motivation of everyday subsistence, the pursuit of sexual and romantic relationships or culture and leisure, the convicts were exercising agency and mobility. In all this activity, the environment was a core historical fact - more so than is generally recognised - and was, in a very material way, both the scene of convict life and a major catalyst for their mobility. These routines of everyday life forged relentless and important networks of knowledge and the construction of place. There was a differentiated environmental world and perception to the officers and marines, a landscape stimulated by alternate cultures, desires and interests.

This chapter traces the 'sinuous 'desire lines' made by the convicts' 'walking feet' and oar-rowing arms.² It is about the innumerable counts of trespass, unsolicited thoroughfare, pilfering, and sense of entitlement that existed throughout the settlement at Sydney. The convicts wandered willy-nilly for food, to source and work raw materials in the 'own time'; fish, 'greens', berries, sweet-tea, cabbage palm, fuel and Aboriginal 'trinkets'. They held in disregard the damage and wanton destruction their digging and washing caused as well as the damage done by the unchecked wanderings

¹ Graeme Aplin, 'People in an Alien Landscape', p. 25.

² Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 3.

of their pigs, goats and sheep. This chapter is also about public festivity and leisure and how these activities shaped the creation of convict Sydney.

The social desires and relations of the convicts were overwhelmingly pre-industrial. Their concerns and sense of obligation were bound less by notions of nation, Empire or duty, and more by ties of immediate kinship, community and self-interest.³ The convict's presumed access to unclaimed land as if it was their right. Despite their overwhelming consumptive habits and commercial activity – more tea and coffee was consumed per capita in Australia than in Britain - these co-existed and were entwined with older communal habits. Modern attitudes of respectability and self-discipline, alive in the upper-classes of the British already and later to incorporate nearly all, simply did not exist and the convict's outlook on sex, marriage and children were markedly different to their social superiors - at least theoretically.⁴ Richard Waterhouse, going back to the convict's homegrown roots, pointed to an informal, spontaneous, rowdy culture and social life.⁵ Festivities were characterized by overindulgence in food and drink, noise, sexual promiscuity and violence.⁶ As explored in the previous chapter, when the government tried to impose clock-time on work, they ceded to task work – the province of artisans and the more independent workers. The result was – and more so during times of short rations – that the convicts had a lot of time to themselves, time that allowed for wandering. While worldviews are fundamental and structure perceptions of reality – what historian David Carr calls the 'unreal' reality which is, for that person, the real world' – yet agents do not exist out of 'the reality of the spatial surroundings' – they are not solely 'wrapped in the content of their own heads'.⁷ This chapter asks how the Tank stream, the early roads and thoroughfares, the government grounds, brickfields and district of Bullanaming were used and perceived by convicts – the spatial and environmental

³ Karskens, *The Rocks*, p. 55.

⁴ Karskens, 'Shifting the Shape of Australia's History', pp. 15–20.

⁵ See Waterhouse, chapter 1, 'Deference and Defiance, 1788-1831', in *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, pp. 3–32.

⁶ Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, p. 6.

⁷ David Carr, 'Place and Time', p. 156.

dimension of their pre-industrial social relations and individual designs. It explores the convict worldview and how they imparted and created meaning to their physical surroundings through the activities of their everyday life and ‘own time’.

Bruce Baskerville was the first to suggest that the fringes of the early colonial Sydney were used as areas ‘from which building materials, foodstuffs and living spaces were extracted’.⁸ He had in mind places like Petersham Hill, that area that began about a mile from the brickfields and ran several kilometres on either side of the road to Parramatta and generally known as the Kangaroo Grounds or Bullanaming. In terms of the quantity and frequency of reported trespass, the Kangaroo Grounds certainly was a popular area. Situated just outside of the main town, it was the perfect place to cut timber, remove bark or otherwise damage it, to graze stock and let them wander, while the size of the grounds and the thinner population meant less chances of being caught in the act. Gates were frequently left open, and paling was torn down for firewood or convenient thoroughfare.⁹ Thomas Smyth, much to his consternation, even found steel traps upon his farm while Thomas Moore was frequently angered by ‘divers outrages’ upon grounds.¹⁰

While Bruce Baskerville was right to suggest that the Kangaroo Grounds was a ready place to target for use as a commons, these were not the only areas subjected to the convict’s eager imaginings and plans. Nicholas Devine, the convict superintendent, had stones removed and quarried from his leasehold at Farm Cove.¹¹ One property on the north harbor had railings and palings of its stock yard burnt and destroyed while valuable honey suckle and she-oaks on a farm at Vaucluse had their ‘crooked parts’ removed, presumably for boat building, forcing the owner to declare that no more grass was to be cut on their land – a practise that had occurred here from the earliest days of the

⁸ Baskerville, Bruce. ‘Commons of Colonial New South Wales’, RAHS Knowing Places, Understandings Spaces, *Royal Australian Historical Society* et. al. 1994.

⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 20 November 1803, 30 October 1803, 28 August 1803, 17 July 1803.

¹⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 January 1804. *Sydney Gazette*, 4 March 1804.

¹¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 30 October 1803.

colony.¹² Individuals wandered on to the land of Ann Chapman, the prominent publican and dealer, and used her sawpits, while Isaac Nichols, superintendent of public works and the colony's first postmaster, was subjected to a 'continual stream' of people crossing his yard to use his wharf.¹³ Phillip was forced to issue a similar proclamation when boats kept landing on his own private jetty on the west side of the cove.¹⁴ The Brickfields too were subject to the 'commoners' use and proved a popular spot for cutting timber.¹⁵

While the dispersed nature of such use suggests an indiscriminate eye – and this is partly true – certain areas were looked upon by the convicts in certain ways. Australia had imported the English notion of commons. The Lord of the Manor – in this case the Governor as the King's representative – was bound to leave 'waste ground' for such as were entitled to it and both Lord and Commoner could go to court for damages done to their interests and concerns.¹⁶ The problem was, that what began as 'waste lands' situated just outside the port centre at Sydney Cove did not remain unoccupied and unclaimed – to European eyes – for long. As the camp became a colony, conflict and tension unceasingly erupted between the convict's local customs and land owners. Cockle Bay, the Brickfields and the land later known as Government Domain and Hyde Park were 'open, unbuilt, still-wild' areas in the early decades of the colony.¹⁷ Yet such areas that were available to source timber, loam or to graze, became privately owned, enclosed, jealously guarded or subject to changed government prerogatives. The problem was that such ownership did not alter the convict's perception of the land as a place to extract goods from and there were constant assertions of ownership and remonstrations of breaches against this.

¹² *Sydney Gazette*, 29 January 1804.

¹³ Karskens, *The Rocks*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, 16 August 1817.

¹⁵ *Sydney Gazette* 16 February 1811.

¹⁶ Bruce Baskerville, 'Commons of Colonial New South Wales', in *Knowing Places Understanding Spaces, proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Royal Australian Historical Society with Affiliated Societies 8-9 October, 1994* (Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society, 1994), p. 59. *Sydney Gazette*, 20 January 1805.

¹⁷ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 424.

If one looks at the many illustrations of the settlement around Sydney Cove and rather than noting urban ‘progress’ looks for environmental realities – vegetation, topography, water - the uses that could be made of the land by ‘commoners’ comes into focus.¹⁸ As Karskens has noted, tracing Sydney’s convict geographies is ‘like seeing the region through another set of lenses entirely from those of authority and order’.¹⁹ The images below (figure 9 and 10) painted by an unknown convict artist, point to the green of grass and trees and the blue of the rippling waters: Sydney was close to the natural environment. The Woolloomooloo / Vaucluse area appears as a site of rollicking grasslands with belts of trees and scrub.



Figure 9. A painting by convict artist. The circular track at Hyde Park is visible in the mid-ground. Green spaces abounded. Bound in album in James Wallis, *An Historical Account of The Colony of New South Wales and its Dependent Settlements; in Illustration of Twelve Views, Engraved By W. Preston, a Convict, from Drawings Taken on the Spot* [London, 1821]. State Library of New South Wales online collection .<<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/album/albumView.aspx?acmsID=954703&itemID=957996>> accessed 6 June 2013.

¹⁸ For a thorough exploration of the discourse around the term ‘improvement’ with regards to Australian colonization, see Tom Griffiths, chapter 3, ‘Improving’, in *Forests of Ash and Environmental History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 32—49.

¹⁹ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 305.



Figure 10. A painting by a convict artist of Woolloomooloo Bay. Bound in album in James Wallis, *An Historical Account of The Colony of New South Wales and its Dependent Settlements; in Illustration of Twelve Views, Engraved By W. Preston, a Convict, from Drawings Taken on the Spot* [London, 1821]. State Library of New South Wales online collection
 <<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/album/ItemViewer.aspx?itemid=957996&suppress=N&imgindex=75>>
 accessed 6 June 2013.

Another painting, c. 1817, from the north side of the harbour, allows an interesting comparison of various places around Sydney Cove (figure 11). While the centre shows development and infrastructure, the east side and the west of the painting in which the government house and behind this, farm cove and Woolloomooloo bay are largely grassy, open areas. Mostly unenclosed, the result was that in line with English notions of ‘waste lands’, horses, oxen, sheep, donkeys and goats were accustomed to graze here (figure 12). The area also proved a popular spot for sourcing timber and pasture – with or without permission. John Palmer lamented again and again that all his cautions against trespass and depredations had been ineffectual and that trees he intended to remain for

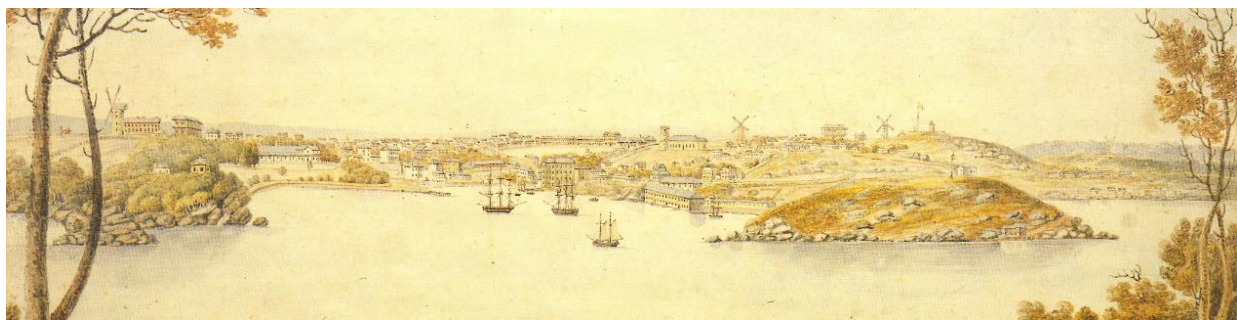


Figure 11. Detail taken from *North view of Sydney Taken from the Shore*, c. 1818, by Joseph Lycett. Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 229.

ornament were cut down, stock was stilled grazed on his land, his poultry was still stolen, and that his grass continued to be cut. To add insult to injury, he suspected much plunder occurred by those on his ground under pretence of thoroughfare.²⁰



Figure 12. Goats can clearly be seen grazing at Millers Point. Detail taken from *Miller's Point from Flagstaff Hill* by John Skin Prout, 1842-1844. 'The Powerhouse Museum' online database.

<<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=326890#ixzz2fEuq5AMA>> accessed 22 August 2013

It was not until 1812 that the Government Domain grounds were enclosed from Sydney Cove to Woolloomooloo with stone walls and a paling fence. And yet, despite numerous proclamations against the trespass of animals and the removal of trees and shrubbery, a further formal warning had to be issued.²¹ Four years later, and despite numerous incriminations and ordinances to stop, walls were still broken down, shrubbery was still cut and burnt, palings and plantations were destroyed, stone was quarried and loam removed. If fences were meant to demarcate spaces and 'stabilize social relations' through dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, it was not working as smoothly as planned.²² It was a place popular enough for illicit activity to warrant the appointment of a constable in 1817.²³

²⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 1 September 1810, 15 February 1807,

²¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 24 October 1812.

²² John Pickard, 'Fences: Ordinary Objects Integrating the History of Ordinary Landscapes', *Knowing Places Understanding Spaces*, p. 9.

²³ *Sydney Gazette*, 20 September 1817, *Sydney Gazette*, 19 September 1818.

Part of the problem regarding ‘common’ areas was the ambivalence of its definition. With the enclosure laws changing in Britain, the commons system was becoming even more unstable.²⁴ Such instability was transferred into the colony and disputes over rights to wander and graze were frequent enough in the early years to warrant a general proclamation to help stem the flow of ‘vexatious complaints and litigations’. The commons was defined, in the case of New South Wales, as ‘commons of pasture’, that is, ‘a right of feeding one's beasts on another's land... in those waste grounds usually called Commons’, the property of the King’s representative. The ‘commonable beasts’ were those of ‘the plough, or such as manure the ground’ and this was considered a universal right. Yet the term *could* sometimes extend to animals such as hogs, goats, sheep as well as the right to cut vegetation. These rights, however, had to be claimed by ‘immemorial usage and prescription’ for animals and by ‘custom’ for vegetation.²⁵ The convict’s persistent use of the Government Domain and other areas after they had been enclosed, points to a perception of long-established tradition, ignorance, or an utter disregard for changing laws and customs.

It was not just the open spaces of Cockle Bay, Government Domain, the Brickfields or the Kangaroo Grounds that were sites of the convict’s impetuous wanderings or sense of entitlement. The streets in early Sydney seemed to have been viewed and used in the same manner by all classes, but perhaps by the convicts especially: they were less likely to own their own areas of land in which to keep their animals. Sheep, goats, pigs, cattle and horses, when there were more of them in the colony, were often at large in the streets. Wandering where they willed, swine and stock uprooted the earth at the Burial Grounds, near today’s Town Hall, much to official consternation.²⁶ In another instance, a horse that had broken loose was detained as a ‘disorderly character’ while several goats

²⁴ See Atkinson for a discussion of changing notions of property rights and commons areas in Britain at the time. *The Europeans in Australia*, pp. 114—117.

²⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 27 January 1805.

²⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 5 February, 1804.

belonging at the Brickfields wound up at the Burial Grounds where they were molested by large pigs already stationed there.²⁷ Stumps were left on the roads and caused much nuisance until the 1810s while Pitt's Row was so full of bumps and hollows that men and woman could, and did, tumble.²⁸ Many had no qualms sourcing soil to level the ground of their dwelling from the same road leading to their abode. One man, when reprimanded for the 'impropriety of wheeling away the public street', responded with a look of 'disdain' and the comment that there was 'no law against it'.²⁹ Showing a similar spirit, convicts greatly damaged the road to the South Head – built by public subscription as a pleasure route – by driving laden carts and wagons upon it. After investigation, the reason for the use of this route, rather than the usual High Street/Parramatta Road, was to evade the toll on carting merchandise like firewood. In 1804, the lower end of Pitt's Row – near the cove - was still described as a 'ruthless picture of neglect'.³⁰ Immediate personal gain figured more than aesthetic ideals, safety and public accommodation promulgated by the authorities.³¹

Water was another communal resource continually maligned. The government-operated *Sydney Gazette* was filled with the frustrations of the authorities as convicts, and emancipists of the same mould undermined the authorities' attempts to impose regularity, sustainability and order on this fragile resource. Despite being dependent as well as mutually responsible for it, they displayed little evidence of long-term care. Sand and rubbish had accumulated in the Tank Stream as early as 1803 leading the erection of a high palisade on one side and it being cleaned out and enclosed. Regardless, individuals threw their rubbish and offal into the stream, cleaned fish, erected pig-sties near it, and took water directly from it instead of from the tanks. They removed the paling when they wanted and some continued to wash in it well into the 1820s causing 'great annoyance' to the families residing in

²⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 1 July 1804, *Sydney Gazette* 23 September 1804.

²⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 12 June 1803 and 10 July 1803, 4 November 1804, *Sydney Gazette*, 10 July 1803.

²⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 12 June 1803.

³⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 28 October 1804.

³¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 10 February 1805.

the vicinity by ‘most indecent exposure’.³² Eight years after the first warnings about its degradations, more specific regulations appeared in the *Sydney Gazette*. No necessaries, slaughter-houses, tanneries, breweries or dying houses were to be constructed anywhere near the stream and neither was rubbish, ashes, dirty water or offal to be disposed of on the nearby roads. Clothing and linen were not to be washed in it, neither were any animals allowed to be anywhere near it.³³ The need to issue further regulations suggests the continuance of such activities.

The area now known as Hyde Park had a multitude of names, ‘the Commons’ being one of them. It was also called the ‘the Exercising Grounds’, the ‘Cricket Ground’, the ‘Race Course’ and, perhaps most interestingly, ‘St. George’s Fields’. It was officially proclaimed ‘Hyde Park’ in 1810 and the same proclamation warns, in a telling manner, what the grounds were *not* to be used for, clearly anticipating encroachments from attitudes that were by now entrenched. The soil was not to be used for brickmaking– the Brickfields was right next to it and such incursions would have been easy – nor was it to be used to graze horses or cattle on. Such earthy activities were now to take place outside Macquarie’s more structured and orderly demesne.³⁴

The earlier names for Hyde Park mentioned above are illuminating in that they are names that organically developed. They show that areas delineated as commons often served as places for recreation and entertainment too as the convicts used those places known during their everyday work and life.³⁵ St. George’s fields, the Sydney version, though not an officially designated commons, was a popular place of recreation, meeting and gathering for a multitude of person – convicts included. It was a place for leisure, exercise, horse training, racing and, in its train, gambling and drinking. Its namesake was another unofficial commons southwest of the Thames in London that was unsuitable

³² *Sydney Gazette*, Friday 19 October 1827.

³³ *Sydney Gazette*, 14 October 1802, 18 December 1803, 12 February 1810, 15 September 1813, 16 April 1811.

³⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, October 6, 1810.

³⁵ Robert W. Malcolmson discusses this in *Popular Recreations in English Society 150-1850*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 1.

for grazing due to the nearby marshes.³⁶ Sydney's 'St. George's Field' formed the epicentre of the three-day long celebrations for Easter Monday in 1810. A full fair was in thrall - music, dancing, costumes and booths to boot.³⁷ It was probably the same or similar recreational activity that occurred during the colony's first 'jubilee' celebration in 1810, a week of equestrian pursuit that excited enough interest to bring individuals from Parramatta, Prospect Hills, Seven Hills, the Hawkesbury and areas around the Nepean. It included foot races accompanied by wagering: Dicky Dowling was set against a 'young active man' to carry the weight of fourteen stone over a distance of fifty yards before the youth had ran the same ground twice – one hundred yards.³⁸ It is probable that the same or similar activities occurred in Sydney as those recorded for the 1810 fair at the 'Village of Parramatta' at which, along with horse racing, cocking and betting, had included foot-racing, blindfolded wheelbarrow races and sack jumps.³⁹

Another congenial affair occurred at the Brickfields in 1808, and 'Old English Custom' allowed to 'give relaxation to the inferior' - the convicts and the other lower orders.⁴⁰ 'Little eccentricities that were introduced to variegate the scene' included a race run by seven girls, the reward being apparel trimmed with blue and scarlet ribbons of the British flag. Grimacers 'exhibited their

³⁶ Ida Darlington (ed.). 'St George's Fields: Enclosure and development', *Survey of London: volume 25: St George's Fields (The parishes of St. George the Martyr Southwark and St. Mary Newington)* [1955], pp. 49-64. Online at < <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=65444> accessed: 9 May 2013.

³⁷ 28 April 1810, Monday last being Easter Monday, a fair commenced on the Cricket Ground, to which a sort of popular acquiescence has given the appellation of St. George's Fields ; the recreative pastimes of which were carried on with much decórum and with no less festivity for three days, during which the " merry dance " was kept alive in every booth and other fair costumes of the mother country closely imitated. St. George's field reference, SG Saturday 28 April 1810. Other names referenced in SG Saturday 6 October 1810. I'm thinking here of the *tone* of " the recreative pastimes which were carried on with much decórum".

³⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 20 October 1810.

³⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 5 May 1810. In 1835, the Catholic priest Dr. Ullathorne's testified that mechanics who were assigned to masters generally had Noonday as a holiday and that, as there was much squabbling amongst them, they used to come to Hyde Park, 'the place of recreation' to settle them. Hyde Park, was, according to his testimony, the site of several 'brutal fights' each Monday. Ullathorne cited in Charles White, *Old Convict Days*, p. 218.

⁴⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 12 June 1808.

talent' to much applause, and one African American imitated an antelope.⁴¹ Occurring a few times a year, such public festivities helped to recreate social and cultural traditions from the homelands.

This matter of public festivities was important. While the reports in the newspapers speak congenially of such affairs, they were always a cause of concern for the administrative authorities - Waterhouse details that festive life was renowned for 'sexual license, drunkenness and challenges to authority'.⁴² Governor Macquarie was so concerned about the maintenance of 'peace and good order' before the races of 1810 that for two successive weeks he proclaimed there should be no 'gaming, drunkenness, swearing, or fighting' and that no booths, stalls or shops were to be erected, nor any selling of alcohol. Those making of 'noise' or 'disturbance' during the week were to be arrested by the police until the festivities were over.⁴³ Clearly, Macquarie anticipated that the revelry of the convicts in Sydney could, without careful management, bubble over into unchecked mirth and ungovernable unruliness.

Despite this, by 1825, Sydney's reputation as a racing town was firmly established- or at least it was in the mind of one poet who composed new lyrics to a well-known tune. 'Tailors, tinkers, justice's together were entangled', he wrote, and 'Fun and mirth kept jubilee, with laughter... every scene was leeling drunk with humour wit and drollery'. That the convicts had a place in this conception of the 'racing town' amidst the other colonials is clear. The convicts' and emancipists' pre-industrial culture of hawking, betting, rowdiness and general chaotic merriment is palpable. Culturally, they were making themselves at home in the open spaces of Sydney.

⁴¹ *Sydney Gazette*, Saturday 2 February 1811

⁴² Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, p. 8.

⁴³ *Sydney Gazette*, 6 October 1810.

Another key factor in the development of a differentiated geographic awareness amongst the convicts was the movement and activity of Aboriginal people in the urban areas and immediate hinterland of Sydney Cove. A family of Aboriginals resided in Cockle Bay (see figure 13), and the place became a scene for human interaction, socialising and amusement. ‘Large parties’ of convict men and women visited the family on those ‘days in which they were not wanted for labour’. Here, the convicts were privy to the Aboriginal people’s song and dance and brought gifts along as a gesture of good will.⁴⁴ Another convict remarked that some clans were ‘very friendly’ and would take you from ‘tribe to tribe’.⁴⁵



Figure 13. The family of Aboriginal People that resided at Cockle Bay can be seen in this image. On the opposite shore the Ultimo grounds can be seen. Detail from *A native camp near Cockle Bay, New South Wales*, 1813 by Philip Slaeger, engraver, after John Eyre. Accessed on 22. 08. 13 via the State Library of New South Wales online.

<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/events/exhibitions/2010/governor/08_aboriginal/image04.html>

While Inga Clendinnen, in her much-celebrated work *Dancing with Strangers*, argues that relations between the Europeans and Eora began with friendship before declining into violence, and though the afore-mentioned example seems suggestive of this, this episode of song and dance cannot be taken in isolation.⁴⁶ As Grace Karskens has contested, friendly behaviour could – and often did –

⁴⁴ Collins, *Account*, p. 34

⁴⁵ Noah, *Voyage*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing With Strangers*. (The Text Publishing Company: Melbourne, 2003. 2005 ed.).

have violence lurking in the background. A poorly interpreted look could end with a ‘bayonet in the guts’ – or a well-aimed spear.⁴⁷ And the same convict observer who noted how friendly some clans were also noted that you ‘must not touch their gins as they are jealous’.⁴⁸ Conflict amongst the Aboriginal people was well known and well observed. It was watched with all the avidity of a people accustomed to racing, gambling and blood sports and a lively cultural discourse to describe it. And so a large number of people watched a conflict near the military barrack in 1804. The crowds pressed around to such an extent that the hostilities were disrupted and the colonial authorities ordered the Europeans not to get involved.⁴⁹ The upper end of Pitt’s Row – near today’s Sydney War Memorial – was the site of a skirmish between the Aboriginal people, involving one who was well known, Musquito. The whole encounter was scrutinized, the agility and skill applauded and watched with intrigue.⁵⁰ At another hostile encounter, the European spectators were ‘astonished at the dexterity and incredible force’ with by which waddies were twirled and thrown.⁵¹

While conflict amongst the Aboriginal Australians occurred in many places around Sydney Cove and its hinterland, generally the open spaces were favoured. The areas in the vicinity of the Brickfields were recognized as a favourite location for these rivalries. In late 1804, Musquito was chased to the Brickfields and, in the same year, a ‘warlike spectacle’ that began on the New Bridge ended up at Bennelong’s point.⁵² By 1795, it was the place where Aboriginal people from all around the country came to meet those already in Sydney. It was also the final destination on a run of sheep from Farm Cove. The result was that the contests and activities of the natives became ‘part of the round of events, the rough and violent pleasures of the preindustrial town’.⁵³ All injuries were noted

⁴⁷ Karskens, *The Colony*, p.389.

⁴⁸ Noah, *Voyage*, p. 73.

⁴⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 December 1805.

⁵⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 16 October 1803.

⁵¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 December 1805

⁵² *Sydney Gazette*, 23 December 1804, 21 October 1804.

⁵³ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 441.

– just as in blood sports. What, where and how a body was hurt, injured or bleeding was a fact to be surveyed, recorded, aestheticized and imbued with valuation. It was either the behaviour of a manly, warrior-culture or a culture that was brutal, uncivilized and arbitrary.⁵⁴ For the Europeans, including the convicts, it was a source of many things – ‘amusement’, curiosity, intrigue, adrenaline, sportsmanship – and way to acquire cross-cultural knowledge by, more often than not, assessing Indigenous ways through their own ‘web of significance’.⁵⁵

A final motive for convict movement – and the development of geographic familiarity – was the search for native foods. While Alan Frost has touched on one aspect of this – sweet tea as an antiscorbutic - and Karskens has pointed to it as a key reason for convict mobility, beyond a cursory nod there has not been little geographic placement of these items in so far as they were a catalyst for movement within the colony.⁵⁶ Botany Bay greens, or Cook’s cabbage, grew abundantly on many parts of the coast and was cultivated in some gardens. It made better eating when cooked young as maturity increased its acidity.⁵⁷ Going looking ‘for greens’ was a common pursuit in the early years of the colony. One convict who was in the care of one of the surgeons went out to gather ‘a few herbs’ to make tea and met with another convict who was doing the same thing.⁵⁸ Patrick Burn, the gamekeeper, inadvertently became embroiled at a hearing as a result of this common pursuit. He was at Cockle Bay and going to walk ‘up the country’ to look for ducks when he met two convicts gathering ‘vegetables’. As they had finished their task work early and had ‘got a few days to themselves to get greens’, they went with him, promptly got lost, and were thought to have absconded by their

⁵⁴ See, for example, *Sydney Gazette* 2 February 1806.

⁵⁵ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), Jean Vivies, *English Travel Narratives in the Eighteenth Century: exploring genres*. (tr. Claire Davison) (Cornwall: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p. 111.

⁵⁶ Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia’s Convict Beginnings*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), p. 222–23.

⁵⁷ Maiden, *The Useful Native Plants of Australia*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ White, *Journal*, p.132.

overseer!⁵⁹ The name ‘Parsley Bay’ remained the cove at Vaucluse for many years, suggesting that it was a well-known place to source this vegetable, and one officer list balm, parsley, semaphore, sorrel and a kind of spinach as the ‘greens’ readily available.⁶⁰ Watkin Tench, captain of the marines, noted that esculent plants grew in ‘great abundance’ – wild celery, spinach and parsley - and the healthy and sick alike were ‘very glad to introduce them into their messes finding them a ‘pleasant as well as wholesome addition’.⁶¹ Captain White though it ‘a pleasant substitute for vegetables’ and one convict woman thought the type of chickweed available tasted so much like ‘our spinach that no difference can be discerned’.⁶²

Another plant that grew in a vine along the along the foreshores of the harbor was called native sarsaparilla – *smilax glycyphylla* – a plant whose leaves produced a tea that was sweet and tasted liquorice root. According to Tench this was drunk ‘universally’ and contributed greatly to the ‘healthy state’ of the soldiers and convicts.⁶³ Collecting leaves for tea was common enough for George Worgan to speak of Captain Hunter’s servants going for a walk in the woods to find wild balm.⁶⁴ But it was most common on the rocky shores of Port Jackson, and it was here that Mary Bryant – the famous colonial escapee – gathered tea for the secret sojourn north.⁶⁵ It was these vegetables, as well as the native current, *Leptomeria Acida*, a small white berry that tasted like a sour, green gooseberry and was used as an antiscorbutic, that has led to the perception that the convicts were healthy in Sydney.⁶⁶ As

⁵⁹ Patrick burn’s evidence as chief witness at a hearing in 1788. A. J. Gray, ‘Patrick Burn, Licensed Game-Killer at Sydney Cove 1788-1791,’ *The Australian Genealogist* 9 (1958), p. 4.

⁶⁰ Worgan, *Journal*, p. 12.

⁶¹ Collins, *Account*, p. 13.

⁶² letter from a Female Convict, Port Jackson 14 November 1788, reprinted in Bladen (ed), *HRNSW II*, appendix. White, *Journal*, p. 155.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald* 26 December 1889, Warwick Hirst, *Great Escapes by Convicts in Colonial Australia*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Worgan, *Journal*, p. 46, p. 54.

⁶⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 June 1862, Warwick Hirst, *Great Escapes*, p. 15.

⁶⁶ White, *Journal*, p. 155.

Alan Frost has noted, one cup of berries contained enough nutrition to replenish an individual's vitamin C levels.⁶⁷

As Karskens has recently written, 'Sydney Cove was a canvas for the convicts themselves. They took 'outskirts' land – the Rocks - and inscribed their town... deeply in earth stone and wood'.⁶⁸ Yet the Rocks was far from the only 'outskirts' used and inscribed with meaning, tangibly and imaginatively. The entire cove and hinterland became known, internalized, perceived and transformed into differentiated landscapes in the convict's 'own time' as well.

⁶⁷ Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p. 223.

⁶⁸ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 178.

Chapter 4:

‘Property...had never before been sacred’: Illicit Convict Geographies¹

It was 1834 when Emanuel Brace, an eighteen year old absconder from assigned service near the Cooks River, was sworn under oath at the Supreme Criminal Court to give evidence. Not wanting to be brought before the police for insolence, Brace crossed the water into the neighbourhood of his master’s property and met another absconded prisoner, John Jenkins from the Georges’ River Iron Gang. Soon they were joined by a third, and they became companions in crime, crossing from known farm to known estate, across known fences, boundaries and landmarks. They made fire from the fencing of Dr. Wardell’s grounds and set up camp for a fortnight in a rough-bark hut. Travelling towards Sydney one evening, they came out near Cooper’s distillery in Chippendale. They knew it relationally – it was near the old race course. They washed their shirts at creeks and knew that in a quarryman’s hut they would find articles worth stealing. From this hut, near to the Brickfields, they took gunpowder, razors and money. They hid a few items, including a velveteen jacket and flannel-lined trousers, in a bundle under a tree near their hut. Hungry, they made breakfast and cut a piece of bark out of the tree so that they could mix their flour and make bread. They marked the same piece of bark with charcoal and used it as a target to fire upon when they had finished. Drawn by the commotion, a man came riding up to them, asked who they were and, upon realizing they were ‘poor runaways’, tried to get them to come quietly. Emmanuel Brace, the teller of this fine tale, wanted to go with the man: he thought it was better to receive fifty lashes than risk their lives. But his companion disagreed. Wardell was shot and the absconders made a run for it. They followed Cook’s River to reach Botany Bay, stopping at several properties during the journey – Mr. Prout’s, Mr. Sparks’ and

¹ Collins, *Account*, p. 62.

Mr. Flinn's, who kept the *Lame Dog Public House*. The morning after, they made their way to a pub in the Rocks before returning to their 'old haunt' across the river. Pushing on to Seven Mile Beach, they met an old oyster-gatherer. He recognized the trio and before long the outlaws were captured, sentenced and executed for murder.

While this affair was in 1834, it is a convict voice that tells us, in great detail, what was a taken-for-granted reality and present from the earliest years; that the colony and hinterland were not ruthless, alienating lands of torturous chain gangs, but a place of places – locales – intimately known through work and everyday life and leisure. Creeks, boundaries, estates and owners were known. It was a world one could move in, subsist in, and the natural environment was, for the most part, responsive to their needs. It was precisely because of this geographic familiarity that Sydney Cove and its hinterland facilitated illicit activity: the landscape held many possibilities for nefarious purposes. This chapter challenges the enduring claim that the harsh environment and complex state controls rendered escape and freedoms difficult. By looking at reports of illicit activities and attempts to stem these, this chapter focuses on action, context and, to cite Inga Clendinnen, the 'reciprocating dynamic between them'.² It presents the case – sometimes quantitatively and sometimes qualitatively – that covert behaviour was the ultimate test of one's knowledge of the administrative, social and, most overlooked, the environmental landscape. The stakes were high. If caught, the penalty could include corporal punishment, hard labour, work in chain gangs, the loss of one's liberty by being ordered to another part of the settlement, lodged in guarded quarters, confinement on bread and water, or even death.³ Moreover, as the convict system was a 'graduated hierarchy' in which one's conduct and demeanour could materially alter one's circumstances, and as advancement in the colonial world meant subscribing, for men, to codes of gentlemanly conduct, the loss of character resulting from conviction

² Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, p. 3.

³ Wentworth, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 44. *Sydney Gazette*, Sunday 19 June 1808.

was considerable.⁴ Illicit leisure, repeated depredations from workplaces and skulking boats and people all point to the reality of the convicts' geographies of knowledge and place: it was a kaleidoscope of possibility.

While the jubilee-celebrations in Sydney in 1810 were a government-proclaimed public affair, not all of the occurrences received official approbation. During the course of events, and while most of the town were otherwise distracted, a private cock-fight was organized in a house close to the official scene of activity.⁵ Yet cock-fighting was prohibited. It was considered injurious to morals and the peace. There are few recorded instances of cockfighting, and yet the overwhelming sense from the scanty records – as Waterhouse too concludes – is that it was a common pursuit and had occurred since the earliest times of the colony.⁶ Yet it was a lesser crime. Those caught were detained, reprimanded, and then let go.⁷ While not all cases made the paper, those that did often engaged with the excitement and the mode is playful. In the Brickfields in 1805, John Cooper's house served as such a venue. A 'powerful party coloured pile' named Bone-a-part versed the ginger Sir Sidney – it was a culture of masculinity, nationhood and bravery. Yet the birds were left to themselves after the marines and constables arrived. In the ensuing flight from the scene, many became completely bogged in Blackwattle Swamp – somewhere between today's Victoria Park and Glebe Pt. Road – and had to be retrieved by their servants.⁸ As cockfighting involved all sorts of roles – cock-owners, feeders, handlers, spectators, and, it goes without saying, the ubiquitous spirit of gambling – any cockfight necessarily entailed much covert conversation. It must also have involved some consensus as to the

⁴ One's 'character' was a criteria in selecting overseers, and in case involving a tanner washing hides in the Tank Stream against Government Orders, the fact that he was of good character limited his punishment. Druitt in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 2. *Sydney Gazette*, 12 June, 1808. Martin Gibbs, 'The Convict System of New South Wales: a review of archaeological research since 2001', *Archaeology Oceania* 47 (2012), p. 78.

⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 28 April 1810.

⁶ Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, p. 15.

⁷ See *Sydney Gazette* 1 January, 25 November, 1804.

⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 11 August 1805.

suitability of certain venues as well as people: undercover conversation and a working knowledge of the people and places of Sydney.⁹

Another entertainment that was a favourite amongst the convicts was pugilism, or boxing. Cockle Bay and the Kangaroo Grounds proved popular locations for reasons mentioned in previous chapters. They were just outside the main bustling port town, held a thinner population, were less frequented, and had open spaces as well as suitable hiding locations. One contest, recorded in great detail, occurred in 1814 on a field on the road to Botany Bay, about half a mile from the race course. Two hours and fifty rounds later, there was a conclusion to the gathering, and the circle of spectators standing in a 30 feet diameter dispersed.¹⁰ In another instance, a ‘great concourse of spectators’ gathered at Cockle Bay to enjoy this ‘afternoon sport’ – the particulars were too well known to spell out.¹¹

Racing and cockfights all provided opportunities for gambling, but gambling could take other forms as well – most of which escaped detection at the time. Much of it also escaped the written record as they existed in word-of-mouth transmission or the vague perception of the colonial elite who were aware of and lamented this vast culture of ‘dissipation’.¹² As early as 1804 the prevalence of gambling was recognised as well as the difficulties of its detection in ‘a large metropolis’.¹³ Nowhere was this a more conspicuous than at the Rocks. One instance of this has made it into the written record and points to the commonality of the experience and the location. An assigned servant, William Kaley, left his master’s house in the afternoon to play ‘two -up’ as he had received a nod in the street. They headed to a covered area at the back of a dwelling nearby and there commenced their game.¹⁴

⁹ Karskens makes a similar point in *The Colony*, p. 215.

¹⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 8 January 1814.

¹¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 2 August 1822.

¹² Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 150-1850*, p. 42. See *Sydney Gazette* 6 July 1806 for a letter lamenting the culture of drinking and gaming. For a discussion of the impact of British ‘moralising’ discourse and the role it played in Sydney, see Chapter 1, ‘The enemies’ in John Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies*, pp. 5—22.

¹³ *Sydney Gazette*, 15 April 1804.

¹⁴ Karskens, *The Rocks*, p. 177.

Assigned convicts around the Kangaroo Grounds exhibited the same free spirit. Sundays and holidays – their ‘own time’ – saw large numbers of them gather near a creek on George Gambling’s forty acre estate. Here, attracted either by the name, the cover of the bush or both, they gambled away food, property, and even the clothes on their back.¹⁵ Here, and especially at the Rocks, petty crime was a part of the convict’s quest – and often the realisation of – a limited individual and collective autonomy. The convicts were seizing and defining ‘part of the colonial space on their own terms and in ways that challenged the space of officialdom’.¹⁶

Another area in which knowledge of the administrative, economic and physical landscape was pertinent, was demonstrated by the extent of thefts from places of work and public and private storage. Separate from the petty thefts of clothing and the like, these thefts, while opportunistic, were also systemic. The best example of such illicit behaviour was amongst the mechanics and those in the lumber yard. Their workplaces contained all the necessities for their trade - iron, copper, tin, pan, leather, tools and the like.¹⁷ Their workplaces also contained the requisite independence, bustle and unchecked inflow and outflow of goods to allow for the theft of these items for private contract or sale. The government released an order with a detailed description of new regulations hoped to stem the tide of such practise in 1811. The extent of the demand suggests the extent of the practise. Superintendent and overseers were handing government goods out, while more were being requisitioned by convict workers in the government employ under pretence of private contract. Timber, iron, steel, coals, lime, timber, plank, board, steel, nails, colas, files, shingles, bricks, ‘wrought and unwrought, whether new or old’, were among the articles mentioned and to be protected by new

¹⁵Shepherd, *The Story of Petersham*, p 13.

¹⁶ W. M. Robbins. ‘Spatial Escape and the Hyde Park Convict Barracks,’ *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 7, (2005), p. 95. Major Druitt noted that on their day off, Sunday, the convicts ran ‘immediately to the Part of the Town called the Rocks’. Druitt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 38.

¹⁷ Druitt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 22.

and thorough record keeping and the dutifully upheld responsibility of the superintendent, carpenter, clerk and the watchmen.¹⁸

Eight years later, depredations were still common at the main lumber yard in Sydney. The wall that surrounded it was so low the workers could throw anything over it, leave empty handed from the main, surveyed gate and collect these items on the other side. It was not until surveillance increased that the depredations lessened: the wall was raised and a sentinel posted from sunset to sunrise.¹⁹ Similarly, convict's attempted – and sometimes achieved – escape from the Hyde Park convict barracks by going over the walls. Moreover, on Sundays, many tried to smuggle extra slops out of the front gates by wearing double.²⁰ The convicts were aware of the landscape and the changing opportunities for prohibited activities.²¹

It was not just from the government lumber yards that depredations occurred. The dockyards also proved a popular and known site to plunder. The timber lying at the hospital wharf was frequented stolen and was facilitated 'by people being in boats under various pretences of being in the cove'. Goods unloaded at the Hospital Wharf were also prey to petty thieving by 'persons passing through... under pretence of thoroughfare'.²² While there's little evidence of such activity being committed solely by the convicts, the attitude such activity pointed too was not dissimilar to the convict and emancipists wanderings over farms to plunder yet pleading thoroughfare (see Chapter 3).²³ This fact was recognised by the colonial authorities as something so self-evident that none 'who had ears to heard' would deny the claim that 'many petty thefts have been committed by the select description of associated loungers' at the wharfs. The result was the outlawing of such 'indolent spectators'.²⁴ And

¹⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 7 September 1811.

¹⁹ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 4, p 27.

²⁰ Druitt cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, pp. 12—13.

²¹ Similar behavior occurred at the lumber yard at Parramatta. See *Sydney Gazette*, 3 November 1805.

²² *Sydney Gazette*, 21 June 1807.

²³ *Sydney Gazette*, 8 August 1812.

²⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, 22 July and 12 August 1804.

yet it was not just on the wharf that goods carried by water had designs placed on them. Peter Pitually, a watchmen over the dockyard, even broke into one of the ships he was supposed to be guarding and stole items of clothing.²⁵

Indeed many – if not most – workplaces proved to be sites of knowledge and plunder. Those working the government long boats were found to have secreted lead in one of their houses.²⁶ Two convicts working as the watchmen at Carter’s Barracks at the Brickfields, were charged with breaking into the storeroom with a mind to sell the medicines stored there that they thought to be valuable.²⁷ Similarly, the convict hired by the merchant Robert Campbell to be his watchmen was found guilty of stealing casks of gunpowder from his house.²⁸ Accounts of assigned servants stealing ‘sundry items’ from their masters’ premises are numerous.²⁹

Night was not merely one’s own time after work hours were complete: it also transformed the landscape. Areas that were visible and much in use became less used, less surveyed, and provided opportunities for privacy and covert activity. Robbery was a near-nightly occurrence and led to the establishment of a night watch 1789. Four groups of three men, convicts considered to be of good character, were given the task of patrolling all night. Collins records that as night-watch was held in ‘fear and detestation’ by the convicts that this was evidence of the measure’s ‘assiduity in searching for offences and bringing them to light’.³⁰ It was also because those convicts who were gaming or seen to steal or barter clothes or provisions were to be taken note of and, in some cases, reported.

While the above-listed depredations points to extensive knowledge of the administrative and surveillance landscape, what is often neglected is that the natural environment was also a key

²⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 12 August 1804.

²⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 5 June 1803.

²⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 30 June 1825.

²⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 June 1808.

²⁹ See *Sydney Gazette* 28 September 1816 and 12 August 1804.

³⁰ Collins, *Account*, p. 66.

component of the convict's illicit activities and, moreover, that proximity to the natural world was a core, taken-for-granted component of life in the early colony (see figure 14).

Figure 14. The shoreline and secluded rocks at Dawes Point, leading to Cockle Bay, are seen here. *A View of Port Jackson from Dawes Point Sydney Cove*, c. 1805, Reproduced in Tim McCormick et. al. *First Views of Australia 1788-1825: A History of Early Sydney*. (Chippendale: David Ell Press, 1987), p. 121.



When, in Autumn in 1809, goods were found missing from a store house, the behaviour of a man seen carrying bundles across the Rocks to Cockle Bay became a curiosity worthy of investigation. ‘An idea suggested itself’, wrote the *Sydney Gazette*, ‘that the stolen property might then be concealed in the Rocks and cavities in that quarter’. Upon the examination of the area, a cavity deep enough to contain a man was found and, nearby, another crevice was found in which the stolen goods had been deposited.³¹ A few years earlier, another runaway was caught hiding behind a self-constructed ledge of rocks in Cockle Bay.³² Yet leaves and boughs were the preferred concealment of the absentee known as Gibber Jack, who was found hiding behind a house in the Brickfields.³³ Leaves, boughs and wooded areas were also favourite spots for men and women to be alone together, away from the prying eyes and the talk of the town.³⁴

³¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 30 April 1809.

³² *Sydney Gazette*, 30 September 1804.

³³ *Sydney Gazette*, 9 October 1813.

³⁴ Arthur Bowes Smyth, *The Journal of Arthur Bowes Smyth: Surgeon, Lady Penrhyn, 1787-1789*. (Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1979), p. 79. Ralph Clark, *The Journal and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark 1787-1792*. (Sydney: Australia Documents Library, 1981), p. 96.

People were not the only things to find concealment in the natural environment. Trees, bushes, ponds more often served as vestibules for stolen goods themselves. A stolen desk was found half hidden in the brush behind Back Row in 1803 while the other goods taken during the robbery were found in various other places: a couple of two pound pieces behind a fig tree in a garden, thirty-two dollars were in one grove in the same brush, while beads found in another, silver teaspoons and a purse containing coins.³⁵ When in 1806 several Sydney residents ended up in court charged with having stolen tea in their possession, it came to light that they had purchased the goods from a man who had stolen the goods from the first stealer, spotted in a boat near Bennelong's Point hiding tea behind some rocks.³⁶

In two well described cases in the mid-1810s, stolen goods were secreted at Farm Cove and the Sand Hills – behind the Brickfields in the area now occupied by Central station and the suburb of Redfern. The details of these two cases are fascinating because they illustrate that stealing goods for the purpose of sale or barter was a complex business. It required the knowledge of how and where to steal, finding a buyer for the stolen goods who would not 'split' upon you, finding somewhere to hide the goods in the interim, and, depending on what it was being stolen, trustworthy accomplices.³⁷ In December 1814, Thomas Bradbury, an assigned servant to Mr John Dixon, received a proposal from George Stevenson and his wife, Mary. George proposed the removal of large quantities of Brazil tobacco from his master, Dixon, and added that he had a buyer for it. The other assigned servant, Moses Prosser, was induced to assist, and a convict called Donovan who lodged with the Stevenson's was also compelled to assist as he was a 'stout' and 'strong' man able to carry out the plan. After a

³⁵ Similar behavior was exhibited by the convicts in other parts of the colony. Stolen property was found in thatched roofs, hollow trees, and in ponds. *Sydney Gazette* 22 June 1806, 30 June 1805, 1 December 1805.

³⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 June 1806.

³⁷ Druitt mentions that this term, 'split upon each other' was part of the convict vocabulary. Druitt, *Evidence to the Bigge Report*, p. 14.

night was fixed, seventeen baskets were removed. Three were sold immediately and fourteen were concealed around the Sand Hills.³⁸

Similar processes and knowledge were required in another well-publicized case in 1816. Thomas Reeds, a hairdresser who lived on Castlereagh Street, was the unfortunate who had his home and goods decided upon as the objective of covetous action. His neighbour, James Flavell, a blacksmith, approached another resident of the street, the shoe maker William Webb, about his design. Webb agreed to accompany Flavell and a date was set. On the chosen day, Flavell sent his young apprentice away to buy spirits as a diversion. Webb was placed on watch while Flavell and his servant William Tripp, busied themselves breaking into the home with two iron implements fashioned at Flavell's workshop. Once inside, the property was tied in bundles and removed. One bundle was placed in Flavell's workshop, more were placed in his well and other bundles were hidden at Farm Cove. Importantly, Flavell also dropped other iron implements from his own workshop down the well and called into a nearby house with his servant to create an alibi in case it was needed: the administrative, legal, environmental and economic landscape were known and shared.³⁹

There were certain valuable goods that could only be taken from the areas beyond the main settlement: the belongings of the Aboriginal people, and illicit, sometimes violent, experiences with the Aboriginal people themselves. Karskens, who has dealt with this in part in *The Colony*, aptly wrote that details here are 'far more shadowy' and that we must catch 'small glimpses' by reading between the lines. Collins, has left us with a curious remark that lends itself to this process. 'The convicts were everywhere straggling about, collecting animals and gum to sell to the people of the transports', a practise 'carried on secretly' because it was punishable. Collins leaves other clues with geographical and spatial implications. That the Aboriginal people were accustomed to leaving 'Spears, fizegigs, gum

³⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 10 December 1814.

³⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 26 October 1816.

and other articles under the rocks, or loose and scattered about upon the beaches'. The other items mentioned for trade included spears, shields, swords, fishing-lines'.⁴⁰ Phillip also noted that 'favours' had been granted to several of the convicts by the Aboriginal woman while Collins, with disapproval, recorded that Aboriginal women 'were ready to exchange their chastity' for 'a loaf of bread, a blanket, or a shirt'.⁴¹ Beyond this we can only presume, but there are other glimpses that suggest the convicts frequent and 'nefarious' encroachments upon Aboriginal people and their belongings.

Early in 1789, sixteen workers from the brick kilns set off to Botany Bay on a quest to steal Aboriginal fishing gigs and spears. They armed themselves with their working tools and large clubs and set off down the road. When they met with violence and were forced back into settlement, the convicts argued that they were out picking sweet-tea. Embedded in their decision to take action are several things worth noting; that the network was formed at work; that they brought work tools with them; that they knew that the road to Botany Bay was a good source for 'trinkets'; that they knew such items had a market value; and that they knew their excuse, picking sweet-tea, was plausible as it was a well-known place to gather it.⁴²

The same region and excuse was given by another pair of convicts the year before. In July 1788, a convict wounded by Aboriginal people was brought into camp. While he insisted that he and another convict had been picking vegetables at Botany Bay, the officers gave little credence to their accounts.⁴³ A month earlier, a pair of convicts who, by their own account, had 'strayed to a cove beyond the farm—one wonders what for—were speared and another pair who had stolen a canoe were

⁴⁰ Collins, *Account*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Phillip cited in Hunter, *Journal*, p. 336. Collins, cited in *The Colony*, p. 545. See Karskens, *The Colony*, for another discussion of these two comments and for a broader discussion of sexual relations amongst the Europeans and Aboriginal People, both convicts and marines, in Sydney and around the colonized areas. pp. 417-419.

⁴² For a discussion of the links between action and narrative explanation, see David Carr, 'Narrative Explanation and its Malcontents,' *History and Theory* 47, (2008), pp. 19—30.

⁴³ Collins, *Account*, p. 33.

found violently murdered when employed cutting rushes up the harbour.⁴⁴ In May 1791, a convict was indicted and flogged for stealing fishing tackle from Daringa, the wife of the well-known Colbee.⁴⁵

There was one individual in the colony towards whom, in particular, the documentary record suggests frequent and unsavoury interaction with the Indigenous people. When John McEntire, the Governor's large and robust game-shooter, was speared by a young Aboriginal man and died soon after, certain facts came to light.⁴⁶ By itself, the fact that he could speak their language suggests a frequent acquaintance. But when the surgeon pronounced his wound mortal, less innocuous activities rose to the surface. McEntire admitted to the 'commission of crimes of the deepest dye', called for a Catholic priest and, though he despaired of his mercy, desired his prayers. Despite the fact that McEntire swore to never having killed or wounded an Aboriginal people - except one and that was in defence - Tench footnoted a personal remark in his account. He noted that there was an aversion 'uniformly shewn by all natives' towards McEntire, and that he had 'long been suspected by us ... of having in his excursions, shot and injured them'. Moreover, despite McEntire's last confession, Tench noted that, 'most people doubted the truth of the relation, from his general character, and other circumstances'. What these 'other circumstances' were remain undocumented.⁴⁷

The unremitting flow of tide that connected all the coves, main settlements – even the convict's homelands – was one last factor that facilitated licit activity and movement and with it, illicit designs and actions (see Chapter 1). Not only, then, were men becoming accustomed to the sea as a direct consequence of their work, but many came to the colony already well-acquainted. Alan Atkinson noted with finesse that conversation in Sydney 'tasted like salt water' as it was 'shaped a good deal by the seamen's eye and seamen's tongue'. Commission Bigge, too, noted that circumstance with

⁴⁴ Collins, *Account*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Tench, *Account*, p. 221.

⁴⁶ For another discussion of this occurrence, see Karskens, *The Colony*, pp. 392–393.

⁴⁷ Tench, *Account*, pp. 205–206. Hunter, *Journal*, p. 492.

disapproval.⁴⁸ One-fifth of the convict men were former sea-men⁴⁹ as Phillip himself was well aware when he remarked that ‘there are several hundred men, many of whom are seamen, who would at any hour risk their lives, if they saw the least possibility of escaping’.⁵⁰ The convict William Noah in his account of the voyage of the *Hillsborough*, demonstrates that he too had knowledge of the sea.⁵¹ One wonders how many other convicts, simply by virtue of the trip alone and the number of port-calls along the way, developed similar levels of knowledge - of winds, direction and conditions of sailing.

The cumulative effect of boats, tides and the presence of waterways meant that boats, and parts of boats, were constantly going missing. Oars might be taken in one instances, the jib or foresail on another, even cables, ropes, chains and stern sheets.⁵² Possibly, these parts were sold or bartered away, or, perhaps it was pay-back against perceived injustices.⁵³ Yet in other cases, such piece-meal stealing was strategic: it was to assemble a craft to steal or effect an escape. In February 1807, seven men, six of whom were convicts and one a freeman, were indicted for stealing a boat as well as a mast, sail and oars – presumably as spares in the case of damage at sea.⁵⁴ There are other cases. Thomas Morley threatened the full extent of the law for the individual caught with his boat that had been cut from its moorings.⁵⁵ In 1818, one property-owner along George Street awoke to find that both his government man and his boat had absented themselves.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ One-fifth of those whose trades are recorded. Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ Phillip cited Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia* p. 113.

⁵¹ William Noah, *Voyage to Sydney in the Ship Hillsborough [1798-1799] and a Description of the Colony [1799]*. (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1978).

⁵² *Sydney Gazette*, 14 January 1807, 12 February 1804, 12 April 1803, 15 April 1804, 5 November 1809, 3 February 1805. For an example at Cape Barren, see 11 November 1804. Karskens also notes that constant disappearance of boats, long boats, cutters etc. See *The Colony*, pp. 165—167.

⁵³ As in the burning of hay stacks and other parts of one’s master’s property as discussed by Alan Atkinson, ‘Four patterns of convict protest,’ in Penny Russell and Richard White (eds.) *Pastiche I: reflections on nineteenth century Australia* (St. Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 68.

⁵⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, 22 February 1807.

⁵⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 23 December 1804.

⁵⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 21 February 1818.

There are many and sensational narratives of convict escapes by sea, the best-known being that of William and Mary Bryant. While theirs is not the only case, it is one of the best-documented and easily analysed occasions. From their activities it is easy to see that, as Grace Karskens has written, ‘geography was folded into social networks’ and both had to be intimately known.⁵⁷ Turning to it again with questions about environment, space and administrative knowledge, a fascinating tale takes on even more curious shades.⁵⁸ Certainly, there was a sense that homes were private places, places where private conversations could take place. It was at his house, after dark, that William Bryant, the head of the government fishing-boats, discussed with five others the practicability of ‘carrying off’ the boat in which he was employed.⁵⁹ We know that William Bryant had liaised with the captain of a ship in the months prior to the escape – a captain who was known for his mercenary character – and that it was from him that necessary nautical instruments such as a compass were received. Of the seven men who escaped, one had a life sentence and one was a navigator.⁶⁰ As a fisherman, Bryant knew how to operate a boat, as did another of their company. James Cox, another of the escapees, endeavoured to acquire information on navigation whenever he could and, as Mary Bryant’s father was a mariner and her husband a fisherman, she too had knowledge of boating and the sea. They effected their escape at 11pm, on a moonless night and, moreover, on the night that William Bryant and his companions were rostered for fishing: there would be no boats, and no lights, present to see and overtake them. They left from ‘the point’ – C. H. Currey notes that it was probably Bennelong’s or Mrs Macquarie’s Point – and launched out, dodging the night-police in the process.⁶¹ Hugging the coastline, they survived on their provisions the sweet tea Mary had stocked back in Sydney and on native fruits, birds and eggs.

⁵⁷ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 292.

⁵⁸ For an example of similar knowledge and behaviour in other parts of the colony, see *Sydney Gazette* 1 February for an account of a ‘piratical seizure in Tasmania’.

⁵⁹ Collins, *Account*, p. 112–113.

⁶⁰ Druitt, cited in *Evidence to the Bigge Reports*, p. 14.

⁶¹ C. H. Currey, *The Transportation, Escape and Pardoning of Mary Bryant*. (Sydney: Angus and Roberston, 1963), p. 18.

They had played their knowledge of the landscape – administratively, environmentally, and in terms of social networks and human foibles – to the best of their ability.⁶²

The extent of illicit behaviour in the colony points to the extent of the convict's knowledge of the geographic, social, material and economic landscapes. The convicts had a firm grasp of the people and places of the colony and hinterland. They knew what had value – whether it was a private road without a toll, a jib and a foresail, or sundry items to steal and barter. The widespread engagement in illicit activity throws into relief the layers of knowledge constituting the convict's geographies, nefarious and otherwise. The landscape became known, internalised and invested with meaning through the convict's routines of work, in their leisure and 'own time'. Their pursuit of illicit activity was but a further manifestation of their multifaceted sense of place.

⁶² Warwick Hirst, *Great Escapes* p. 21.

Epilogue

In 1798, William Noah, the convict silversmith who earned official praise as clerk and overseer of the lumber yard in Sydney, noted the wildlife around Sydney – especially the birds. There was an emu that was very fast and there were beautiful parrots, only they would not learn anything. There was also a beautiful wild pigeon, but it would not sing.¹ And though there were large and handsome white and black cockatoos, few could be kept in cages. Another observer, in 1828, remarked that the number of ‘parrots and other bird of strange notes and plumage’ hanging at doors was a site to behold.² An unsuspecting family in Chapel Row had already placed a hollow log on their fire before they noticed a large snake ‘writhing to disengage itself’. Promptly killed and measured, it was found to be a metre and a half long.³ In 1812 two convict workers stumbled upon a diamond snake at Black Wattle Swamp. They chased it, killed it and preserved its skin.⁴ By 1828, one miller in Sydney advertised that he would accept fur, seals, kangaroos, opossums, bandicoots, squirrel skins and other colonial produce in payment for his services.⁵ The cry of ‘Fish O’ was common about the main town and, according to one observer, a cheap meal could be had by taking a few slices of bread and butter, strolling ‘round any of the romantic shores’, and feasting on the ‘sweet and finely flavoured rock oysters’, crossing paths with convicts and poor emancipists collecting them to sell.⁶

Early colonial Sydney, then, was not estranged from the natural environment or from individuals actively engaging with it and the places around Sydney. The cove and hinterland was, in a peculiar way, intimately entwined with the landscape. It was through the forces of trade, development

¹ Noah, *Voyage*, p. 73.

² Walter P. Cunningham cited in the *Sydney Gazette*, 25 February 1828

³ *Sydney Gazette*, 14 July 1805.

⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, 4 January 1812.

⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 July 1826.

⁶ Walter P. Cunningham cited in the *Sydney Gazette*, 25 February 1828

and the pursuit of personal interests and leisure that the convicts ‘reacted’ to the natural environment. The convicts, working as quarrymen, as agricultural labourers, as sawyers, road makers and the like were in close and familiar contact as the Aboriginal people’s land became a camp and later still a colony. They came to know the land. Natural and social knowledge built upon one another until associations and knowledge of certain places at certain times of the day, and certain times of the year, were forged, perceived and, in some cases, shared amongst the convict classes – even across the *Berewegal* more generally. From forced labour to that which was privately taken, from official and unofficial leisure to the conscious pursuit of the prohibited, convicts were developing a complex and multifaceted sense of place. They were not passive recipients of authoritarian demands and the threat of the lash or hard labour, but actively perceived and made sense of the personal and political, the social and cultural and the useful and aesthetic in the cove and immediately hinterland of the colony.

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