“SEND ME A BONNET”

Colonial Connections,
Class Consciousness and
Sartorial Display in
Colonial Australia, 1788-1850.

AMY BUTTERFIELD

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INTRODUCTION

In the stacks of the Mitchell Library and the Tasmanian Archives lie the written remnants of some of the earliest female settlers in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land. Some names are well known to history - Elizabeth Macarthur and Elizabeth Marsden for instance - in part due to the actions of their more prominent spouses. Yet many of these women remain obscure. Their letters and diaries lie concealed within the archival collections of their families where, their contributions are often restricted to two or three entries and the only indication of their existence being a name listed in a catalogue or table of contents. This is unfortunate, for among recollections of social engagements, observations on colonial life and declarations of affection for various family and friends, are references to a subject, which although important to these women, has been passed over by historians - clothing. For these women, clothing went beyond satisfying a physical need to protect themselves from the elements, or to demonstrate one’s knowledge of, and adherence to the latest fashions. Clothing provided these women with the necessary means by which to negotiate the environment in which they lived, engage with other women and express their individual as well as collective identities.

Women sought not only to define themselves through sartorial display, but through shopping. For within the letters of ten settler women (out of an initial sample of twenty two) published between 1788 and 1850, are contained multiple requests to friends and relatives in Britain to purchase on their behalf items of clothing. In the case of Harriot Blaxland, the request was for furniture other household goods, not clothing. Profuse declarations of thanks are also offered for fashionable items sent out as gifts, and letters are received by women in the colonies, asking if there are any goods they wished to have purchased and delivered. This global shopping network cannot be explained simply on the basis of necessity, however. Indeed the practice, whilst common prior to 1810, when colonial retail sectors were in their infancy, increased in popularity during the 1820s and 1830s, when Sydney and Hobart possessed a vibrant luxury import trade and a diverse variety of shops, many singularly devoted to stocking fabrics and trimmings, hats and
shoes, all of the highest quality and in the latest fashions. Colonial shops however did charge high prices for their wares, a fact settlers women frequently complained about. Yet the cost of importing goods privately as well as the risk of said goods being lost at sea, stolen or simply misplaced during the long journey would have rendered such savings negligible. So why did the practice persist once it had ceased to serve an essential function?

This thesis will demonstrate that informal importation of fabric, clothing and other fashion accessories was motivated by the perceived need on the part of settlers women in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land to establish their superior social status in the colony above that of former convicts and their children. The practice of receiving or requesting articles of fabric and clothing from abroad indicated that its recipients had connections at home in Britain, or elsewhere in the empire, particularly India. The advertisement of such connections not only proclaimed their status as free immigrants, but also that they were of respectable, even genteel origins, having not only the funds to emigrate, and in some cases being wealthy and well-connected enough to secure official colonial or military postings.

The majority of former convicts, besides had not only been expelled from their native country, but were also of a lower socio-economic status. The colonies gave these men and women the opportunity to amass fortunes of their own, and in doing so to redefine themselves as ‘respectable’. Familial connections abroad were detrimental to former convicts, serving only to demonstrate their low-born origins and marginalized status as criminals within Britain. Thus, these ‘colonial connections’ weren’t merely bonds of

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affections extended across the empire, but weapons in the battle for status in the colonial social hierarchy.

The fierceness of that battle though reflects the extent to which the social hierarchy was enforced by those in control and respected (or at least tolerated) by those who were not. Sydney during the eighteen-twenties and thirties was a highly fraught social arena. Recently arrived free settlers attempted to monopolise political, social and economic control over the young colony but were frequently and loudly resisted by the prominent offspring of former convicts, most notably W. C. Wentworth. The claims of free settlers to govern rested on tenuous claims of respectability and gentility, including the existence of familial connections in Britain.

Hobart by comparison, represented two extremes. In the first 20 years of the colony of Van Diemen’s Land’s existence (1803-1824), when settlement was confined to Hobart and its surrounds, the social hierarchy was extremely fluid. The most clear social difference was that between convicts and soldiers, which was frequently subverted by officers taking convict women as their wives or mistresses. Following the arrival of Governor Arthur in 1824 this situation was radically reversed and Van Diemen’s Land came to resemble not so much a class-differentiated society as a caste system, with the boundaries between free and convict, wealthy and poor rigidly enforced. The social structure of these colonial towns shaped the extent to which settler women relied on clothing received from friends and relations abroad as a signifier of superior social status.

In order to examine the phenomenon of globalised consumerism and its effects on the development of class consciousness in colonial Sydney and Hobart, the body of the thesis will be divided into the following three chapters: ‘Connections’, ‘Conflict’ and Display’.


‘Connections’ will examine the relationships that these settler established and maintained through private correspondence, and consider how the exchange of clothing, fabric and fashion accessories contributed to that process. However, not all relationships conformed to that model, so this chapter will explore the particular social and economic circumstances of each woman and how they affected relationships across geographical divides. In examining the varied experiences of settler women, the chapter will also demonstrate the differences which existed between the colonies, and the extent to which women in New South Wales came to rely on the private importation of clothing in a manner that women from Van Diemen’s Land did not.

‘Conflict’ contextualises the colonial connections cultivated by settler women within the structure of colonial society in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land. It focuses on their relations with ex-convict women and their children and their response to those of convict extraction who had amassed enough wealth and social cachet to challenge the privileged status of settlers. Throughout this chapter, comparisons will be identified between these particular women and the efforts on the part of settler men to replicate the British class system in Australia, as well as examine the development of the consumer society in the early years of the colonies and the extent to which it contributed to conflict between settlers and convicts. In doing so ‘Conflict’ will attempt to provide an explanation of why women in New South Wales insisted on continuing to import clothing from abroad, whereas women in Van Diemen’s Land remained content to shop locally.

The final chapter, ‘Display’ will demonstrate how these three factors: the transplanting of the consumer society to Australia, personal connections between settler women and their geographically distant friends and relatives, and the development of class consciousness combined to affect how settler women dressed in New South Wales. Through an analysis of a representative sample of twenty colonial portraits, the chapter will also examine how gentry women sought to distinguish themselves from their emancipist rivals through their choice of clothing and how these women (both gentry and emancipist) sought to represent
themselves through visual media. In particular, this chapter will demonstrate the
difficulties gentry women experienced in trying to differentiate themselves clearly from
emancipist women through dress. While gentry women described their choice of clothing
as reflective of their own ‘good taste’, in opposition to emancipist women, whose dress
they characterised as gaudy and materialistic, but whose dress rarely accorded to that
stereotype. Essentially, ‘Display’ will demonstrate that the private importation of clothing
was less about sartorial display, than reinforcing those connections between colonial
gentry women and their friends and relatives elsewhere in the empire; connections which
were denied to emancipists, regardless of wealth.

Until recently this connection between clothing and class consciousness or even the social
and cultural significance of dress in colonial Australia has gone largely unremarked by
historians. The earliest histories, most notably Cedric Flower’s *Duck and Cabbage Tree*
(1968) were largely pictorial, heavy on description and light on analysis, which reflected
their thematic focus on the aesthetic elements of dress. M. Maynard’s *Fashioned from
Penury* (1994) however, represented a reformation in analysing the history of Australian
colonial dress, arguing, ‘Fashion does not represent a unified message about style… Power
relations instead can be negotiated through the act of consumption, fashion and
adornment’. Thus, the female members of the colonies used fashions to distinguish
themselves from the masses, when they had no other means to do so. Therefore, the
examination of female settlers’ transnational exchange of clothing, is placed within the
broader parameters established by Maynard, where dress was an expression of power.

Examination of colonial dress and its significance for settler women as demonstration of
their superior status affords the opportunity to expand the parameters of multiple
historiographical fields of inquiry, particularly with regard to class consciousness and
expressions of gentility in early colonial Australia. Until recently, discussions of class were
confined to its expression among working-class men and the transformation of English

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8 Maynard, *Fashioned from Penury*, p. 41.
class bound identities into a national culture defined by egalitarianism. Whilst Linda Young argues that Australia’s discomfort with examinations of class consciousness was because it was contrary to the accepted image of our society as ‘classless’ several historians also focused on examining expressions of working class identity because they represented the majority yet had been excluded from academic history until the nineteen-seventies. That need to redress previous biases is still evident in recent historiography, as Grace Karskens demonstrates in *The Colony* (2009) - her panoramic history of early colonial New South Wales. In her discussion of women for instance, Karskens devotes only seven pages to settler women and their experiences in the colony. Again this imbalance is justified in part because convict women represent a far greater proportion of the population than settler women, and because the source material concerning convict and emancipist women is far more abundant.

Linda Young and Penny Russell have done much to redress this imbalance through examination of class consciousness and its maintenance through expressions of gentility (e.g. etiquette) by the colonial elite. Yet Young and Russell confine much of their analysis to the period after 1840 and the letters which form the centerpiece of this thesis were written between 1791 and 1841. This thesis therefore will expand the chronological focus of this subject to the early part of the nineteenth century, when New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land were defined by their status as penal settlements. During this period, wealthy settler women were consumed by the perceived need to define themselves as superior to emancipists (ex-convicts), particularly those who acquired large enough fortunes to the extant they aspired to genteel status in the colony. Thus, this thesis intends

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10 Young, *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth century*, p. 31-32.


to expand on the conclusions already drawn by Young and Russell through an examination of the antecedents to the development of a distinct ‘genteel’ or middle-class identity in colonial Australia.

Finally, the examination of class consciousness is not confined to Australia’s borders. The fact that settler women used their connections abroad as an expression of their gentility serves as a valuable contribution to the field of transnational history. A new field of historical inquiry, transnationalist historiography has to a great extent confined itself to examining two themes. Firstly, exceptional individuals who occupied multiple geographical areas and formed a ‘cosmopolitan’ as opposed to a national identity, as examined in Lambert and Lester’s Colonial Lives and Zoe Laidlaw’s Colonial Connections. Secondly, the construction and subversion of racial boundaries, which was examined in the seminal text Re-Orienting Whiteness. However, certain anthologies have been able to develop transnationalist frameworks outside the parameters of race and nationality. Life Lines examines the correspondence produced by women in early colonial Australia and how those on the frontier combatted isolation by maintaining written connections with those still residing in Britain and other parts of the Empire. This theme was expanded upon in Transnational Ties in Maggie MacKellar’s essay ‘Love, Loss and “Going Home”; The Intimate Lives of Victorian Settlers’.

As such, the question of how privately imported clothing was used as a commodity in the acquisition and maintenance of gentility can and should be placed within a transnational framework. Kirsten McKenzie has placed the issue of class consciousness in Australia within a broader global context, arguing that the strict enforcement of class differences by

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14 Patricia Clarke and Dale Spender Life Lines (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. xxv.

the self-appointed colonial gentry was not only a strategy employed to protect against the encroachment of emancipists upon their status, but also to prove their gentility to those still residing in Britain. In early colonial Australia, for a woman of the colonial gentry to define herself, not as an Australian, but as a member of a transnational colonial elite, was an assertion of superior social status. This reflected the understanding that their true ‘home’ was Britain, not Australia, and was reinforced by the belief, however misguided, that they could return home triumphant once they improved their fortunes in the colony. The private importation of clothing would become one more strategy by which gentry women could advertise their membership of this transnational community.

The behaviour of emancipist women, and their purchase of luxury items, especially fabrics, clothes and fashion accessories, is also placed within a transnational framework. Such behaviour would not have been possible without the development of the consumer society in Britain. It not only provided the materials by which the lower echelons of society could mimic their superiors, but established the expectation that those who possessed sufficient wealth would endeavour to display that wealth, regardless of their previous socio-economic status. In establishing the colonies, the British (whether convict or free) exported not only the consumer society, but the increased sense of class consciousness that developed among the colonial gentry, as a reaction to the equalizing tendencies of consumer capitalism. This thesis therefore becomes not an examination of a national culture, or even local cultures, but rather the global influences which shaped early colonial culture.

The personal exchange of clothes was, until recently, relegated to a few solitary references in the history of Australian colonial dress - a practice which seemed so infrequent and confined to such a small minority of women that it did not warrant further analysis. Yet

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16 Kirsten McKenzie, Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820-1850 (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 4-6, 12-14.

when such a practice is examined from the perspective of those who practiced it, and placed within a broader historical context of class consciousness, status anxiety and the development of the consumer society in Australia, it is possible to recognise its historical significance. For Martha Manning, Anna Josepha King, Anna Bourke, Mary Broughton, Anna Walker, Ann Hassall, Jane Reid, Jane Ranken, Frances Macleay as well as Elizabeth Macarthur and Elizabeth Marsden, clothing and its consumption was an expression of their identity. While each woman appreciated the value of dress differently, nevertheless it was a facet of their colonial experience in all its complexity and thus deserves our examination.
‘Mrs Marsden had requested me to write to you for a few ribbons, sewing silk… you will know what she will want’
– Samuel Marsden to Mary Stokes, 1813.

I. CONNECTIONS

In November 1791, a young Elizabeth Macarthur wrote to her mother in England, describing that: ‘since the Supply had returned from Batavia I have received from her commander Mr. Ball many articles at very moderate prices, besides a number of things which he had the goodness to present to me’. Whilst Mrs Macarthur did not divulge the contents of Mr Ball’s gift, an earlier letter indicate that he was sent to the Dutch East Indies to procure necessary provisions for the colony, particularly food. Clearly Mr Ball had taken the time to purchase something extra for Mrs Macarthur, which may have been food or spices (which the Dutch East Indies were known for), but may have also been other consumer goods from Asia, such as porcelain or cotton fabrics. Half a century later in September 1841 a young woman, Mary Broughton also living in Sydney, recorded in her diary that ‘we ordered Bonnets (etc.) to be sent out to us’, but instead of sending directly to London for a new bonnet, she enclosed her request with a letter sent to her Uncle John who was still residing in England. During the intervening fifty years, there were a further nine free settler women who recorded receiving items of clothing from their family and friends in Britain. This total does not include those women who brought clothing out with them, when they emigrated to the colonies. Whilst this seems a relatively small number, suggesting that the practice itself was uncommon, this sample was taken from an initial survey of twenty one women, suggesting a pattern among settler women. The purpose of this chapter is to comprehensively document how each woman undertook the process of requesting and receiving items of clothing. In doing so, the following chapter will also demonstrate the extent to which such transactions relied on personal connections between

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1 Elizabeth Macarthur, ‘Letter to Grace Veale [mother], 18 November 1791’ Macarthur Family - Papers, 1789-1930, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
2 Elizabeth Macarthur, ‘Letter to Bridget Kingdon, 7 March 1791’ Macarthur Family - Papers, 1789-1930, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
3 Mary Phoebe Broughton ‘Diary 1839-1841’, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
4 Harriot Blaxland requested the purchase and delivery of furniture - but as this chapter is concerned with the prevalence of the private importation of clothing, she is not included in this initial survey.
family and friends located in different parts of the Empire; reinforcing, even establishing new connections.

In the examples of Mary Broughton and Elizabeth Macarthur and their acquisition of clothing, what defines both transactions is their essentially personal nature. It was as much an opportunity for maintaining one’s relationships with friends and family across thousands of miles, as it was an exchange of material goods. For women especially, being separated from the familial and communal networks which had sustained them at home meant that life in the colony could be a lonely one: ‘I long for an opportunity of conversing with you face to face… We seem in our present situation to be almost totally cut off from all connexion with the world’ Elizabeth Marsden wrote in 1796.  
Communities of settler women in New South Wales, especially during the early years of settlement were so few in number that ‘we sensibly feel the loss of every member’ as Elizabeth Macarthur noted on the departure of some friends in March 1791. The exchange of letters and gifts therefore provided an opportunity for women to counter this sense of isolation and preserve a sense of intimacy between family and friends despite being separated by thousands of miles across land and sea.

The personal significance of gifts of clothing and their ability to sustain friendships and familial connections is evident in the experiences of both Mary Putnam and members of the Marsden family. Mrs Putnam, the daughter of Governor Bligh, accompanied her father to New South Wales as his companion and official hostess. Despite the knowledge that her residence in the colony would only be a temporary one, her family nevertheless sent her gifts of clothing along with their letters. In a letter dated 7 October 1807, Mary thanked her mother for sending out a new gown which she described as ‘altogether different and superior to anything of the kind seen in this country’. Her sister Elizabeth also kept Mary abreast of the latest changes in fashion, writing in March 1808 that Mary must notify her as to whether she wanted ‘a summer or winter pelisse’.

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5 Elizabeth Marsden, ‘Letter to Mary Stokes, 1 May 1796’ Hassall Family - Correspondence, Vol. II, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
8 Fletcher, Costume in Australia, p. 18.
Similarly the Marsdens, settled at Parramatta, received a regular supply of fabrics and clothing from their friends the Stokes, who still resided in London. The earliest recorded delivery was received in 1799 when Elizabeth Marsden wrote to thank Mrs Stokes for ‘the bonnet with white satin ribbons’ noting that ‘it is much admired’.\(^9\) Over the next twenty years the pattern would be repeated with the Stokes sending out items of dress and the Marsdens responding with an equal mix of gratitude and elation. Such emotions were proudly on display in one letter sent by Samuel Marsden dated 6 October 1817: ‘I had great pleasure to receive… the gloves which you were kind to send and the little blocks for the children… I wish you could have seen them dancing about the ribbons the night I brought them home’.\(^10\) The Marsdens continued to exchange gifts of clothing as family members settled at different parts of the colony. Ann Hassall, who settled at the O’Connell Plains (near Bathurst) frequently received gifts of clothing from her sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, still living in Parramatta: ‘I send by the post… two large parcels… I beg my little goddaughter’s acceptance of a white frock as a new year’s gift. It is quite plain but I know her Papa (Ann’s husband Thomas Hassall) is not fond of fine clothes’.\(^11\) Like her mother before her, Ann relied on such gifts, not only to acquire necessary, even fashionable consumer goods like clothing, but as a means of maintaining connections with her family, and perhaps also to counter her sense of isolation.

The act of bestowing gifts was also transplanting a tradition to the colonies which had long been practiced in England. Evidence of similar practices has been identified by Amanda Vickery in her examination of the lives of gentry women such as Elizabeth Shackleton. The wife of a local woolen merchant residing in rural Lancashire during the mid-eighteenth century.\(^12\) Elizabeth also received gifts of clothing and jewelry from friends, for as her friend Jane Scrimshire noted in a letter ‘small presents confirm friendship’. Bessy Ramsden certainly intended her own gift to Elizabeth Shackleton for that purpose: ‘I have taken the liberty to enclose a cap which you will do me Great Honour to except (sic)…. I do desire that you will wear it for my Sake and not put it up in

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Lavender’.\textsuperscript{13} The significance of gift-giving had earlier antecedents than the eighteenth century. In fact Elizabeth Shackleton and the Marsden and Putnam families extended this to the colonies were continuing a tradition which had long been practiced by the gentry - using gifts to establish and cement relationships, whether familial, social, economic or political in nature. In earlier centuries, members of the country gentry, like the Verney family, had made gifts of game to their clients and patrons in the cities.\textsuperscript{14} What motivated the shift from gifts of game to gifts of cloth and jewelry was the result of the consumer revolution during the eighteenth century and the subsequent redefining of what constituted a luxury good.

Whilst acts of gift-giving defined the experience of Mary Putnam and the Marsdens, this practice was not sustained solely by acts of generosity between family and friends. Those women willing to pay still utilised the services of their friends and family abroad to act as their agents, purchasing goods on their behalf. Elizabeth Macarthur was one such woman, enlisting her son John to purchase items for the family while he was managing the Macarthurs’ business interests in London, with Elizabeth advising her son:

\begin{quote}
It is of consequence that what we have for our personal use should be appropriate and of superior quality we wear our things out and therefore wear them long - we have no opportunity of changing often… the last cambric muslings we were greatly deceived in, your sisters made them up into dresses they washed to pieces immediately - injured we supposed in bleaching.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Even Mary Putnam and Elizabeth Marsden were not solely passive recipients; they too undertook an active role in acquiring clothing. Mary Putnam, offered clothing by her sister, was asked to state her personal preferences. Elizabeth Marsden instructed her husband as to her preferences in regards to clothing, and he subsequently informed Mrs Stokes, ‘She will also thank you to send to Mr. Green’s Gloves, Newport St for about 5 pounds worth of gloves. Mrs Green knows what sort to send. I have dictated Mr. Birnie to

\textsuperscript{13} Vickery, \textit{The Gentlemen’s Daughter}, p. 192.


\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth Macarthur, ‘Letter to John Macarthur, 7 June 1824’ Macarthur Family - Papers, 1789-1930, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
let you have 25 pounds to pay for the ribbons’. In each case, Elizabeth Bligh and Mary Stokes were the intermediaries, as John Macarthur was for his mother.

Rather than conducting business directly with shops and suppliers in London, the use of personal agents was preferable to such a degree that it could foster new relationships as well as cement old ones. Anna Walker (née Blaxland), in a letter to her sister-in-law Mary Walker, dated 2 June 1825, responded gratefully to Mary’s offer to purchase items on her behalf:

Many thanks for your kind offer… I have often wished I could make such a request but always though it would be too great a liberty we find it much the best way to send to England for anything we want particularly in the shape of wearing apparel as everything of that kind in of an inferior quality or very expensive here… I was always at a loss to know who to ask to make selections for me.17

For both women, Mary Walker’s offer could have been interpreted as a sincere desire to welcome Anna into the family. Yet for Anna such connections had the added advantage of providing her with a connection through which she could obtain highly coveted consumer goods from Britain. By her own admission, Anna had only been prevented from asking this favour of her sister-in-law previously for fear of appearing indecorous.18 The desirability of such a connection is also evident in a letter written by Elizabeth Marsden to Mrs Stokes (dated 15 Jan 1805), where she notes that a Mrs Hughes, wife of the local blacksmith, would frequently enquire as to whether she had heard from Mrs Stokes.19 In all likelihood Mrs Hughes may have only known Mrs Stokes as the source of all those coveted imported goods - and consequently may have wanted to take advantage of such a connection.

Imported fabrics and items of dress were coveted commodities in the colonies. The arrival of a supply vessel from Britain, India or China was an eagerly anticipated event. As such


17 Anna Elizabeth Walker, ‘Letter to Mary Walker 2 June 1825’ Walker Family Papers, 1808-1933, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.

18 Walker, ‘Letter to Mary Walker’

local merchants in advertising their wares would frequently emphasise that their goods were ‘imported’ and consequently of the highest quality and the latest fashion, as is evident in an advertisement published in Sydney on 16 July 1814:

Just imported and now on sale at the warehouse of Henry Marr, Castlereagh Street, the following exceptional articles at the most reduced prices, for Ready money only… British and India prints at particularly reduced prices, brown and white nankeens, blue dungaree, calicoes, India check, a choice assortment of ladies elegant straw bonnets of the latest fashion, green silk umbrellas, long cloths, punjums and ceases, cambric muslin for gentlemen’s cravats, ladies’ dress and checkered muslins, bombazines, durrant, ladies bents, black silk waistcoating, threads and tapes, black sewing silks, silks of all colours, Welsh flannel… ladies shawls, black and white silk hose.\(^\text{20}\)

Marr’s notice is evidently intended to bombard its readers with proof of the abundance and variety of goods available at his Castlereagh Street warehouse.

However, Marr’s copy also demonstrates that imported goods were highly desired by Sydney shoppers, because Marr seems to have assumed that he could generate higher sales by proclaiming the foreign origins of such goods. The abundance of advertising similarly proclaiming the sale of ‘imported’ goods also demonstrates that there was a ready and willing market for such items within Sydney. In the same edition of the *Sydney Gazette* contained advertisements for Indian fabrics, ‘blue, white and yellow nankeens, prints, calicoes and cambric muslins, gentlemen’s Europe and China hats’ to be sold at ‘17 O’ Connell Street’ and ‘India Prints… brown and white nakeens…fine and course calicoes’ to be sold at 96 George Street.\(^\text{21}\) And so there was, for the settlers who emigrated to New South Wales between 1788 and 1851 had departed from Britain during a period when the consumer society was already well-established.\(^\text{22}\) The settler women who sent home for bonnets, parasols and yards of cotton and silk had come to expect that clothes were not simply intended to shield oneself from the elements, but to demonstrate one’s wealth and good taste by being able to replace one’s clothing regularly in accordance with the dictates


of fashion. The private importation of clothing between family and friends thus was merely another method by which to participate in the consumer society and acquire the goods which had ceased to be luxuries and had now become necessities.

The extent to which Anna Walker and Mrs Hughes regarded such connections as coveted commodities also demonstrates that participation in the private importation of clothing was a privilege for gentry women. For all those women who did take advantage of their friends and family in this manner, there were other women amongst the colonial gentry who were denied that opportunity. Mary Wild provides a good example. Despite eventually becoming a landowner in Camden, on her arrival in the colony she was merely the wife a non-commissioned army officer. Had her husband been able to purchase himself a commission, Mary Wild would have been assured of a position within the colonial gentry, but at that stage her only claim to gentility was her status as a free arrival. Despite regularly writing to her mother, who was still living in Ireland, she never requested clothing or fabrics to be sent out to her in Sydney, in part because her mother had no money to purchase such goods. Mary Wild was in fact supporting her relatives at home on her husband’s income, as is evident in a letter dated 5 April 1817: ‘I send you by the Surrey an order for twenty pounds’ along with her profuse apologies that she had not sent it sooner, arguing that numerous expenses previously prevented her from doing so. Those numerous expenses included the purchase of necessary household goods including ‘chairs and… bedding which cost ten pounds’ after the previous occupant of the Wilds’ barrack quarters absconded with the furniture.

Consequently, within this relationship neither party possessed sufficient funds to partake in the trade of clothing.

Jane Williams was presented with similar obstacles. She wrote in response to her mother’s (Jane Reid) request that her daughter send some luxury items to their estate in Van Diemen’s Land, while she and her husband were stationed in India. Yet Williams felt she could not comply as ‘there is really nothing at Poona that I have yet seen that is worth


25 Mary Wild ‘Letter to mother 3 April 1819’ Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.

26 Wild ‘Letter to mother’
Williams attempted to assuage her mother’s disappointment by reminding her that English shawls were equally good, so much so that they may be mistaken for authentic Cashmere shawls. Yet Jane Williams’ ability to refuse her mother’s request and Mary Wild’s ability to survive in New South Wales without sending home for essential goods demonstrates what was to be a significant shift in the trade of clothing between friends and family from being the only source of desperately needed supplies to being an alternate means of acquiring fashionable items of dress; being desirable but not essential.

The high value placed on such personal connections is evident in the fact that the private importation of clothing continued long after it had ceased to be strictly necessary. Comparing the experiences of Elizabeth Macarthur and Mary Broughton demonstrates this development. Mrs Macarthur, writing in the 1790s, had arrived in a colony where even food was in sporadic supply and clothing, fashionable or otherwise, was difficult to acquire. In 1795 Elizabeth described the supply situation to her friend Bridget Kingdon: ‘it becomes necessary to keep large supplies of such articles as are most needed by these people (convicts and emancipists in the Macarthurs’ employ) for shops there are none’. Elizabeth Macarthur was one of the few settler women to provide written records of her experiences during the earliest years of settlement in New South Wales. However it is possible to gain a fuller sense of the desperation that many settler women experienced by examining the personal correspondence of others who travelled out with the convict fleets. One example was Dan Southwell, who wrote to his mother in May 1788; his desperation attested to the difficulty settler women must have also experienced in acquiring even the most basic supplies of clothing:

If it should come easily in your way, source materials for making six pairs of shoes, some very plain second cloth for making a working jacket and two or three dozen small bell mid boutons (sic), one pair of blue duffel trowsers (sic)


28 P. L. Brown (ed), Clyde Company Papers, p. 145. Susan Hiner argues that authentic cashmere shawls were fashionable because of their rarity, often being presented as gifts, rather than being imported wholesale from India. Once European manufacturers were able to replicate Persian design and production methods, they could flood the market with cheap copies. Whilst this fulfilled popular demand, the ubiquitous presence of the shawl also rendered it unfashionable. See Susan Hiner, Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia: 2010), pp. 83-86, 90, 103.

29 Elizabeth Macarthur, ‘Letter to Bridget Kingdon, 1 September 1791’ Macarthur Family - Papers, 1789-1930, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
two coarse hatts (sic), round six pairs coarse thread and 4 pairs of worsted stockings would be very usefull (sic).

Southwell’s choice of clothes was evidently governed by utility rather than the dictates of fashion. Furthermore, Southwell reflects Mrs Macarthur’s sense of frustration, indeed desperation in acquiring the most basic supplies during the early years of settlement in New South Wales. During those years, family and friends were not instruments by which to demonstrate superior social status, but life lines.

However, by the time Mary Broughton wrote to her Uncle John in 1841 requesting the purchase of a bonnet, though, Sydney had been transformed into a thriving commercial centre. Two years prior Christiana Bloomfield had described it as ‘well supplied with English goods of every description. The shops are numerous and full of goods’. Mrs Bloomfield’s mother Christiana Brooks had made a similar observation of Sydney earlier in 1828, writing in her diary that Sydney was now full of ‘well-supplied shops and with the number of well-dressed people in the street you are inclined to fancy yourself in the capital of a flourishing country’. Yet even as fabrics and items of dress were imported into the colony in greater quantities, a sense of need continued to define women’s requests for clothing. Many settler women justified their request on grounds of economy, claiming that it was cheaper to buy fabric and items of clothing directly from England, China and India and have it shipped out rather than purchase from merchants in Sydney. Mrs Eyde Manning justified her purchases on such grounds, writing to her mother: ‘I should be very glad of some cheap gauze or Zeno for Margaret’s curtains as you pay 1/6 per yard here... I suppose you could get for 6d in England. We want so much the difference of price in material’.

Yet it is difficult to accept that such purchases were based solely on considerations of price. Firstly, several letters requesting the purchase of items of dress contain no mention of price. Mrs Manning in the same letter requests that her mother purchase some shoes from

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31 Clarke, Spender, Life Lines, p. 105.

32 Clarke, Spender, Life Lines, p. 92.

‘Mrs Perciville’s… if she has kept my measurements’\textsuperscript{34} Secondly, despite claims of items of clothing being cheaper if purchased abroad, settlers ran the considerable risk of those goods being lost, stolen or damaged at sea, as was the case for Anne Bourke, daughter of Governor Bourke (1831-1837). While spared the misfortune of having her property stolen in transit, she was faced with her own dilemma on unpacking her clothes following the long sea voyage from England: ‘fancy the wet getting through the tin cases to our dresses… there is hardly a box that is not touched more or less by salt water’.\textsuperscript{35}

Fanny Bussell though, who had settled with her siblings in the Swan River Colony in the mid-1830s was less fortunate.\textsuperscript{36} In her journal Fanny recounted how, after requesting that her mother send out necessary supplies of fabric, sewing thread and shoes, the vessel \textit{Cumberland} carrying those supplies was sunk just off the West Australian coast. Fanny lamented that the ‘packages bearing our name were strewn upon the beach’. In addition to the damage the Bussells’ items had suffered, the wreck had also been looted:

Suspicion was roused by the appearance of one of the wives of these men (who had pillaged the wreck) Mrs Walters, a washer woman in a coral necklace a present from dear Capel to Bessie. In the subsequent search quantities of goods, linen with the names cut out and damask table clothes, sheets and towels and other articles. Jewelry broken and mutilated in every possible way has come to light but as yet no traces of plate has (sic) been found.\textsuperscript{37}

The thought that a working-class woman was wearing their stolen jewelry, after waiting so many months for its delivery was clearly horrifying to the Bussell sisters.

Despite Fanny’s misfortune though, there were alternate methods of acquiring of clothing. Examining the classified advertisements in \textit{The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal}, it is evident that that was a steady supply of fabrics and items of clothing imported from Britain, the Cape Colony, Hobart or Sydney. For instance, from 1833 when Fanny arrived in the colony, to 1836 when she concluded her journal, there were thirty nine listings for

\textsuperscript{34} Manning ‘Letter to Mother 17 July 1827’
\textsuperscript{35} Clarke, Spender \textit{Life Lines}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{36} Clarke, Spender \textit{Life Lines}, pp. 209-210
\textsuperscript{37} Clarke, Spender \textit{Life Lines}, p. 228.
sales of shoes alone.\textsuperscript{38} This was despite Fanny’s laments that, ‘Len would have been quite shoeless but for timely present’. However, locally-acquired merchandise did not always satisfy Miss Bussell’s requirements: ‘the shoes I have obtained from Swan River are immensely dear and immensely larger’.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, the Bussell family did have some justification in requesting items of clothing from their mother in England, for purchasing goods locally that were of poor quality or did not fit properly was a poor use of funds. Yet the risk of clothing being lost, stolen or damaged in transit was a palpable one, and combined with the fact that one could spend many months, maybe even years, waiting for the goods to arrive may well have negated any savings which might have been achieved.

Finally, despite settler women complaining of high prices and scarce supplies of fabrics and clothing, such purchases were not beyond the budgets of convicts and emancipists, as has been demonstrated by Jane Elliott in ‘Was there a Convict Dandy?’, her analysis of convict consumer habits. Cataloguing the purchases of three emancipated convict labourers, Ralph Wiggan, Thomas Lucas and David Gardener between September 1803 and April 1804, Elliott calculated that each man had spent the following amount on clothes and related items: Wiggan, £5.13.1, Lucas, £4.13.8 and Gardener, £5.9.4 and not just on hard wearing items. Each man had purchased a pair of duck trousers for 16 shillings, Wiggan purchased 2 muslin handkerchiefs for 13 shillings and Lucas and Gardener had each spent 17s/6d for a calico frilled shirt.\textsuperscript{40} These purchases were not simply intended to protect them from the elements, but were public demonstrations of each man’s prosperity and respectability.\textsuperscript{41} Consequently, either settlers possessed lower levels of disposable income than their emancipist neighbours, or settlers were exploiting an option denied to most emancipists who did not possess such connections abroad as a means of advertising their status as free arrivals to the colony. In either case, settler women choosing to purchase directly from abroad through family and friends, considering the difficulties and

\textsuperscript{38} ‘Classified Advertising’ \textit{The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal}, 12 January, 16, 23 February, 2 March, 7, 14, 21 September, 30 November, 7, 14, 28 December 1833, 4, 11 January, 15, 22 February, 8, 15, 22, 29 March, 5 April, 10 May, 19 July, 30 August, 27 September, 11 October 1834, 8 August, 28 November, 5 December 1835, 16, 23, 30 January, 10, 17, 24 September, 10, 17 December 1836.

\textsuperscript{39} Clarke, Spender \textit{Life Lines}, pp. 224-225.

\textsuperscript{40} Jane Elliott, ‘ ‘Was There a Convict Dandy?’ Convict Consumer Interests in Sydney 1788-1815’, \textit{Australian Historical Studies}, 26, no.104 (Apr 1995), pp. 382-383

\textsuperscript{41} Elliott, “Was There a Convict Dandy?” p. 386.
risks of doing so, were motivated by more than mere consideration for the household 
budget.

In examining the practice of the private importation in clothing it is curious to note that 
the vast majority of examples originate in Sydney and its surrounding settlements. Fanny 
Bussell (Swan River) and Jane Reid (Van Diemen’s Land) represent two notable 
exceptions. The majority of settler women who resided outside Hobart and its immediate 
surrounds were required to send away for clothing and fabric, on account of local retail 
facilities being underdeveloped, supplying only the most basic items. Yet they appeared to 
have few qualms about ordering goods from Hobart, as was the case with Mrs Maria 
Meredith. Residing in Swansea, then known as Great Swan Port, 134 km north of Hobart, 
Mrs Meredith would write to her husband George whenever he was visiting Hobart, 
requesting that he purchase several items on her behalf:

The markets at Hobart are overstuffed with Indian and English goods…
therefore I thought you might meet with bargins (sic), he (Capt. Graydon friend 
to the Merediths) said that Mrs Bosch has now on sale gingham of a superior 
quality at 1/8 a yard but something strong is what I want, should you meet 
with anything to please you do not buy less than thirty to forty yards.42

On the back of the letter, a shopping list had also been written listing ‘Nankeen, Dungaree, 
Blue Cotton, Hats and Cheese Cloth’ among other items. Mrs Meredith’s choices in fabric 
were pragmatic; she preferred hard-weaving, easily washable cottons to more luxurious or 
delicate fabrics such as silks and muslins.43 Mrs Meredith also shopped at Hobart because 
she had to. The earliest record of any retail business in Swansea was in 1833, when John 
Alexander Graham opened his first store.44

Yet as shops began to open at Great Swan Port, settler women in the area began to shop 
locally, as is evident in the purchases of one Mrs Martha Fenton. At a single shop, R.S. 
Waterhouse & Bros. ‘Linen Drapers, Haberdashers, Hosiers and Lacemen’, between 15 
January 1847 and November 19 1849, Mrs Fenton spent a minimum of £17.7.1 on fabrics, 
such as flannel, gingham, muslin and calico, various items of clothing including a dress 
(6/6), a shawl (16s), shoes, neckties and gloves as well as pins, needles and sewing 

42 Maria Ann Meredith ’Letter to George Meredith 25 June 1822’ Correspondence and Associated Papers of 
George Meredith and Family, Tasmanian Archives Office, Hobart, Tasmania.
43 Meredith ‘Letter to George Meredith 25 June 1822’
thread. Furthermore, Mrs Fenton did not lack connections abroad but in one of the few surviving pieces of correspondence received by her from her friend Robert Courtenay in Ireland, there is no mention of dress, or even enquires as to material conditions in the colonies. The letter instead is devoted to an account of the famine situation in Ireland. If Mrs Fenton had desired a connection with Britain, as Anna Walker had, it isn’t evident in her shopping bills. The cost and variety of goods purchased suggest that Mrs Fenton was one of R.S. Waterhouse’s most loyal and enthusiastic customers and there is no evidence to suggest that she was disappointed with the shops in Great Swan Port.

Mrs Fenton’s accounts also demonstrate that settler women in Van Diemen’s Land were as concerned with being well-dressed as their counterparts in New South Wales. One would not purchase silk neckties, lace collars and yards of ribbon as Mrs Fenton did as a shield against the cold, or for the sake of modesty. Writing to her aunt in Clapham, Jane Synnot described the settler women in Launceston, countering any notion that their life in Van Diemen’s Land was akin to life on the frontier: ‘I can assure you they are as fashionable and more so than they are at home… the ladies walk every day in black and the lightest colored satins… their dresses are superb’. Yet for all the women who were concerned with maintaining an appropriately fashionable appearance there were genteel women who rarely, if ever, expressed such concerns. Jane Reid was one such woman. She entertained regularly at her country estate of ‘Bothwell’, and in a letter to her daughter Jane, described the following ball: ‘There were about 80 people at it and everything was arranged in the best style, possible it was kept up until 5 in the morning’. Similarly Annie Baxter during the mid-1830s described in great detail in her diary the dinners, dances and country outings she had attended. Yet she remained apparently unconcerned with how she or anyone else was dressed. The reason for Mrs Reid and Mrs Baxter’s silence on the matter was most likely because there was nothing to report. Many settler women only commented on the appearances of those they felt to be over or underdressed – usually

45 Martha Fenton ‘Cash Book of Mrs Martha Fenton’, Fenton Papers, Tasmanian Archives Office, Hobart, Tasmania.


47 Jane Synnot, ‘Letter to her aunt, Mrs Synod 6 March 1838’, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.

48 Jane Reid ‘Letter to Jane Williams 21 July 1835’, Correspondence of Jane Williams and the Reid Family, Tasmanian Archives Office, Hobart, Tasmania.

overdressed. Yet even those women who most complained of extravagance in dress did not seek to distinguish themselves as Sydney women did by purchasing fashionable items of dress from abroad.

Jane Ranken was the only settler woman in Van Diemen’s Land, apart from Jane Reid, who has been positively identified as having requested items of clothing from family residing abroad. Ranken, who resided in Hobart, justified her decision to do so much in the same manner as many Sydney women did - sending away for clothing because the few available local supplies were prohibitively expensive. As she lamented in December 1821: ‘Oh I wish I had brought a great many things here that I have not. I have written a list of things which I really would require if Willie could find it convenient to send them’. Despite women in Van Diemen’s Land not regularly sending away to family and friends abroad for clothing, fabric and other items of dress, in every other respect they did not differ dramatically from their counterparts north of the Bass Strait. They regularly wrote to friends and relatives at home and abroad, were enthusiastic shoppers and many operated in the highest circles of colonial society. Clearly wealthy settler women residing in New South Wales and choosing to send away to Britain for their supplies of clothing were motivated by additional factors which did not influence their counterparts in Van Diemen’s Land. Such motivations may have had their origins in the relationship between wealthy free settlers and those of convict heritage in New South Wales and the many and varied strategies developed by women who thought themselves members of a distinct colonial ‘gentry’, to distinguish themselves from those they believed their social inferiors. This examination of the context which women of the colonial gentry operated will therefore serve as the focus of the next chapter, Conflict.

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51 Clarke, Spender Life Lines, p. 152.
Colonial Portraiture - I. Gentry Women

Fig. 1. *Elizabeth Marsden*, Richard Read, 1821, Watercolour on Ivory, 7.8 x 6.1 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 2. *Elizabeth Macarthur*, Oil on Canvas, 90 x 70.5 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 3. *Harriott Blaxland*, c. 1835, Oil on Canvas, 89.9 x 63.5 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 4. *Christina Brooks*, Augustus Earle, 1826-1827, Oil on Canvas, 74.4 x 61.7 cm (National Gallery of Victoria)
Fig. 5. *Mrs (Anna Elizabeth) Walker*,
Maurice Fenton, 1840,
Oil on Canvas,
77.5 x 63.8 cm
(Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 6. *Jane Marsden*,
Richard Read, 183-?,
Watercolour, 24.7 x 19.7 cm
(Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 7. *Daughter of John and Elizabeth Macarthur*, c.1825, Watercolour, 7.7 x 6.6 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 8 *Mrs Cooper*, Richard Read, 1833, Watercolour, 33.0 x 26.6 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 9 *Agnes Busby*, Richard Read, c. 1836, 5.7 x 4.7 cm  
(Reproduced in Eve Buncombe, *Artists in Early Australia and their Portraits*  
(Sydney: Eureka Research, 1979), pp. 182-183)

Fig. 10. *Hannah Laycock*,  
Richard Read, 1826,  
Watercolour, 17.7 x 15.2 cm  
(Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
II. CONFLICT

The previous chapter established that the private importation of clothing was common practice among wealthy settler women in colonial Australia during the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, it demonstrated that this practice was considerably more common among settler women living in New South Wales than in Van Diemen’s Land. Such a distinction suggests that women from New South Wales were motivated by more than a desire to maintain good relations with friends and relatives ‘at home’. Indeed, this chapter will demonstrate that the private importation of clothing was a reaction to the social dynamics of the colonies. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the structure of colonial society in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land was defined by an individual’s status as either a free settler or a convict. In Van Diemen’s Land, the divide between convict and free settlers had become so insurmountable by the eighteen-thirties that it would be more accurate to speak of a caste rather than class system in describing the colony’s social structure. ¹ Within New South Wales however, from the outset of settlement the distinction between convict and free was continually challenged by emancipists themselves. The response of the wealthiest free settlers, who identified themselves as ‘exclusives’, was to defend their own social status by denying emancipists the opportunity to use their wealth either to conceal their sordid origins or acquire the qualities of ‘respectability’ and ‘gentility’, which ‘exclusives’ felt were unique to their class and justified the power and privileges their status afforded them.

The convict population had always been the source of much anxiety for the colonial elite. Frances Macleay, daughter of Alexander Macleay, Colonial Secretary (1825-1831), reflected such anxieties, frequently complaining to her brother William of the manners and

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appearance of the convict population. As she noted in a letter in 1826: ‘The lower orders of
the community make money very quickly, they therefore do not know the value of money
and are inclined to squander it away to please any idle fancy’. ² It was an opinion shared
by many contemporary commentators, who feared that the high wages paid to convicts
would allow them to indulge in various vices, particularly the consumption of alcohol,
rather than develop into members of an industrious and thrifty workforce. Furthermore, it
was believed that the prosperity achieved by convicts in the colonies would also
undermine the whole project of transportation.³ For how could transportation serve as an
effective deterrent against crime if ex-convicts could acquire a higher standard of living in
the colonies than they could ever enjoy at home?

A source of even greater concern though, especially among female ‘exclusives’, was the
presence of convicts who had acquired large personal fortunes, either through their own
endeavours or via marriage – as many female emancipists had done. Settlers could tolerate
the presence of ex-convicts if they remained within the ranks of the labouring classes, even
if they objected to their (from the settler’s perspective) extravagant consumer spending.
Yet emancipists who sought to enter the ranks of the colonial ruling class were fiercely
resisted. Mary Wild felt particularly threatened by the presence of wealthy emancipists,
reporting to her sister that ‘some of the convicts had made their fortunes here but if they
ride in a coach and six we dare not associate with them’.⁴ Mary’s attitude towards the
emancipists may have been the result of her precarious social status within colonial
society. Her only claim to superior status was the fact that her husband was a (non-
commissioned) army officer and that she had arrived in the colony as a free woman.
Although Mrs Wild’s husband and later her son would become significant landowners in
the Camden area, at this early stage she occupied a position in society that was only

² Frances Leonora Macleay, Fanny to William: The Letters of Frances Leonora Macleay 1812-1836 (Sydney:
³ McKenzie, A Swindler's Progress, pp. 195-197.
⁴ Mary Wild ‘Letter to sister [Bess Cox]’ 1 April 1819’ Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
marginally above that of an emancipated convict. Perhaps Mary Wild feared that she and emancipists might have been confused as each other’s social equals.

Certainly women who were more secure in their status as members of the colonial gentry did not necessarily experience the same sense of anxiety that Mary Wild did in their relations with the convicts. Nor were they as concerned about maintaining the fine gradations of status that Mrs Wild felt distinguished her from those of convict heritage. Amelia Forbes, for example, regarded the obsession with class in New South Wales as faintly ridiculous, remarking that ‘I always considered such class distinctions objectionable in a small community such as ours’. Yet Mrs. Forbes did not regard members of the colonial gentry ever to be her equals, however, noting ‘nor were the inhabitants of the best class, but we soon made agreeable acquaintances’. Amelia could afford to be blasé about class differences because her husband was the Chief Justice of New South Wales, one of the highest ranked colonial civil servants, thus placing her in the upper echelons of colonial society. As her own superior social status in the colony was never in question – she could afford to be magnanimous.

Many settler women were particularly hostile to those emancipist women who had defied their position by marrying and bearing children to men of genteel status, many of whom had already taken such convict women as mistresses. If such men married beneath themselves they risked being ostracised by the colonial gentry. This was the case for a Major George Johnson who following his marriage to a convict woman was subsequently shunned by his former friends, as Baron von Hugel reported following a visit to the Johnsons’ house in 1834: ‘(the) house had never been entered by respectable people’. Similarly, Jane Synnot’s brother Walter was ostracized by the Launceston community for

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his relationship with a woman of low repute. She is only referred to in the letter as Walter’s ‘infamous companion’ to whom Jane could ‘hardly suppose him to be married’; Jane observed ‘I do not suppose more than one or two gentlemen speak to him and no ladies’.

Jane provided scant details as to the identity of Walter’s partner but the fact that the couple were unmarried was scandalous enough. Whilst such unofficial unions were tolerated, even openly paraded during the early years of settlement in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land, by the eighteen-twenties there was a concerted campaign to eradicate such behaviour.

The children of wealthy emancipists were to a certain extent able to rise beyond the pariah status of their parents, the most prominent example being William Charles Wentworth. The daughters of wealthy emancipists were encouraged to marry into the gentry, and, with large dowries to compensate for any social deficiencies, many did. Yet only the negation of that convict heritage made this possible.

Those convicts who made no effort to mask their lowly origins were scorned by free settlers. This is evident in the testimony of Jane Ranken: ‘the society here in the abominable. Mr Lord (marine officer and landowner) a man worth half a million is married to a convict woman. The Lieutenant Governor Sorrell is married but he left his own wife in England and brought another man’s wife with him in her stead’.

Ranken, though, was describing the composition of Van Diemen’s Land society during its first twenty years of settlement, prior to the appointment of Sir George Arthur as Lieutenant Governor in 1824 and the establishment of Van Diemen’s Land as a separate colony in 1825. During that period the social distinction between emancipists and free arrivals (whether they be settlers, civil servants or military officers) was so indistinct as to be non-existent. However, the fluid nature of Van Diemen’s Land society was increasingly challenged as growing numbers of free

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9 Synnot, ‘Letter to her aunt, Mrs Synod 6 March 1838’, Clarke, Spender Life Lines, p. 163
11 Clarke, Spender Life Lines, p. 152.
settlers sought to establish themselves as the political and economic leaders in the colony while their counterparts in New South Wales were also attempting to achieve the same outcome.

From the eighteen-twenties onwards, civil servants, military officers and large landowners in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land increasingly asserted their status as members of the ‘colonial gentry’. Settler women asserted their superior social status over those women of convict heritage regardless of their wealth or the status of their husbands. Indeed the obsession among the gentry in New South Wales with social status and maintaining the division between classes was so acute that British visitors were pleasantly surprised to find their own hierarchical social structure had been replicated so faithfully. Charles Darwin certainly thought Hobart superior to Sydney noting it possessed ‘a better class of society’. His reasoning was abundantly clear: ‘I suspect society is here in a pleasanter footing certainly it is free from the contamination of rich convicts and the dissensions consequent on the existence of two classes of wealthy residents’. Some regarded its strict enforcement, stricter than in Britain, as extreme, while others found the whole situation faintly ridiculous. James Mundie, for example, who mockingly referred to the native gentry as ‘the ancient nobility of New South Wales’. Even the gentry was not a homogenous group, however, with fine gradations of status determined by one’s wealth, occupation and date of arrival in the colony. Vital to the establishment and maintenance of a colonial gentry were the women: the wives, mothers and daughters of those military officers, colonial administrators and landowners who sought to establish themselves in the Antipodes.

Members of the colonial gentry defended their position vehemently in large measure because they themselves were not of particularly high birth. Most were the impoverished sons of clergy, military and naval officers or younger sons of landowners who had little

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13 Reynolds, A History of Tasmania, pp. 102-103.
14 Young, The Struggle for Class, p. 119.
chance of inheriting the property that would have allowed them to join the ranks of the English gentry. Indeed, by emigrating to New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land many hoped to improved their social and economic position and consequently acquire a status that was not even conceivable in Britain.\textsuperscript{16} John Macarthur, married to Elizabeth, was one such man. The younger son of a Plymouth draper, he disembarked at Botany Bay in 1790 as an ensign (the lowest officer rank). Having been granted 100 acres at Parramatta in 1793, Macarthur eventually acquired an estate which comprised at its maximum extent 60,000 acres. This placed Macarthur on a par with some of the largest landowners in the Empire.\textsuperscript{17} Samuel Marsden, Elizabeth’s husband, despite initially being only engaged as the parish priest, also acquired an estate at Parramatta, becoming Macarthur’s main rival in the burgeoning wool industry.\textsuperscript{18}

Van Diemen’s Land offered similar opportunities for impoverished men of genteel birth, including many retired officers who had been stationed in India and could not afford to retire in London or Calcutta on half-pay.\textsuperscript{19} In acquiring their estates they set out not only to make their fortunes but to replicate the lifestyle of the English country gentleman. By the eighteen-thirties, the north-east of the island was adorned with country estates, dominated by Palladian manors, their surrounding farms worked by large parties of convicts. Gentlemen rode to hounds (Thomas George Gregson especially imported hounds for the purposes of hunting) and race meets were held as early as 1814. Meanwhile their wives paid calls and hosted balls: Jane Williams, a young widow, spent six happy weeks in 1836, staying at several grand houses in the northern midlands, whilst her mother Jane Reid


\textsuperscript{17} Margaret Steven, ‘Macarthur, John (1767–1834)’, \textit{Australian Dictionary of Biography} hosted by the National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, \url{http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-john-2390/text3153}, viewed 11 September 2012.


\textsuperscript{19} Broadbent, \textit{India, China, Australia}, pp. 70-71.
regularly hosted balls at their property, ‘Bothwell’.\textsuperscript{20} Van Diemen’s Land had become essentially an ‘antipodean’ version of the Home Counties.

The success of John Macarthur, Samuel Marsden and the country squires of Van Diemen’s Land is ironic, for they condemned wealthy emancipists for acts they themselves had profited by, amassing large personal fortunes and using that wealth to replicate the habits of the English gentry. The only characteristics that differentiated them from their emancipist neighbours were that they had emigrated freely and nominally were of genteel birth, whereas convicts were more likely to be of working-class origin. As such, the native gentry, in defending their own claims to superior social status, relied not on claims to great fortunes, but rather on possessing the qualities of ‘gentility’ and ‘respectability’. By the early nineteenth century these terms had become interchangeable concepts. Contemporary commentators and modern historians alike have had difficulty distinguishing what defines gentility and respectability. Is either determined by one’s heredity, education, occupation, attitudes, manners, morals or even how one’s spends one’s income? In actuality, each of the above factors has been considered indicative of gentility and/or respectability.\textsuperscript{21} W. D. Smith has been the most successful recent historian to demonstrate the distinction between them. Smith argues that while respectability was demonstrated through one’s behaviour, gentility was thought innate to those of genteel birth: ‘A gentlemen who did not behave as a gentleman was still a gentleman’.\textsuperscript{22} However, Smith still acknowledges that there is a persistent ambiguity regarding these terms, in the past as well as the present. Smith, like several historians before him, also notes that even within


\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{22} Smith, \textit{Consumption and the Making of Respectability}, p. 204
the eighteenth century there was the understanding and the fear that gentility had become a quality that could be learned by affecting the correct behaviour and values.\textsuperscript{23}

Within a specifically Australian context, the colonial gentry sought to distinguish themselves as genteel and to a lesser extent, respectable on the grounds that they were not convicts. A criminal history would deny an individual any claim to either quality; conversely ‘respectable’ men and women were though incapable of committing criminal acts.\textsuperscript{24} The distinction between free and convict in Van Diemen’s Land would prove to be sufficient to protect the gentry status of free settlers against the encroachment of wealthy emancipists.

With the appointment of Sir George Arthur (1824-1836), free settlers in Van Diemen’s Land had acquired a Governor who felt that ‘the time expired convict had still been a Felon…’. Essentially, his mantra was once a convict, always a convict. Arthur’s low opinion of emancipists had a direct effect on government policy in Van Diemen’s Land. Arthur proudly proclaimed to his superiors in the Colonial Office that ‘no emancipist or time-expired convict has ever been received at my table, none have been promoted to a higher municipal office than that of constable’.\textsuperscript{25} In excluding emancipists socially as well as politically, Sir George and his wife Eliza withheld invitations to Government House from any person who had been a convict or was married to one. Even the children of convicts were regarded with disapproval.\textsuperscript{26} Consequently an invitation to Government House in Van Diemen’s Land became proof of unimpeachable gentility and a method of confirming one’s membership of the colonial gentry.


\textsuperscript{24} Respectable young men who committed criminal acts were thought to be engaging in harmless ‘larks’, not motivated by malice or avarice. The idea of respectable young women committing crimes was thought absurd. Carolyn A Conley, \textit{The Unwritten Law: Criminal Justice in Victorian Kent} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 173-178.

\textsuperscript{25} Reynolds, \textit{A History of Tasmania}, pp. 100-101.

\textsuperscript{26} Boyce, \textit{Van Diemen’s Land}, pp. 158-161.
Previously it had been impossible to exclude emancipists, particular female emancipists from the social circle surrounding the Governor because several Governors took emancipist women as their mistresses, even wives, such was the case with Lieutenant Governor David Collins (1803-1810) who kept a succession of convict mistresses, the most famous being Maria Lord.\footnote{Alexander, Obliged to Submit, pp. 32-35, 58.} Furthermore, ‘respectable’ women were severely outnumbered during the colony’s early years of settlement. Essentially their only choice was to join the social circle of the Governor or to exclude themselves entirely, as many did.\footnote{The diary of Robert Knopwood attests to the fact that many ‘ladies and gents’ would frequently attend receptions presided over by ‘Mrs Lord’ the emancipist wife of the late Governor Collins. (Mary Nicholls, ed.) The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood, 1803-1838: First Chaplain of Van Diemen’s Land (Sandy Bay, Tasmania: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1977), pp. 188, 231.} However, from the eighteen-twenties onwards there was an influx not only of free settlers but their wives: by 1831 there 13, 344 free settlers out of a population of 23, 678 of which 4,952 were women (37.1 percent). This demographic shift created a critical mass of ‘respectable women who could form their own self-contained community.\footnote{Robson, A Short History of Tasmania, pp. 168.} Thus, the impenetrable boundary which developed between the colonial gentry and emancipists was in part, the result of Governor Arthur’s exclusionist policies. Crucially though, the Governor may not have been so successful in ostracising the emancipists, for they still outnumbered those who believed themselves the ‘colonial gentry’.

In New South Wales, however, the taint of ‘convictism’ wasn’t sufficient to exclude emancipists from the ranks of the ‘exclusives’, but that doesn’t mean the exclusives didn’t attempt every possible means to ostracise them: ‘There is absolutely no contact between the emancipists and the aristocracy of the colony. No emancipist will ever be found in the Governor’s House or in any private house’ Baron Von Hugel, a visiting Austrian nobleman observed in 1834.\footnote{Baron von Hügel New Holland Journal, p. 203.} Von Hugel’s statement was an exaggeration - many exclusives were compelled to associate with emancipists, if only for the sake of conducting business with emancipists. For by the turn of the nineteenth century, many of the colony’s...
most prominent retailers and merchants were emancipists. For example, following the establishment of the Bank of New South Wales in 1817, several of its directors were also emancipists.\textsuperscript{31} Essentially they were engaged in trades that the colonial gentry felt were beneath their dignity. Furthermore, the exclusives were prepared to tolerate the presence of emancipists and acknowledge their usefulness as long as emancipists understood that they were in no way their social or political equals. Those emancipists and their children who did challenge the authority of exclusives were vehemently condemned. This was the opinion expressed by members of the colonial gentry about W. C. Wentworth and his campaign against Governor Darling, which resulted in the Governor’s resignation.\textsuperscript{32} Frances Macleay expressed the opinion of many exclusives when she described ‘the party in opposition to the Gov’t…. and the emancipists - a vile set of wretches’ and complained that they had no goals except to gain ‘any thing which we have not’.\textsuperscript{33} With the growing political and economic influence of emancipists, exclusives like John Macarthur, Samuel Marsden and Frances Macleay would increasingly rely on their claims to gentility, no matter how spurious.\textsuperscript{34}

The distinction between ‘exclusives’ and emancipists’ was also reinforced by gentry women’s fastidious imitation of English etiquette. Peter Cunningham on his journey through New South Wales in the late eighteen-twenties, observed of Sydney society that:

\begin{quote}
Etiquette is, if possible more studied among our fashionable circles than in those of London itself. If a lady makes a call she must not attempt a repetition of it until it had been returned, on pain of being voted ignorant of due form... rules of precedence are so rigorously insisted upon by some of our ultras that
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} McKenzie, \textit{Scandal in the Colonies}, pp. 80-83.

\textsuperscript{32} McKenzie, \textit{A Swindler’s Progress}, pp. 204-207

\textsuperscript{33} Macleay, \textit{Fanny to William}, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{34} J. B. Hirst, \textit{Freedom on the Fatal Shore} (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008), pp. 141-142.
the peace of the colony was placed in jeopardy only a few years back by the opening of a ball before the leading lady of the *ton* made her appearance.\textsuperscript{35}

Whilst Cunningham’s account (published in 1827) may have been exaggerated for satirical effect, there were cases of genteel colonial women who sought to reinforce fine gradations of status as a method of compensating for their own lack of wealth or title. Frances Macleay provides a good example. Her few, but crucial, claims to gentility rested on the fact of her father’s position as Colonial Secretary and her own status as a recent free immigrant to the colony from Britain.

Yet Frances frequently railed against the power of material wealth and its ability to undermine her own status, which was evident in her condemnation of colonial ladies’ ostentation in dress. She often complained that she possessed neither the time nor the money to maintain a fashionable wardrobe of her own and expressed her indignation that she should be compelled to keep up with the latest fashions, so as to appear genteel.\textsuperscript{36} In a letter to her brother, Frances complained:

> You would be astonished were you to behold how much people dress here – How they manage I cannot imagine, they think of little else I believe – I am sorry to say that we have become quite hated by the ladies here. I do not know exactly why four or five of them are really horrid creatures if half be true that is said of them – everybody exclaims against them and yet they are received in company – this is not right – But they are pretty and rich & that is enough for some folks.\textsuperscript{37}

The ability of dress and to a greater extent material goods to transcend class boundaries represented another challenge for exclusives in New South Wales, though not Van Diemen’s Land. For wealthy emancipists were able to acquire all the goods which defined the gentry lifestyle. This not only included land, but also a lavishly decorated and

\textsuperscript{35} Peter Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, 1966), p. 239.

\textsuperscript{36} Macleay, *Fanny to William*, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{37} Macleay, *Fanny to William*, p. 134.
furnished home, one’s table adorned with exquisitely crafted silver, china and glassware as well as dressing oneself in the latest fashions. Materially, there was often nothing to distinguish the house of wealthy emancipist from that of a well-established free settler, as is evident in comparing Annandale House (fig. 11), the home of George and Esther Johnson with Elizabeth Farm (fig. 12), the first house of the Macarthur Family. The structure and design of both houses conform to the same style of neo-classical-influenced colonial bungalow. This was the challenge posed by the rise of the consumer society to members of the gentry. It was also one which was imported to the colonies direct from the metropole.

Whilst its consequences were especially significant in New South Wales from the turn of the nineteenth century, the consumer society itself was a product of the previous century, originating in what was one of the wealthiest nations, per capita in the world – Great Britain. As a result of the explosion in expenditure on consumer goods, what had been once considered luxuries, became decencies, then necessities. Tea and sugar, cotton, porcelain and pewter cutlery (all luxuries in 1700) had become ubiquitous by 1800, available to all but the poorest and most geographically isolated residents of the British Isles. Many of these new consumer goods were imported directly from India and China, though local production, particularly of textiles, glassware and porcelain were in the early stages of development by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Thus, from the outset of British settlement in New South Wales, the presence of the consumer society was felt. As early as 1790, the Lady Juliana had imported, along with 226 female convicts, items of

38 Admittedly, George Johnston was not a former convict, but Esther Johnston (nee Abraham) was and since women were increasingly thought responsible for the decoration and outfitting of the home during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is significant that a house presided over by an emancipist woman did not differ in any great measure to an ‘exclusives’ house. See Davidoff, *Family Fortunes*, pp. 357-362.


Fig. 11. Annandale House
(State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 12. Elizabeth Farm
(Historic Houses Trust of N.S.W.)
‘military, perfumery and haberdashery’ with the ship’s master setting up a temporary shop on board.\textsuperscript{42} As earlier as 1798, David Collins in describing the state of houses in Sydney, noted that many contained ‘most of the comforts, and not a few of the luxuries of life’, which he attributed to the colonies’ trade with India.\textsuperscript{43} From that first shipment in 1790, the quantity and variety of imports rapidly increased. By 1800 monthly, even fortnightly shipments of fabrics, clothing and fashionable items of dress were being imported from London, Bengal, Calcutta, Madras, Manila, Boston and Cork. Shops quickly replaced ship-board sales, although one-off auctions of recently imported goods remained commonplace, as newspaper advertisements from the eighteen-twenties and thirties would attest.\textsuperscript{44}

Such a proliferation in the variety and quality of foodstuffs, household goods and clothing, though, was a source of persistent concern among many social commentators, chiefly through its potential to disrupt established social hierarchies, by allowing anyone with sufficient funds to purchase goods which had once been the preserve of the wealthy.\textsuperscript{45} Nowhere was this concern more apparent than in the increased consumption of fashionable clothes. Clothes presented a particular challenge to those who wanted to suppress the equalising tendencies of the consumer society because, like foodstuffs, they were cheap, but as with furniture and other household goods, the market for such goods was essentially limitless - one could buy and replace clothes as often as one could afford it.\textsuperscript{46} Finally, the decline and eventual abolition of sumptuary laws during the seventeenth century meant there was no legal impediment to one emulating the styles and dress of one’s social superiors.\textsuperscript{47} As John Style has demonstrated, this development had practical

\textsuperscript{43} Broadbent, \textit{India, China, Australia}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{45} McKendrick, \textit{The Birth of a Consumer Society}, pp. 11-12, 16-19, 52-54.
\textsuperscript{46} Vickery, \textit{The Gentleman’s Daughter}, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{47} Berg, \textit{Luxury and Pleasure}, p. 32.
benefits for many members of the British working classes. For the first time, they may have owned an extra set of clothes, which may have been produced in brighter colours or more elaborate patterns. Yet so radical was this development that it prompted harsh condemnation from many quarters. As early as 1725, Daniel Defoe complained that a woman could be transformed by fashionable clothes from a ‘plain country Joan into a fine London madam’ and Defoe was not the only one:

Our servant wenches are so puffed up with pride nowadays that they never think they go fine enough. It is a hard matter to know the mistress from the maid by their dress; nay very often, the maid shall be much the finer of the two… it seems as if the whole business of the Female Sex were nothing but excess of Pride and extravagance in dress.

Such comments would only become more frequent during the eighteenth century and were more widely applied, eventually condemning everyone’s obsession with fashionable dress, male and female, wealthy and poor alike. Fashionable dress was regarded as symptomatic of a culture divorced from all virtue, entirely devoted to the causes of vanity and hedonism.

Complaints such as these, particularly concerning women’s dress, persisted well into the nineteenth century and were easily translated to a colonial context. James Mundie, reporting on the arrival of a transport ship in Sydney in the eighteen-thirties, described the appearance of the women disembarking: ‘rich silk dresses – bonnets a la mode, ear pendants 3 inches long, gorgeous shawls and splendid veils – silk stockings kid gloves,

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and parasols in hand… they disembark and are assigned as servants’. Mundie’s account is in part satirical, highlighting the humorous incongruity between these women’s pretensions in following the latest fashion and their own low station. Yet far from sharing Mundie’s amusement, many contemporary commentators found such practices disconcerting. Even David Mann, an ex-convict, railed against the female ‘obsession’ with dress: ‘In dress, each seem to vie with the other in extravagance… (it) is meant as a mark of superiority, but confers very little grace and much less virtue on its wearer’. Mann reserved particular condemnation for convict women, regarding them as mere ‘slaves to vanity and pride’ and consequently proposed that women should be issued only with the necessary amount of cloth to make a dress, so as to encourage industry and prevent women trading superfluous items of clothing for superior items of dress.

Persistent criticism of the extravagance of colonial dress of colonial dress, particularly among convict women, as well as proposals that required convicts to wear a uniform – all proved ineffectual. High wages and regular imports of cloth, haberdashery and items of dress meant that convict women were perfectly free to satisfy their consumer desires, already well-developed considering the transformations wrought by the consumer society during the previous century. As emancipists acquired greater personal fortunes, there was a thriving retail market to satisfy those tastes, and as Jane Elliott demonstrates in her analyses of the accounts books of general stores in and around Sydney, the benefits of the consumer society were enjoyed by the small farmers, craftsmen and day labourers, as much as the wealthy merchants who comprised the population of emancipists in the


54 D. D. Mann, Brian Fletcher (Ed.), *The Present Picture of New South Wales, 1811* (Sydney: John Ferguson in association with Royal Australian Historical Society, 1979), p. 44.


In the case of New South Wales at least, the consumer society had proved one of the British Empire’s most successful exports.

Not all commentators, in Britain or throughout its Empire, thought the proliferation of luxury goods to the masses such a sin. As early as 1714, Bernard Mandeville, in his highly influential *The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Public Benefits*, argued that an increase in consumption was beneficial to everyone because it encouraged increased production of said consumer goods and consequently led to higher rates of employment among labourers as well as higher profits for manufacturers. This argument was reiterated by Adam Smith in his classic treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Yet even Smith’s praise of the consumer society appears expedient. The economic benefits were emphasised while the potential for social mobility was downplayed, even ignored. Certainly some early Australian colonists, such as John Macarthur, recognised the practical benefits of widespread consumption. In 1808, Macarthur commissioned a cargo of various goods to be sent out to Sydney on the *Harrington*. Much of this cargo consisted of fabrics (60 rolls of silk) and items of clothing, including 535 pairs of ‘ladies shoes’. There were only 2000 women (convict and free) residing in the colony at that point - so Macarthur must have felt that the small population of wealthy settler women were able to buy multiple pairs of shoes, or more likely he was intending these shoes for sale to a wider market of ‘emancipist’ women. Macarthur, ever the astute businessman, could recognise the potential profit, even if it meant catering to the ‘vanity’ of emancipist women.

For the majority of the ruling classes in both Britain and in New South Wales, though, the consumer society continued to frustrate their attempts to maintain the status quo and their superior social status. During the eighteenth century, the aristocracy believed themselves forced into an ‘arms race’ with an increasingly wealthy middle class, adopting new

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57 Elliott, “Was There a Convict Dandy?”, pp. 382-383


fashions as they emerged and disregarding them as soon as they had been emulated by their social inferiors. The aristocracy constantly dared their rivals on to more extravagant and expensive purchases, and the pace of change within fashion became so frenetic that by the seventeen-seventies fashion cycles had become annual. As one gentleman complained: ‘a man can hardly wear a coat two months before it is out of fashion’. Prohibitively expensive, this model of emulative consumption would not continue outside a very select few into the nineteenth century. Yet it was not the aristocracy who encouraged this shift – they continued to spend lavishly, adorning their homes and themselves according to the dictates of fashion. To this end, they were led by the Prince Regent himself, who thought nothing of making extravagant purchases on a regular basis and consequently plunged himself heavily into debt. Rather it was the middle class, the merchants, manufacturers and members of the professions whose consumer spending was defined by the mantra ‘quality, not quantity’.

The concept of ‘good taste’ and its influence on the consumer spending habits of the middle classes during the nineteenth century represented the practical application of ‘quality, not quantity’. There was the practical benefit of allowing them to lower their expenditure without lowering their status. Yet ‘good taste’ also demonstrated the middle-classes’ respectability, righteousness and personal restraint which distinguished them from the hedonistic aristocracy, just as their gentility elevated them above the rough and uncouth working-classes. In attempting to demonstrate one’s ‘good taste’ though, the middle classes were faced with a dilemma in that they were attempting to advertise, through displays of material wealth, the values of hard work, thrift, modesty and self-discipline, which in several cases would appear contradictory. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the realm of female fashion. Middle-class women were under constant

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61 McKendrick, The Birth of the Consumer Society, p. 56


63 Young, *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 88-89.

pressure to dress in a manner which advertised their husband’s own material wealth without compromising their modesty or encouraging others to question their sexual propriety. The return to wide skirts, long sleeves and covered décolletages (at least during the day), all of which concealed the female figure was perhaps an attempt to address this paradox. Male dress during the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on the quality of fabric, the tailoring, and choice of sober colours and patterns used in the ensemble, rather than adherence to the latest fashion, represented a far more consistent application of the principles of ‘good taste’ to clothing.

The dilemma of the middle classes in Britain became the dilemma of the gentry in New South Wales. The colonial gentry, more so in New South Wales than in Van Diemen’s Land, sought to convey a sense of gentility, through their behaviour, values, and careful selections of consumer purchases, to compensate for their own lack of breeding. Yet they also did not possess sufficient funds to advertise their superior social status solely through ostentatious displays of wealth, for which they could all too easily be confused with wealthy emancipists. Instead, by asserting that their own purchases were proof of their ‘good taste’, the colonial gentry could negate any attempt by emancipists to enter the ranks of the gentry though material acquisitions. Possessing a country estate, riding in a coach and four and dressing the wife and daughters in the latest fashions were not proof that emancipists had entered the ranks of the gentry, only that they were merely trying to overcome their social deficiencies. As Mrs Macarthur explained to her son, ‘at this distance from the mother country, mere articles of show are ridiculous’. Mrs Elizabeth Fenton was more blunt. In examining the attire of a young woman on the journey through the Tasmania frontier she remarked that, ‘the lady of the house arrayed in a very beautiful

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66 Kuchta, *The Three Piece Suit*, pp. 162-172; Young, *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 163-167

67 Macarthur, ‘Letter to John Macarthur, 7 June 1824’
French Levantine dress of pale lilac… I really pitied the poor woman who wished me to suppose this was her usual dress’.\textsuperscript{68}

This is not to say that gentry women in the colonies were unconcerned with fashion. Several letters from women, as noted in the previous chapter, indicate otherwise. Moreover at the wedding of Anna Walker (née Blaxland): ‘the Bride and the Bridesmaids were attired in low necked dress… the Bride in white silk with French white gauze trimmings – the very short waists were then the fashion’.\textsuperscript{69} Clearly on this particular occasion the desire to appear fashionable overrode concerns for modesty. The fact that gentry women reserved their fashionable dress for particular social occasions, such as weddings or receptions hosted by the governor, also attests to the ‘good taste’ of gentry women. Yet, it further suggests that ‘good taste’ was a double standard by which these women defended their superior social status and protect against the encroachment of other women on that coveted position.

Despite their claims to superior status, gentry women in New South Wales clearly felt threatened by wealthy emancipists and their ability to use their money and material acquisitions to erode whatever status gentry women may have possessed. In Van Diemen’s Land, however, there was little such challenge from emancipists. With the increasing exclusion of emancipists from the society of Government House, combined with the virtual monopolisation of the distribution of land via government grants, (land ownership was essential to establishing and maintaining gentry status), free settlers ensured that their superior social status would be protected and preserved for generations. Accordingly, the practice of privately importing clothes was also far more prevalent in New South Wales than in Van Diemen’s Land as it fulfilled the need of gentry women to respond to the challenge posed by wealthy emancipists. That one of the few women from Van Diemen’s Land to request deliveries of clothing from Britain, Jane Ranken, felt


\textsuperscript{69} Anna Frances Walker, ‘Family Traditions and Personal Recollections’, Manuscript held in Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
similarly threatened by the presence of emancipists among the colonial gentry, attests to that fact.

In New South Wales, the private importation not only of clothing, but furniture and other household items, meant that gentry women were acquiring those consumer goods denied to their emancipist rivals. In doing so, gentry women also conveyed their status as free emigrants. Emancipist women, by buying from local suppliers, advertised their convict heritage, even though such purchases were intended to mask that personal history. Thus, the private importation of clothing and other consumer goods even seems to have inverted the equalizing tendencies of the consumer society. Yet to what extent were women of the colonial gentry able to represent themselves, through their consumer purchases as different from their emancipist rivals? The next chapter, Display, will explain how colonial gentry women displayed their superior social status through their choice of consumer goods, especially clothing, and assess to what extent they were successful.
Fig. 13. *Esther Johnston*, Richard Read Senior, 1824 (Private Collection)

Fig. 14. *Mary Reibey*, c. 1835, Watercolour on Ivory 5.9 x 4.7 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 15. *Ann Piper and Her Children*, 1826, Augustus Earle, Oil on Canvas, 196.3 x 131.3 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 16. *Mrs. Celia Wills, daughter of Mary Reibey*, c. 1820-1825, Watercolour on Ivory, 8.9 x 6.8 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 17 Julia Johnston, Richard Read Senior. 1824 (Private Collection)

Fig. 18. Jane Penelope Atkinson, c.1828, Watercolour on Ivory, 8.7 x 6.8 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 19. *Mrs Jane Thompson*, Richard Read, 1836, Watercolour, 36.2 x 26.5 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 20. *Mrs Hannah Thompson*, William Nicholas, 1839, Watercolour, 36.2 x 29.2 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
Fig. 21. *Woman* [unknown], Augustus Earle, c. 1828-1830, Watercolour, 26.0 x 23.7 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Fig. 22. *Woman* [unknown], c. 1825-1840, Oil on Canvas, 57.0 x 48.4 cm (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)
‘You would be astonished were you to behold how much people dress here’
Frances Macleay to her brother William Sharp, 1827.

III. DISPLAY

The previous chapter attempted to provide an explanation for the motivations behind ‘exclusive’ women conducting their own private trade in fabric, clothing and other items of dress, despite the entire practice being often highly impractical in its execution - considering the cost, long delivery times and risk that such goods would never reach their intended destination. However, it also demonstrated that while such practices were common among women in New South Wales, the pattern was not, in general, repeated in Van Diemen’s Land. Essentially, beyond its function of cementing relationships between family and friends over vast distances, the private importation of clothing helped to maintain a colonial social hierarchy which placed ‘exclusives’ like Elizabeth Macarthur and Elizabeth Marsden at its apex. That hierarchy, while strictly enforced in Van Diemen’s Land, was subject to constant challenge in New South Wales from wealthy emancipists. The importation of clothing restored to elite women’s dress a sense of exclusivity which it had largely lost with the development of the consumer society. It also provided an additional method by which ‘exclusive’ women in New South Wales could distinguish themselves socially from women of convict heritage. For clothing and fabrics received from family and friends abroad demonstrated at least to women belonging to the New South Wales colonial gentry that they were not isolated from Britain or the Empire. It signaled that they belonged to a transnational community, set apart from those of convict heritage, bound to the Australian colonies because they had been excluded from their own homeland. This particular factor, as much as the desire to exude the qualities of refinement and good taste, explains why women in New South Wales sourced their clothing in this manner.
The extent to which the dress of colonial gentry women was affected by the private trade in clothing is perhaps best demonstrated by their curious relationship to the concept of ‘fashion’. It would be erroneous to argue that gentry women were not concerned with fashion - that it was only the concern of avaricious and social climbing emancipists. Rather, gentry women who participated in the trade of consumer goods with family and friends took great pains to ensure that not just their clothes, but linen, tableware and furniture had all been purchased from that centre of fashion, London. Such was the popularity of British manufactures, that in New South Wales, those who could afford it bought British (and from London where possible), rather than from India and China, or even deign to wait for such items to be imported into Sydney.¹ Harriot Blaxland, for instance, when purchasing the furniture for the new house being built on their estate ‘Newington’ (19km west of Sydney) wrote to her friend Mrs Tilden in Kent: ‘I shall request the favour of you, to purchase materials for the drawing and dining room furniture and your taste will do justice to the style of our houses… in this you will of course be guided by fashion’.² Purchasing goods on the basis of location, rather than their quality, was another practice exported from Britain. Elizabeth Shackleton, a member of the Yorkshire gentry, made it her custom to purchase consumer goods, from London which she regarded as the ‘centre of fashion’ in Britain. This was thought to compensate for the fact such items could not easily or regularly be replaced in accordance with the latest fashions - either because of expense or effort involved in doing so.³

Many women who arrived in Australia with their husbands sent out on colonial assignment and whose stay was expected to be temporary brought out everything they felt they would need so as not to be reliant on local retailers. Such cargoes could apparently be very large indeed, as was the case with Anna Bourke who reflected in her dairy shortly after her arrival in the colony: ‘I have been very busy unpacking these two

days, tho’ (sic) we have not got half the things from the ship’. Amelia Forbes had made similar arrangements for her stay in the colony noting that ‘The furniture which we had brought with us had been put in its place... when our own furniture had been moved nothing could be more complete or comfortable’. Transporting furniture for the duration of an individual’s stay was an understandable course of action for both women, as furniture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was often purchased for life, and rarely replaced. Being expensive and long-lasting, it made little economic sense to replace such items only in order to remain fashionable. Such items also acquired further value on being bequeathed to subsequent generations. However, Amelia Forbes, who was to reside in New South Wales for twelve years, also claimed ‘I seldom went into the town as the shops were not very tempting and we had brought a supply of clothing from England sufficient to last us for some time’. Whether she was motivated by the need for financial restraint or desire to purchase her clothes only when she was at home in Britain, Lady Amelia seemed content, at least at the outset of her stay, to forgo regularly replacing her clothes so as to keep up with the latest in fashionable dress.

As with the expression of wealth through the acquisition of furniture, it would have been virtually impossible for the ‘exclusives’ in New South Wales society to remain at the forefront of fashion. Unless women of the colonial gentry had wealthy and well-connected friends and relations who were prepared to regularly post fashionable items of dress as soon they were made available, they would have not been able to capitalize on such connections to ensure that they were first in the colony to adopt the latest fashions. Not only could wealthy emancipists compete with them in terms of expenditure, but both parties had equal access to information as to what was and was not considered fashionable. The pages of the Sydney Gazette during the eighteen-twenties and thirties contain printed excerpts from the latest editions of such fashion magazines as: La Belle 

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4 Clarke, Spender Life Lines, p. 76.


Assemble, The Lady’s Magazine and Ackermann’s Repository of Fashion. As one excerpt from The World of Fashion printed in the Sydney Gazette on 3 July 1830, demonstrates, such reports were extremely detailed as to what was presumed to be at the forefront of fashionable dress:

Black satin dresses, trimmed with velvet are also much in favour, and fringe is still universally worn. This article is now brought to a high degree of perfection; its beauty and richness is a sort of criterion of the taste and rank of the wearer. Some new patterns, both in chenille and feather fringe, have been lately introduced by Mrs. Bell. We noticed one of the former, of a particularly elegant description on a dress of granite velvet, which was finished round the bust and sleeves in a most tasteful manner, with this beautiful fringe.

The reference within the article to a specific person - Mrs Bell - provides a sense of intimacy between writer and reader. Such details, in addition to reports of fashionable fabrics and cuts, may have been greatly appreciated by the colonial readers of these fashion pages, separated by thousands of miles from the global centres of fashion in London and Paris.

Yet rapid transmission of the latest development in fashion was a relatively recent development in the eighteen-twenties; during the earliest years of settlement in New South Wales, an absence of such published reports on the subject of fashionable dress meant that everyone was dependent on private correspondence for information concerning the latest fashions. Such was the case for Elizabeth Macarthur whose friend Bridget Kingdon first informed her of the shift in female fashion towards the ‘empire style’ of dress:

I now give you some account of the fashion, particularly of the ladies dress, but you know my inability to discuss the subject – There is no such thing as a waist – stays are quite unnecessary part of female dress – The petticoats are up to the

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9 ‘London Female Fashions for February’, The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, 3 July 1830.
shoulders, and below the feet. Hats are still worn small, but indeed dress as you will you are not thought particular unless you have a long waist, and it is very seldom that we see two people whose garments are made the same.\textsuperscript{10}

Mary Putnam was similarly kept informed as to changes in fashion by her sister Elizabeth.\textsuperscript{11} Again, such correspondence preceded the regular inclusion of such excerpts in the colonial newspapers, the earliest example of which appeared in April 1827.\textsuperscript{12}

Around this time, advice as to the latest fashion disappeared from the letters of colonial women, though requests and gifts of fabric and clothing continued. Evidently, with information from respected sources as to the latest fashions now publicly available, its transmission through private correspondence ceased to be necessary. For trusted female correspondents in Britain such as Bridget Kingdon, who were previously expected to provide such information, this would have been a considerable relief.

Again, these practices suggest not that ‘exclusive’ women were uninterested in fashion, merely that they were developing methods by which they could distinguish themselves from wealthier emancipists - methods which became increasingly difficult to sustain in succeeding years during the eighteen-twenties and thirties. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, genteel women in New South Wales, much like the rising middle-classes in Britain, sought to define their social status as a reflection of their innate gentility.

Gentility was conveyed through both behaviour but also via an individual’s choice of possessions, including clothes which were fashionable, but not overly decorative. In the case of female dress, it ideally conveyed the particularly feminine qualities of delicacy and meekness.\textsuperscript{13} It is difficult to discern from the available source material exactly how genteel women dressed on a daily basis. Yet it is possible to gain some understanding of how they wished to be seen by society through an analysis of their portraits.

\textsuperscript{10} Onslow, \textit{Some Early Records of the Macarthurs}, p. 53.

\textsuperscript{11} Fletcher, \textit{Costume in Australia}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{12} ‘Female Fashions for November’ \textit{The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser}, 16 April 1827.

Twenty one portraits examined here consist only of women whose identities can be confirmed; twelve of which were of gentry women and nine were of either emancipists, or the wives, daughters or daughters-in-law of emancipists. Another two provide no information as to the identity of their subjects. Furthermore, the portraits of those gentry women, are not representative of the entire colonial gentry - many of them belong to the highest ranks of that class, including Elizabeth Macarthur, Harriott Blaxland, Elizabeth Marsden and their respective daughters, as well as Chritsiana Brooks (Figs. 1-7). This is balanced by an examination of the portraits of a Mrs Cooper (first name unknown), Hannah Laycock and Agnes Busby (Figs. 8-10), which unfortunately are the only three portraits of (obscure) gentry women extant. An analysis of colonial portraiture cannot explain how those women on the very margins of the gentry chose to display themselves through visual media, to the rest of society and particularly those wealthy emancipist women whom they felt so threatened by. Yet even among the wealthiest women of the colony, there is a desire to represent themselves as practiced practitioners of ‘good taste’ and thus this subject is worth examining in greater depth.

In examining early colonial portraiture, the clothes worn by the majority of their female subjects, despite not being of the latest style, nevertheless conform to the board pattern of fashion which could be observed elsewhere in Europe and America. These shifts are particularly evident in the shape and position of the waistline. For example in a portrait of Mrs Elizabeth Marsden completed in 1821 (Fig. 1) shows the waistline is located just under the bust. This was a continuation of the earlier empire line and a trend which continued until the early eighteen-thirties, as is evident in an 1833 portrait of a ‘Mrs Cooper’ (Fig. 10). The structure of the waistline and bodice was suddenly altered around 1836, shifting towards the position of the natural waist and forming a ‘V-shape’ pointing down, as can be observed in a portrait of one of Elizabeth Marsden’s daughters, Jane (Fig. 6).14 Similar attention to fashionable details are evident in the construction of the sleeves. Portraits

painted during the eighteen-thirties depict their female subjects wearing the wide ‘gigot sleeves’, these rapidly contracted during the next decade (Figs. 3, 5).

However, particular stylistic choices also reflect the differing ages of these women, particularly in the matter of their hair. Younger women dressed their hair according to the latest fashion, arranged high upon their heads, with ringlets hanging either side of their face (Fig. 5, 6, 8, 9). Yet the older women covered much of their hair under mob caps (Fig. 1, 4, 12). Middle-aged women occupied a half-way position between the two, affecting both the cap, which was itself often elaborately decorated with lace, ribbons and/or flowers, as well as curling the hair around their face (Fig. 3, 7). It was also crucial for these women to advertise their own ‘good taste’. Consequently, in examining the clothes worn by Messrs. Blaxland, Macarthur and Marsden, as well as their daughters, what defines their dress is their inherent modesty and sobriety, in terms of colour and decoration. With regards to modesty, it can be observed that the arms and much of the decolletage remains covered. Decorative trimmings such as embroidery or lace edging are kept to a minimum, as are accessories. (Fig. 4) Often the only item adorning any of these females subjects’ clothes is a shawl, intended to cover any exposed part of the neck or shoulders (Fig. 9, 10). Jewelry is strictly limited to a necklace, brooch or pendant, worn with a long chain and clasped at the waist (Fig. 1, 2, 7). Furthermore, none of these women are adorned in printed fabrics, which being readily available and extremely popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, would have again equated gentry women with the emancipist majority. Thus, the choice of fabric becomes another strategy by which gentry women distinguished themselves as superior. Through the careful selection of fabric, fashion accessories and the adornment of their hair and body, the genteel women

of New South Wales attempted to resolve the paradox of maintaining one’s piety, while also advertising one’s wealth - or at least the wealth of one’s husband. At least within the bounds of their portrait, rendered in oils or watercolors, they came to embody the concept of ‘good taste’. Yet this form of representation, which was initially intended to openly display the differences between exclusives and their emancipist rivals, would later be copied by some of those emancipist women.

The three emancipist women examined here (Fig. 13, 14, 15) who were wealthy enough to commission a portrait of themselves understood the transformative power of that medium. Far from aiming for verisimilitude, portraiture could allow their subjects to exclude all that was nefarious from one’s past and portray only those visual elements that protected, preserved and promoted their reputation. Such qualities were highly appealing to any former convict who wished to be accepted into the confined society of the colonial gentry, or at least to promote the interests of their children in that respect. For the emancipist women who struggled against the prejudices of genteel ‘exclusives’, portraits allowed them to portray themselves as modest, sober and living within the bounds of sexual propriety - all the qualities that contemporary commentators assumed they were to have rejected as convicts. They also represented themselves as practitioners of good taste. The portraits of these emancipist women represent their subjects as dressed in much the same manner as genteel women, conforming to the basic parameters of the current style, but whose clothes are neither ostentatious nor indecorous. Even in miniature portraits, which were intended to be seen only by close friends and family (not for public display), there is still the same deference to the principles of ‘good taste’ in the subjects’ manner of dress. Such is evident in the portraits of both Mary Reibey and her daughter Jane Atkinson (Figs. 13, 18). Even privately, these women presented themselves as how they wished to be seen by everyone else.


Consider the examples of Ann Piper, Esther Johnston and Mary Reibey. Of these women, both Reibey and Johnston were former convicts and Ann was the daughter of convicts. They each married men who had been stationed in the colony in an official capacity and who later became landholders. Yet in examining the portraits of these women, none of that history is apparent in how they have dressed themselves. Mrs Piper’s ensemble conforms to the present fashion of placing the waistline just underneath the bust, and short, puffed sleeves (Fig. 15). Esther Johnston and Mary Reibey show less consideration of present fashions, befitting their advanced age (both women would have been in their mid-to-late fifties) (Fig. 13, 14). Instead, both women affect the mob cap and the shawl, avoid exposing both their shoulders and their neck, limit any adornment to a single cameo brooch, and in Esther Johnston’s case, decorates her cap with blue ribbon. Yet the impression given by each portrait is that their female subjects are all prosperous but also respectable; well-dressed but not ostentatious.

This strategy of presenting an image of propriety in spite of one’s sordid personal history, was a strategy adopted by these women’s daughters (Fig. 16, 17, 18), as well as by women who had married emancipists such as the Thompson sisters, Jane and Hannah (Fig. 19, 20). As the dress of these women demonstrates, the concept of ‘good taste’ therefore could only serve as a minor distinction between those women of gentry status and those women of convict heritage. So much so, that when examining the portraits of women whose identities remain unknown, it remains impossible to determine whether those women were emancipists or ‘exclusives’ (Fig. 21, 22). The convict stain that women like Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Johnston tried to mask in part by their style of dress would not be sustained over succeeding generations, especially as there was were increasing levels of intermarriage between those descended from emancipists and free settlers.21 Again the specifics of what one wore did not sufficiently demonstrate one’s class or superior or inferior origins, and this is why where an individual bought their clothes became as important as the specific items purchased.

As noted earlier in the chapter, women belonging to the colonial gentry in New South Wales sought to distinguish themselves not necessarily by what clothes they wore but by where they obtained such fabrics and items of dress. It was important to them that such items were not from Sydney, but London and occasionally Canton or Calcutta. These international transactions, conducted with the aid of family and friends abroad, were intended to establish and affirm the connections between the imperial centre and its colonial periphery. Even if such connections were not advertised publicly, but confined to a private world of letters and parcels, they at least confirmed in the minds of genteel women that they were not exiles from their homeland, like the emancipists. Rather they belonged to a transnational community of colonial elites and occupied a social position that was superior to those who were compelled by birth or circumstance to identify themselves as being from New South Wales, the penal colony.

The majority of gentry women in New South Wales did not regard themselves as belonging to that place because of the low esteem the colony was held in, not just by those residing elsewhere in the British Empire, but across the globe. Certainly there were exceptions, commentators who thought the colony a blank canvas, a chance to construct a new society devoid of the social and political problems which plagued old Europe. One such visitor was François Péron, who was commissioned in 1802 by Napoleon himself to lead a scientific expedition to Australia. In his reflections, Péron expressed much praise for early colonial New South Wales, citing: its miraculous ability to transform former prostitutes into virtuous wives and mothers, its education system providing practical and moral instruction for its young people and the early colony’s radical policy of equitably distributing ‘all the articles (furniture, tableware, household linen) necessary for the various purposes of domestic life’ from government warehouses. Yet even those commentators who conferred praise on the young colony could be qualified in their praise. Edward Gibbon Wakefield in A Letter from Sydney, the Principal Town of Australasia (1829), celebrated the Australasian colonies as a source of boundless opportunity, but

nevertheless argued that colonies such as New South Wales could only reach their full potential once transportation was abolished. Until such time, New South Wales would fail to attract industrious and respectable migrants because the shame of residing in a penal colony would outweigh any benefits of migration.\textsuperscript{23} Yet even these admirers were in a minority.

The vast majority of foreign observers of life in New South Wales veered between regarding the colony as either a horror story or a joke. Efforts by colonial governors to render transportation a suitable deterrent against crime conjured up in England horrific accounts of cruelty towards the convicts and convinced the reading public of the essential barbarousness of life in New South Wales.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, attempts by former convicts and their children to exercise their political rights, particularly self-governance, were dismissed by many as a joke. As a contemporary poem demonstrates, the thought that lawbreakers could become maw-makers was ludicrous:

\begin{quote}
A precious tale the Australian sage weaves
A House of Commons for a den of thieves\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The combination of horror and humour meant that New South Wales was held in very low esteem in Britain during first half of the nineteenth century. Those who emigrated face the embarrassment and scorn of their peers and the entreaties of their families not to leave. An official positing may have at least allowed an individual to frame the journey as an unfortunate, but necessary course of action with the promise of return. Residence in New South Wales therefore represented a significant loss of caste, as J.H. Bent (appointed as a judge of the civil court in N.S.W) understood. To compensate, he requested a knighthood ‘to raise the character of the Colony and add as much respectability as possible to the


\textsuperscript{25} Hirst, \textit{Freedom on the Fatal Shore}, p. 176.
situation I am going to hold’. Bent was refused.\textsuperscript{26} The convict ‘stain’ was one therefore that could be attached even to those at the highest echelons of colonial society.

The loss of social cachet experienced by those who lived in early colonial New South Wales meant that gentry women attempted to define themselves, not as ‘Australian’ as many of the native-born were beginning to do by the eighteen-twenties, but as members of a global network of colonial elites.\textsuperscript{27} As Zoe Laidlaw has argued, such networks were often unofficial; established as a result of shared experience in education or career. Many of the colonial governors serving during the eighteen-thirties were veterans of the Peninsular Wars (1808-1814) and the Battle of Waterloo (1815). These networks were then reinforced and extended by ties of marriage and later, blood.\textsuperscript{28} Laidlaw, though, was describing the experiences of colonial officials, particularly governors, who relied on personal networks as a source of information and advice (usually from colleagues stationed in other colonies) or to exercise influence through friends and relations residing in London.\textsuperscript{29} The use of such personal connections to symbolically tie oneself to ‘home’ in Britain is also evident in the correspondence of gentry women in New South Wales.\textsuperscript{30} Letters home and the practice of receiving or requesting deliveries of clothing, as demonstrated in \textit{Connections}, were strategies by which women could eliminate or at least lessen the sense of distance. It also reinforced those connections which defined one as part of an extended British colonial community. So too did the practice of educating one’s children in Britain, sourcing fellow members of the colonial elite as marriage partners and vowing one day to return home to Britain, as Elizabeth Marsden did: ‘Old England is but more than a pleasing dream…. I cannot but flatter myself with some distant hope that it will again be with me as in months past’.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{26} Hirst, \textit{Freedom on the Fatal Shore}, pp. 176-178.

\textsuperscript{27} Hirst, \textit{Freedom on the Fatal Shore}, pp. 179-180.


\textsuperscript{31} Marsden, ‘Letter to Mary Stokes, 1 May 1796’
It was also a useful strategy because it was one essentially denied to the emancipists, and to a lesser extent their children. As exiles from their place of birth and mostly working class in origin, emancipists could not forge such global networks as either exclusives or ordinary free settlers did. Such was the case of the convict woman, Susan Winwood, who was transported to Van Diemen’s Land and assigned as a servant to Abraham Biggs, a master carpenter living in Hobart. In a letter to his mother, Biggs asked ‘if you could do her this kindness’ and contact Susan’s family in England, as she unable to because none of her family could read or write. For more prosperous emancipists women and their children, the ‘stain’ of their convict heritage prevented them from taking advantage of inter-colonial networks, as was the case of Mary Ann Shearers. Her husband Captain Piper, was ostracized by his family in England by cohabiting with the daughter of First Fleet convicts, as much as he was by the ‘exclusives’ in Sydney. Yet Mrs. Piper seemed to be able to manipulate what connections she did have to purchase articles of clothing direct from the London merchants ‘Harding, Ashby, Allsop and Co.’ In a receipt from 1819, Mrs. Piper is recorded as having bought the following goods: ‘embroidered muslin bordered dress’ (13), ‘embroidered muslin handkerchief’ (1) and a ‘wreath of flowers’ (1.6.0), all of which it was noted on the receipt were of French origin. These items were purchased on Mrs. Piper’s behalf by Andrew Allan, so she had evidently established her own network or co-opted that established by her husband. Yet she seems from the evidence available to have been the exception to the general rule, being the only emancipist woman positively identified as purchasing clothing direct from London. Thus the practice of privately trading in clothing appears to have been one of the few practices that ‘exclusive’ women in New South Wales could largely confine to their own class.


34 Cedric Flower, Duck and Cabbage Tree: A Pictorial History of Clothes in Australia, 1788-1914 (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1968), p. 18

35 Flower, Duck and Cabbage Tree, p. 18.
In establishing themselves as members of the global network of colonial elites by receiving or requesting articles of dress from abroad, what is curious is that these gentry women rarely seem to refer to the foreign origins of their clothes, either to emancipists or members of their own class. As least that is the impression conveyed by their diaries and correspondence. Despite frequent commentary on the styles of dress affected by other women in the colony, whether positive or negative, no mention is made of where said clothes were obtained. For example, in a letter sent by Harriot Blaxland to her daughter Anna, she described the guests attending a party hosted by Mrs. Forbes:

A most aristocratic selection of ladies, all in full dress. Book muslin with… silks, satins and we wore our blues like you with tippet and sleeves of book muslin and we were complimented on the tasteful appropriateness of our dress.36

Frances Macleay, whether praising or condemning (more often condemning) the dress worn by colonial women, neglected to mention where such articles originated from.37 There are some references to foreign articles of dress, one of which comes from Elizabeth Marsden. In a letter to her friend Mrs. Stokes she noted that ‘the bonnet with the white satin ribbons is much admired’38 but by whom Elizabeth does not reveal. Anna Frances Walker, describing her mother’s wedding ceremony, notes the foreign origins of the bride’s trousseau and that ‘the bridesmaids’ dresses were ‘beautiful Dacca muslin, which Mrs. Ritchie had brought with her from India’. Yet it is not clear that the foreign origins of those dresses were known by the wedding guests. Again, in the written accounts left by gentry women, we are faced with the paradox that the clothes and fabrics intended to display one’s international connections were not advertised or even commented on publicly.

Consequently, was this practice about public display or private affirmation? Essentially it was both. The fact remains that throughout the first half of the nineteenth century goods

38 Elizabeth Marsden, ‘Letter to Mary Stokes, 6 September 1799’ Hassall Family - Correspondence, Vol. II, Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.
imported directly from Britain were much desired by women in the colonies. As Peter Cunningham reported in his ‘Letters’, women in New South Wales were so enamoured of London fashions that, ‘the moment a lady blooming fresh from England’ had arrived in the colony, the local female population would emerge ‘to take note of the cut of her gown, the figure of her bonnet, and the pattern and colour of her scarf or shawl she displays upon her shoulders’. [Footnote] Furthermore, women belonging to the colonial gentry did take the time, effort and expense to order fabrics and items of dress courtesy of friends and relatives in Britain and thanked them profusely for their diligent exertions. Although references to imported items of dress are scarce in the written sources, this doesn’t negate the possibility that women attempted to display their transnational connections through choice of clothing. Anna Blaxland, for instance, in her portrait (c. 1840) wears a richly embroidered crimson cashmere shawl. Her mother had bequeathed to her daughter a crimson shawl which was presented to her by Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India. Margaret Maynard posits that it was the same shawl. If Maynard is correct in her inference, it would suggest that Anna Blaxland intended to display not only her transnational connections, but her illustrious lineage through the wearing of that shawl.

Yet it is also the case that by the eighteen-twenties articles obtained from abroad would not have distinguished gentry women in New South Wales as clearly as they did at the turn of the century. Fabrics and clothing from Britain, China and India were being imported in greater quantities year after year - and anyone, including emancipists could purchase them if they could afford it. How such fabrics, clothing and other items of fashionable dress were acquired would only have been known had women like Elizabeth Marsden, Anna Walker or Martha Manning advertised that fact publicly.

We established in Connections that the fact that this practice continued long after it had ceased to be practical, and the fact that women in the colonies specifically purchased items from abroad rather than remaining content to receive gifts suggests that it wasn’t

motivated simply by the desire to maintain ties with one’s family and friends. Rather this practice achieved the twin goals of tying the colony gentry to Britain and distinguishing them from the local population, at least in their own minds. These clothes therefore became as much about achieving belonging, as displaying one’s connections and by extension, superior breeding. Through the private importation of clothing, the colony gentry developed another strategy to join themselves to that transnational community of colonial elites and which existed above the national community which would eventually become ‘Australia’.

As the next generation of native-born children came of age, they did not possess those personal connections with Britain (either themselves or through living relatives). As such, they came to regard Australia as their home. Furthermore, each new generation descended from emancipists became further separated from their convict heritage, and consequently became acceptable marriage partners for the descendants of the original free settlers. The old divide between convict and free had been eroded by the eighteen-fifties, largely as a result of individuals’ complete negation of their convict heritage. The combination of these two factors meant that the motivation for the private importation of clothing had largely dissipated. Maintaining class distinctions would remain a pertinent issue for members of the colonial gentry throughout the nineteenth century, but those anxieties, and responses to them found new forms of expression. By the onset of the Gold Rush, the private importation of clothing had, for the most part, become a thing of the past.

41 Robinson, The Hatch and Brood of Time, pp. 53-57.
43 Young, Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century, pp. 148-150.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided some explanation as to why so many wealthy settler women, out of the available source materials, which are somewhat limited, in colonial Australia between 1788 and 1850 willingly chose to purchase articles of dress from retailers thousands of miles away in Britain, enlisting friends and relatives to act as their agents. Whilst many women attempted to characterise such actions in practical terms, claiming it was cheaper to purchase directly, we have established that such reasoning was often spurious. The time, effort and expense of shopping ‘globally’ rather than locally, and the inherent risk that it would be rendered futile if such items were damaged, lost or stolen in transit meant that this practice was not entirely motivated by practical considerations.

Instead, gentry women in New South Wales obtained clothing from abroad as a means to establish and reaffirm their superior social status, in opposition to wealthy emancipists who either sought to join their ranks, or challenge their political and social authority. In Van Diemen’s Land such elaborate strategies for maintaining class distinction were not necessary, for by the eighteenth-twenties wealthy free settlers had clearly defined themselves as a colonial landed gentry. Ex-convicts were unable to gain a secure financial foothold in the colony which would have allowed them effectively challenge the political and social authority of free settlers - as emancipists did in New South Wales.

Despite expending great efforts to purchase clothing from friends and relatives in Britain, though, sartorial display was not always effective in advertising class differences. The development of the consumer society in the eighteenth century and its successful establishment in the Australian colonies, aided by the thriving import trade with China, India and Britain, meant that emancipists could easily copy the fabrics, trimmings and styles worn by the gentry. The attempt by gentry women to advertise their superior social status through displays of ‘good taste’ in their choice of clothing was similarly unsuccessful. Essentially, it was a behaviour that could be all too easily emulated - as the portraits of gentry and emancipist women demonstrate.
Instead, the private importation of clothing was a method by which gentry women could strengthen their personal connections with Britain. As with the exchange of correspondence, bestowing gifts on their friends and relatives in the colonies was intended to cement close relations over vast distances. This purpose particularly defined the experiences of settler women in Western Australia, who had few other good shopping options and Van Diemen’s Land. Yet in New South Wales, the fact that gentry women took advantage of those contacts to regularly purchase their own clothing demonstrates that once again more was at stake for these women than just clothes. They needed to prove themselves superior to emancipists, at least within their own minds, even if they couldn’t advertise their status publicly. Utilizing their personal connections to purchase clothing, rather than simply conducting a transaction with a shopkeeper in London (or Sydney) provided these women with a sense of community that existed beyond their own locality. Belonging to that transnational community of colonial elites, for whom Britain was their true ‘home’, also distinguished them from the wealthier emancipists. Thus, the private trade in clothing, was essentially a form of private affirmation among gentry women, as much as an act of public display.
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