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# Robert Hughes

## The Fatal Shore

Robert Hughes (1938-) was born in Sidney. He is best known as an art historian. He is *Time* magazine's art critic. *The Fatal Shore* brings to light the officially forgotten convict past of Australia.

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**W**ho were these First Fleet convicts? It was once a cherished Australian belief that at least some of the people on the First Fleet were political exiles – rick-burners, trade-unionists, and the like. In fact, though victims of a savage penal code, they were not political prisoners. On the other hand, few of them were dangerous criminals. Not one person was shipped out in 1787 for murder or rape, although more than a hundred of them had been convicted of thefts (such as highway robbery) in which violence played some part. No woman on the First Fleet, legend to the contrary, had been transported for prostitution, as it was not a transportable offense. Many were treated as whores, and doubtless some were, although only two – Mary Allen and Ann Mather – had been described by their judges as “unfortunate girl” or “poor unhappy woman of the town.”

In all, 736 convicts went on the First Fleet. Of these, we know the age or occupation, and sometimes both, of 330 people – 127 women, 203 men. They came from all over

England, but most of them were Londoners. Their main categories of crime were as shown on next page.

All these were crimes against property, some forced by a pitiful necessity. Elizabeth Beckford, the second oldest woman on the First Fleet, was seventy. Her crime, for which she got seven years' transportation, was to have stolen twelve pounds of Gloucester cheese. At the Stafford Assizes, a laborer named Thomas Hawell went down for seven years for “feloniously stealing one live hen to the value of 2d., and one dead hen to the value of 2d.” Elizabeth Powley, twenty-two and unemployed, raided a kitchen in Norfolk, took a few shillings' worth of bacon, flour and raisins, with “twenty-four ounces Weight of Butter value 12d,” and was sentenced to hang; but a reprieve came and to Australia she went, never to eat butter again. Hunger drove a West Indian named Thomas Chaddick into a kitchen garden where he “did pluck up, spoil and destroy, against the form of the statute” twelve cucumber plants; he, too, went to Australia, there to contemplate the exactness with which the

OFFENSE	NUMBER
Minor theft	431
·"Privy theft," including breaking and entering	93
Highway robbery	71
Stealing cattle or sheep	44
Robbery with violence (mugging)	31
·Grand larceny	9
·Fencing (receiving stolen goods)	8
Swindling, impersonation	7
·Forgery of documents, banknotes, etc.	4
Other	35
Total of known indictments	733

god of property had measured out his black life in cucumbers.

Some purloined inedible trifles. William Rickson, a nineteen-year-old laborer, made off with a wooden box which proved to contain merely a piece of linen and five books. James Grace, an eleven-year-old, took ten yards of ribbon and a pair of silk stockings. William Francis stole a book entitled *A Summary Account of the Flourishing State of the Island of Tobago* from a London gentleman named Robert Melville. Fifteen-year-old John Wishammer grabbed a packet of snuff from an apothecary's counter in Gloucester. They all went down for seven years.

None of these acts were news when they happened. They were mere drops in a swollen torrent of eighteenth-century crime. The

only exception was Thomas Gearing, who created a brief sensation in Oxford in 1786 by breaking into the chapel of Magdalen College and stealing some ecclesiastical plate. For this sacrilege, he was condemned to death, reprieved and then transported for life.

Judges were particularly severe on thieves who used violence and threats. In 1782 Thomas Josephs accosted a married woman on a London street, "putting her in fear" and seizing her handkerchief, worth 2 shillings. The sentence was death; after five years in jail he was embarked on Scarborough, to serve the Crown for seven years in New South Wales. All the cattle duffers and horse thieves on the First Fleet were under commuted death sentences.

The Beauchamp Committee had urged

AGE (YRS.)	MEN	WOMEN
under 15	3	2
16-25	68	58
26-35	51	50
36-45	11	6
46-55	4	3
over 56	3	3
Total convicts of known age	140	122



*An anonymous Georgian satirist made this engraving: Farewell to Black-Eyed Sue and Sweet Poll of Plymouth. The ship is waiting at anchor to take their lovers away.*

that the new colony consist of "young Convicts," and so it did. The convicts' average age was about twenty-seven years. Age distribution was much the same for either sex:

The oldest female convict was Dorothy Handland, a dealer in rags and old clothes who was eighty-two years old in 1787. She had drawn seven years for perjury. In 1789, in a fit of befuddled despair, she was to hang herself from a gum tree at Sydney Cove, thus becoming Australia's first recorded suicide. The oldest male convict was a Shropshire

man, Joseph Owen, who was somewhere between sixty and sixty-six. The youngest boy was John Hudson, a nine-year-old chimney sweep. He had stolen some clothes and a pistol. "One would wish to snatch such a boy, if one possibly could," the judge remarked "from destruction, for he will only return to the same kind of life which he has led before." So little John Hudson was sent to Australia for seven years. The youngest girl was Elizabeth Hayward, a clogmaker aged thirteen, who had stolen a linen gown and a silk bonnet worth 7 shillings.

Classed by occupation, the First Fleet convicts were an anthology of country and town trades – but that did not guarantee their fitness as pioneers. The details of em-

TRADE	NO. OF PERSONS
Seamen	8
Carpenters, shipwrights and cabinetmakers	6
Shoemakers	5
Weavers	5
Watermen	4
Ivory turners	3
Brickmakers	2
Bricklayers, masons	2
Other trades	47

ployment (or lack of it) for 190 men and 125 women have survived. Of the men, twenty-four (12 percent) were noted as unemployed. The largest occupation group was laborers, mostly rural – eighty-four men, or 44 percent of the total. From there the size of the professional groups dropped sharply:

“Other trades” included three domestic servants, two leather-breeches makers, two tailors, two butchers, a jeweller, a baker and a silk-dyer. There was also one fisherman, a Cornishman named William Bryant. Of the women, fourteen (11 percent) were “unemployed”, and some if not most of these may have been prostitutes. More than half the women were domestic servants. The rest were milliners, mantua-makers, oystersellers, glove-makers, shoe-binders – a spatter of trades that reflected the kind of jobs women in eighteenth-century England could expect to find, all of them fairly menial.

So it had a motley crew, this Noah’s Ark of small-time criminality; and for all the trades represented aboard, it was absurdly ill-chosen for the task of colonizing New South Wales. The authorities had used no criteria of selection apart from youth, and that erratically. There was no choice by trade. The colony that would have to raise its own crops in unknown soil had only one professional gardener, and he was a raw youth of twenty. It would need tons of fish, but had only one fisherman. There were only two brickmakers, two bricklayers and a mason for all the houses that would need building; no sawyers were aboard, and only six carpenters. It had no flax-dressers or linen-weavers – proof of the government’s indifference to the prospect of a “strategic” colony. This muddle and lack of foresight in the choice of convicts typified the planning, being one of many matters over which Captain Arthur Phillip had no control.

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*convict* (n): a prisoner undergoing punishment

*First Fleet*: the first transportation of convicts started in May, 1787. The fleet reached Australia in January, 1788

*cherished* (adj) /'tʃerɪʃt/: valued

*rick-burner* (n): people who put ricks (*høstakke*)

on fire as a protest against landowners

*trade-unionist* (n): *fagforeningsmand*

*savage* (adj) /'sævɪdʒ/: cruel

*penal* (adj) /pi:nl/: connected with punishment, *straffe*

*code* (n): system of rules or laws

*theft* (n): an instance of stealing

*legend* ...: in spite of what is generally believed

*whore* (n) /hɔ:/: prostitute

*Glouster* /'glɒstə/

*assizes* (pl) /a'saɪzɪz/: court sessions held periodically in each county

*felonious* (adj) /fɪ'ləʊniəs/: criminal

*raid* (vb): break into

*ounce* (n) /aʊns/: unit of weight

*be sentenced to* (vb): *blive dømt til*

*reprieve* (n): remission of punishment, *benådning*

*statute* (n): written law

*cucumber* (n) /'kju:kəmbə/: *agurk*

*'contemplate* (vb): think deeply

*privy theft* (n) /'prɪvi/: *medviden om tyveri*

*mugging* (n): violent attack

*grand larceny* (n): the stealing of valuable things

*fencing* (n): *hæleri*

*impersonation* (n): pretending to be another person

*forgery* (n) /fɔ:dʒəri/: making copies of bank notes etc.

*indictment* (n) /in'daɪtmənt/: accusation

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*purloin* (vb): steal

*inedible* (adj): not eatable

*trifle* (n) /traɪfl/: small, unimportant thing

*make off* (vb): hurry away

*linen* (n) /'lɪnɪn/: cloth made of flax (*hør*)

*snuff* (n): tobacco inhaled through the nose, *snus*

*apothecary* (arch) /ə'pɒθəkəri/

*swollen* (adj) /swɒlən/: increased

*'torrent* (n): violent, rushing stream

*Magdalen College* /mɔ:dli:n/

*ecclesiastical* (adj) /ɪkli:sɪ'æstɪkl/: belonging to the church

*plate* (n): dish, cups etc. plated with (covered with) silver

*sacrilege* (n) /'sækrɪlɪdʒ/: disrespectful treatment of holy things

*severe* (adj) /si'viə/: strict

*ac'cost* (vb): go up to and speak to, solicit

*seize* (vb) /si:z/: take

*em'bark* (vb): go onboard

*duffer* (n): *bissekræmmer*

*com'muted* (adj): reduced (punishment)

*Beauchamp* /bi:tʃəm/

*urge* (vb) /ə:dʒ/: strongly recommend

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*rags* (n): bits of old cloth

*perjury* (n) /'pɛ:dʒəri/: willful false statement

*fit* (n): attack

*befuddled* (adj): confused

*clogmaker* (n): *træskomager*

*bonnet* (n): *kyse*

*anthology* (n): /æn'ɒlədʒi/: collection

*trade* (n): way of making a living, occupation

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*shipwright* (n) /-raɪt/: a man who constructs and repairs ships

*waterman* (n): a person who works on or handles boats, ferries etc.

*ivory turner* (n) /'aɪvəri/: a man who makes things out of ivory (elfenben)

*brick* (n): *mursten*

*mason* (n) /'meɪsn/: stonemason, person who works/builds with stone

*rural* (adj) /'rʊərəl/: suitable for the countryside

*domestic* (adj) /də'mestɪk/: of the household

*leather-breeches* (n): leather trousers

*jeweller* (n) /dʒu:ələ/: trader in precious stones

*silk-dyer* (n) /-daɪə/: *silkefarver*

*milliner* (n): a person who makes and sells women's hats and sells ribbons

*'mantua-maker* (n): maker of mantles, loose gowns and cloaks

*oyster* (n): *østers*

*spatter* (n): here: a random selection

*menial* (adj) /'mi:niəl/: fit for servants

*motley* (adj): of varied sorts

*erratic* (adj) /i'rætɪk/: irregular

*crop* (n): 'produce of grain, fruit, vegetables etc.

*flax-dresser* (n): *hørdyrker*

*muddle* (n): mess, confusion

*Captain Arthur Phillip* organized the First Fleet transportation and was appointed the first governor of the new colony.