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'This spirit of emigration': the nature and meanings of escape in early New South Wales ¹

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Escape was a constant possibility for convict men and women sent to New South Wales (NSW) in the early colonial period, the subject of talk and stories for at least three decades. It was also a constant *leitmotif* in accounts and reports written by the élite. This is because escapes were about crossing boundaries, and boundaries — geographic, mental, social, racial, cultural, and temporal — naturally absorbed European actions and thoughts in the fledgling colony. The 'spirit of emigration' was the vector for those who found the 'road to Botany Bay', or stole boats and rowed into the ocean, or told officials they thought China was not so very far away. Who were these escapees? What were they doing, and why? Were they deluded fools, pathetic victims of their own 'flights of fancy'? Were they defying their imprisonment and exile by imagining other destinations? Did they succeed in reaching geographic ones? What are the implications of this constant undertow of movement, of boundary-crossing, for the early colony of NSW?

* * *

Historians of early European Australia have long been interested in those who attempted to escape the colony.² Ernest Scott's concise *Short History of Australia* (1916) associated escape narratives with the Irish, and the 'feeling of injustice rankling in their hearts'.³ Up to the 1950s, primary school children learnt the escape stories in children's history

¹ I acknowledge and warmly thank David Andrew Roberts, Richard Waterhouse, Chris Cunningham, Tom Griffiths and the anonymous referees providing comments and helpful references. 'This spirit of emigration', see David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, 2 Vols, Adelaide, 1971 [London, 1798], Vol. 2, p. 77.

² This is the meaning of 'escape' for the purposes of this essay, as opposed to absconding within the colony, or becoming lost. Of course, it could also encompass escape from gaols, barracks, gangs and households within the colony; or indeed, from the bush, shipwrecks and so on.

³ E. Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1916, p. 61.

books like *The Story of Australia Illustrated* by H. Blanche (an illustration from which appears on the front cover of this Volume). Here escape was motivated and explained by 'a hard, monotonous life without hope'.⁴ Robert Hughes' popular *The Fatal Shore* (1987) devotes a whole chapter to 'Bolters and Bushrangers' in which practically every famous escape and bushranging tale is lined up and recounted in detail, presented as a stand-alone story. His explanation is fairly straightforward: the penal colonies were gulags, and the convicts naturally tried to escape their horrors and oppressions.⁵ Warwick Hirst's *Great Convict Escapes in Colonial Australia* (2003) also presents the stories of escapees and early bushrangers and salutes them as 'remarkable examples of human endeavour and resourcefulness'. Significantly, the earliest convict escapes are said to be land-focused: 'most of them heading west or north into the interior'. They are presented only briefly as a kind of bumbling prelude to the 'genuine' escape attempts by sea.⁶

The escape stories are less evident in the work of academic historians between the 1950s and the 1980s. Manning Clark's dense first volume of *A History of Australia* (1962) excises them, only noting how the 'delusions' of the benighted Irish 'exposed them to the wildest and cruellest flights of fancy'.⁷ A. G. L. Shaw's magisterial *Convicts and the Colonies* (1966) is mostly concerned with the number of escapes: how many convicts did Britain get rid of permanently? How many returned?⁸ R. M. Crawford's *Australia* (1954), and the essays in Frank Crowley's *New History of Australia* (1974), omitted the escapes altogether.⁹ Perhaps academic scholarship shunned what it judged as folkloric, or smacked of popular interest in thrilling tales and tragic, lonely deaths. Perhaps, apart from a romantic interest in the Irish,

4 H. Blanche, *The Story of Australia*, Sydney, n.d. (c.1956), pp. 31-3.

5 R. Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868*, London, 1987, pp. 203-43.

6 W. Hirst, *Great Convict Escapes in Colonial Australia*, Sydney, 2003, pp. 1-5.

7 C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol. 1, Carlton, 1974 [1962], p. 155.

8 A.G.L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and other parts of the British Empire*, Carlton, 1981 [London, 1966], pp. 141-3, 171 (brief mention of Irish escapes).

9 R.M. Crawford, *Australia*, Melbourne, 1974 [1954]; F. Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1974.

escape could not be the stuff of serious history: the history of colonising and building, of 'fixing ... upon a savage coast'.¹⁰

The bolters re-appeared in academic histories in the 1980s, and now not as objects of pity and delusion, but as active agents of their own destinies. In John Hirst's *Convict Society and its Enemies* (1983) escapees became indistinguishable from free itinerant workers, or learned to live in the bush as bushrangers (though usually not for long). Those who tried to escape were the homesick newly arrived and the incorrigible minority.¹¹ Patrick O'Farrell's *The Irish in Australia* (1986) recounted the escape stories as an Irish phenomenon, now explained not as foolishness, but a distinctive mentalité:

China indeed! None paused to ponder the existence of that unfettered dreamworld that infused the imaginations of these people who knew hardly the rudiments of any world outside their own.

The Irish may have been geographically ignorant, but their escapes were fired by 'genuine thirst for freedom'.¹²

O'Farrell's focus on mind and imagination was pushed further in Paul Carter's pathbreaking *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987). Here the escapees are star players in a reinterpretation of Australia's spatial history. With their challenges, stories and word-games, they burst forth from the confining cloak of imperial history. They are made to stand for a whole epistemological 'otherness' — ways of knowing set implacably against authority and empire. Carter's careful reading of the early escape stories about China reveals that they more likely reveal 'strategic cool-headedness' than delusion. But he does not pursue this, for his interest is not in escape itself, but in the imaginary destinations as 'rhetorical places outside the bounds of the penal colony', places with which to recover an alternative spatial geography and history.¹³

¹⁰ Arthur Phillip, cited in H. Proudfoot, 'Fixing the settlement upon a savage coast: Planning and building', in G. Aplin (ed.), *A Difficult Infant: Sydney Before Macquarie*, Sydney, 1988, pp. 54ff.

¹¹ J. Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies*, Sydney, 1983, pp. 127, 137-8, 142ff.

¹² P. O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, Sydney, 1993 [1986], p. 23.

¹³ P. Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, London, 1987, pp. 295, 300ff, quote p. 301. Similarly, 'whether or not any of the convicts succeeded ... is by the by in this context'. What matters is that 'the road to Botany Bay was a fantasy about another place'.

Martin Thomas' recent imaginative and reflective study of the Blue Mountains takes its cues from Carter's work. Early stories of a white settlement and China 'over the mountains ... indicate the extent of the convicts' dislocation', as well as their complete ignorance of where they were. These 'myths of place ... voice the plight of people wrenched from their own place in the world; people thrust into a labyrinth'. Like Warwick Hirst and many others, Thomas presents convict escape as land-based, with its powerful mythical destinations located in the interior.¹⁴

Alan Atkinson's 'The Pioneers Who Left Early' (1991) offers a more contextualised and questioning discussion of convict escape as *action*. Citing Molly Gillen's research, he points out that perhaps a third of convict men, and between fifteen and forty percent of convict women from the First Fleet, left the colony or simply disappeared. Therefore, a considerable number of First Fleeters cannot be described as 'pioneers' or 'nation builders'; nor were they 'people without choice', sent to a remote place of no return. Atkinson also invites us to consider the reverse: was it the 'increasing charms of NSW' which caused the number of escapes to eventually diminish?¹⁵ The mobility of convicts, particularly those who were seamen, also appears in Atkinson's *The Europeans in Australia* (1997). Escape was linked to mutiny, 'a common response to maritime life'; and it also, once more, belonged to the Irish. Their tales, their peripatetic behaviour and fantastic geographical understandings were part of the great dialectic of early European Australia: the colliding worlds of speech and writing that somehow had to be 'stitched together' in the raw colony.¹⁶

What became of those convicts who succeeded in escaping? Where did they go? What were the implications of their voyaging? Clare Anderson is one of the few historians to have pursued these questions, focusing on the global geography of escape during the transportation period. Convicts from NSW, she points out, surfaced all over the world, from the enclave they formed in Calcutta before 1800, to those who went to Mauritius, New Zealand, South America, the ports of the Pacific rim, Fiji, Ceylon, and the islands of Bass Strait. Their escapes

¹⁴ M. Thomas, *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains*, Carlton, 2004, pp. 122, 145.

¹⁵ A. Atkinson, 'The Pioneers Who Left Early', *The Push*, No. 29, 1991, pp. 110-6.

¹⁶ A. Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, Vol. 1: *The Beginning*, Oxford, 1997, pp. 113-7.

disrupted both the Australian convict systems, and, in other British colonies, the boundaries of race, class, gender and authority.¹⁷

Atkinson and Anderson recognise that convict escape was largely a sea-going affair and examine its implications from global perspectives. Atkinson discusses the way it undermined the original idea of *remoteness* as the certain advantage of Botany Bay. Anderson demonstrates that common people shared in the knowledge of empire: of ships, routes, ports and colonies, knowledge carried on the oceans. Convicts exchanged that knowledge, and used it to escape the so-called 'place of no return'.¹⁸

This rich historiography has thus portrayed and explained escape in many ways, reflecting changing understandings of the early colony. Earlier accounts say escape reveals the colony as cruel and confining, but in later accounts it demonstrates openness and laxity — because escape was so easy. Popular histories recounted some escapes as stories of indomitable human spirit and others as evidence of unfathomable human stupidity. Early escapees are assumed to have turned inland; alternatively, some say they went by sea. Escape is mainly assumed to be about white convicts, and absconders are generally male. The successful and celebrated escape of Mary Bryant is remarkable because of her sex. And escape is most often ascribed to the Irish: their geographical fantasies are evidence of weird minds, language and worldviews, and of their naturally burning resentment of ancient wrongs.¹⁹ Some argue that their geographical fantasies are more important than the escapes themselves. Atkinson and Anderson push the meaning of escape beyond these well-worn but enchanting narrative paths. Here, I want to follow on from their themes and directions – mobility and staying, geographies and 'border crossing'. I want to re-examine, once more, the escape fantasies in the light of actions and movement in early NSW.

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¹⁷ C. Anderson, 'Multiple Border Crossings: Convicts and Other Persons Escaped from Botany Bay and residing in Calcutta', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 3. No. 2, October 2001, pp. 1-22.

¹⁸ Atkinson, 'Pioneers', p. 116; Anderson, *op. cit.* On NSW as a place 'from whence it is hardly possible for persons to return', see Admiral Sir George Young, 'Heads of a Plan', 1785, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Sydney, 1892, p. 17.

¹⁹ I. Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*, Melbourne, 2003, p. 250, bypasses recent historiographical explorations, arguing that Irish escape fantasies were responses to brutal and slave-like conditions, as well as boredom.

Let's look again at those who tried to escape from the early colony. In fact, they were not all Irish. As soon as David Collins draws back the curtains on his scene of busy colony-making on the shores of Sydney Cove, the English First Fleet convicts mess it up by finding their way back to Botany Bay and begging to be taken on board La Perouse's ships, promising to bring women with them.²⁰ There were at least six other escape attempts before the first Irish convicts arrived in 1791. English convicts were among the many others who tried to escape over the next two decades.

While most escapees were male, some women also took to the bush, or climbed into boats in the darkness. Men often left in all-male groups, but women seemed not to have attempted escapes in all-female groups.²¹ Sometimes a few women went with the bands of men, though it appears that men did not often include women in their shared plans, codes and signals. Perhaps Irish 'exhilaration which came from belonging to a band of heroes' played a role here.²² Women, meanwhile, often acted as individuals or in pairs when they persuaded sailors and ships' mates to hide them on departing ships; often these were men with whom they had formed relationships. As Atkinson points out, women were far less willing to escape, partly because it was easier for them to marry or find partners than it was for men.²³

Escape concerned other white people besides convicts, and escapees were not all white. Sydney was a site of Aboriginal escape. Colebe and Bennelong were captured under Phillip's orders, shackled and kept under guard at Government House. Colebe managed to get away immediately, but Bennelong was seized 'while tremblingly alive

²⁰ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 5, 9, 15; Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years: Being a Reprint of A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and a Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, L. F. Fitzhardinge (ed.), Sydney, 1979 [London, 1789 and 1793], pp. 89, 107. Fitzhardinge's notes to Tench's account points out that convicts Peter Parris (a Frenchman) and Ann Smith were believed by some to have escaped on the French ships.

²¹ Warwick Hirst, *op. cit.*, retells many of these stories in ch. 4, 'The Heirs of Mary Bryant'. Hirst includes the story of 'Jane Turner', which was published in England in 1850. Turner purportedly escaped from the Female Factory with three other women, before eventually making her way back to England by 1816. However, I suspect this is a fictional account, as I can find no evidence for this escape, or that anyone listed as 'Jane Turner' arrived in NSW.

²² Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, Vol. 1, p. 250.

²³ See for example Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 130, 185, 205, 235, 271; Atkinson, 'Pioneers', pp. 114-5; see also Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7, 10-2. The gendered dimensions of escape deserve more study.

to the joyful prospect of escaping'.²⁴ Bennelong bided his time, gained their trust, and later just walked away. Soldiers and seamen also occasionally disappeared. In 1793 eight soldiers planned to sail a long boat to Java but were discovered, whereupon two escaped, stole powder and arms and went on a rampage of robbery in the Prospect area. They were re-arrested, and four of the eight endured floggings of between 300 and 800 lashes.²⁵ By the 1810s and 1820s, debtors were also potential escapees – the port regulations introduced to prevent escape were partly aimed at them.²⁶

Overall, though, the large majority of escapees from NSW were convicts, and it is possible to explore who they were by tracking their escapes. Escapes are constant threads in Collins' ponderous, dutiful *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (1788-1800), and from 1803 they are threaded through the dense reportage of the colony's first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*. Reading them alongside official correspondence in *Historical Records of Australia* and a list compiled by Commissioner Bigge in 1820, provides a sample of seventy convict escape attempts from 'Botany Bay' and Norfolk Island between 1788 and 1810. While indications are that there were many more, and that the attempts recorded tended to be those which failed, this sample offers a reasonable profile of the typical escapee, the methods used, the direction taken and the chances of success. It also allows us to compare escape stories with their geographies, and to question the authorities' constant portrayal of escapees as wild, foolish and misguided.²⁷

24 Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 87; see also K. V. Smith, *Bennelong*, Sydney, 2001, pp. 40-1.

25 Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 303. Soldiers also disappeared from Rose Hill in 1789, see p. 69. A seaman and a boatswain's apprentice from the *Supply* were 'carried away' on the *Charlotte* in 1790, *Historical Records of Australia, Series 1 (HRA 1)*, Vol. 1, Sydney, p. 206. Six seamen left Botany Bay in a long boat in 1796 and were never seen again, Collins *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 493. Desertion of seamen in Sydney was also a constant problem.

26 J. T. Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry, on the Judicial Establishments of New South Wales*, Adelaide, 1966 [London, 1823], p. 79.

27 Data collected for this survey included (where known) date of attempt, number of people, sex, date of arrival in colony, ethnicity, stated escape destination/plan/method, geographic locations and routes, and outcome/s. Collins, *op. cit.*, Vols. 1 and 2; *Sydney Gazette (SG)*, 1803-1810; *HRA 1*, Vols. 1-10; Bigge, *op. cit.*, Appendix, 'Escapes or attempts made by Convicts to escape from N.S. Wales since the year 1803 to 1820 inclusive', Bonwick Transcripts, Box 25, pp. 5449-52, Mitchell Library, Sydney. Bigge listed 42 escape events involving 255 convicts, of whom 194 were recaptured. He concluded that there were more successful escapes than the authorities knew about. For discussion see Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Who among the convicts was most likely to try to escape? There were occasional cases where the escapees were people who had been in the colony for some years, and who even had families and property.²⁸ But escapees were most often from among the latest arrivals, those for whom the colony was strangest and most disorienting, and the urge to return strongest. In the earliest years they seemed to fear most of all the *idea* of unrelenting labour and slave-like existence, whether or not they actually experienced such conditions. As Governor Macquarie observed in 1818, 'it is remarkable that the Convicts, who have been the Shortest time in the colony, are always those Who are the Most Anxious to Make their escape from it'.²⁹

Second, people with life sentences also tried to escape, feeling they had little to lose. Governor Phillip knew this and attempted to bribe lifers into becoming diligent store guards.³⁰ Third, and conversely, those who made a bid for escape were convicts who reckoned up the days, months and years and knew they had done their time. Freedom and return were inseparable and rightfully theirs; some would not accept Phillip's and later Hunter's refusal to allow free departure.³¹ This seems to have been a spur to William and Mary Bryant's astonishing escape in 1791.

A fourth type of escapee emerged after the colony became better established, with more opportunities. These were men, often skilled, who were kept in government employ on public projects or farms, rather than living independently or as assigned servants. Commissioner Bigge, critical of Macquarie's policy of retaining skilled convicts for his projects, outlined the grievances of such men. Not only were their skills ironically keeping them in more constrained and lowly employment, they resented the 'greater extent of compulsory service they are made to endure ... than is allotted to any other description of convict'. A servant assigned to a private master waited three years for a ticket-of-leave; those in public employment had to wait four years. These were the sorts of men who carried out brilliant

28 Case of Isaac Peyton, Susannah Harris, William Welch and Hugh MacDonald and others, *SG*, 7 and 28 June 1807. Peyton was a stonemason who built a stone bridge over the Tank Stream (which fell down). He and Harrison had three children and a large house on the Rocks. He may have been deeply in debt.

29 Macquarie to Bathurst, 16 May 1818, *HRA 1*, Vol. 9, p. 793.

30 Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 238.

31 Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, Vol. 1, pp. 75ff; Hunter to Portland, 20 June 1797, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 25. Grose, however, allowed ex-pirees to leave, see Atkinson, 'Pioneers', p. 113.

escapes like the seizure of the *Harrington* in 1808 and made many similar attempts to 'cut out vessels' from Sydney Harbour, the Derwent River and Port Dalrymple.³²

Homesickness, the constant pull of home, played a fundamental role. Both Collins and Tench regarded convicts as 'unthinking', brutishly lacking in such fine sentiments, yet on one occasion even Collins acknowledged their longing for home: 'how cheering, how grateful must have been the hope of returning to their families at no very distant period, if not prevented by their own misconduct'.³³ The longing to return to families, friends and familiar places was a response to the 'devastation of the loss of and separation from former social networks'.³⁴ However, other destinations were certainly mentioned, and reached — the fabled luxury and indolence of Tahiti, for example, or the lively opportunities of cosmopolitan Calcutta.³⁵ So how, then, did one escape, or attempt to escape, from Botany Bay?

* * *

The colony had no walls, and the bush, or 'woods' as Collins calls them, did not restrict the convicts' movements. '[They] were everywhere straggling about, collecting animals and gum to sell to the people of the transports'. Escape was fluid, and it blurred into absconding, becoming lost, wandering away, disappearing for some days and then reappearing. The early narratives are populated with the figures of those staggering back, as if from the dead, wasted, some horribly wounded by Aborigines.³⁶ Others disappeared into this void and were never heard of again; a fearful fate, but one which left room for open-ended speculation, for imagination.

The colony continued to be a place where it was almost impossible to constrain people, to fix and count them. Governor King upon his arrival in 1801 found them in 'a scattered state', many holding 'false certificates', there being 'no general list whatever of the inhabitants'. He

³² J. T. Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry on the Colony of New South Wales*, Adelaide, 1966 [London, 1823], pp. 33, 34.

³³ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. xxxiv, 238; Tench, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³⁴ Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 18; see also M. Field and T. Millett (eds), *Convict Love Tokens: The Leaden Hearts the Convicts Left Behind*, Kent Town (SA), 1998; L. Silver, *The Battle of Vinegar Hill: Australia's Irish Rebellion 1804*, Sydney, 1989, pp. 102, 119-20.

³⁵ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 61, 136; Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-8.

³⁶ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 17, 23, 37; see also Phillip to Nepean, 18 November 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 309.

immediately commissioned a comprehensive muster.³⁷ In these early years it was often difficult to even tell that people had escaped. Unless they stole a boat, or were detected in the act of escape, their disappearance often only became apparent when the musters were held or the commissariat records failed to tally with the numbers supposed to be present.³⁸

For those determined to get away from the colony altogether, that is, to escape rather than abscond, there were several paths. The resigned and patient put their hopes in serving out their time, in freedom by servitude. One 1788 arrival immediately began to sell his food, starving himself to save for a passage of ten to twenty pounds. Others committed robberies, and still others planted and raised crops for the sole purpose of earning money to return home when their time was done. However, the authorities hoped that the convicts would become colonists, and Collins reported with some disappointment that 'the wish to return to their friends appeared to be the prevailing idea'. No land, no fine weather, no regular employment, nothing about the colony had changed their minds. They were now free men and women and wanted rightful, legal escape. To Collins this seemed ungrateful after all the effort of pioneering, and the years of want. But he also believed that ex-pirees would 'soon fall into their bad habits' if they returned. Convicts could never really be reformed. Their natural place was in the colony.³⁹

Other more ambitious and bloody ways to escape included mutiny en route to NSW, piracy or schemes for outright rebellion.⁴⁰ Lieutenant King was surprised and pleased to find so many convicts happy to go to Norfolk Island to settle, until he discovered their plot

³⁷ King to Portland, 10 March 1801, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 8.

³⁸ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 195.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 169, 232, 230, 235; and yet, compare with his assertion that only men of property could be settlers: 'the bona fide settler ... is not to be looked for among discharged soldiers, shipwrecked seamen or quondam convicts', p. 232. See also Phillip to Grenville, 5 November 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 270. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 8, writes of the way the 'convict stain' continued to contaminate emigrants from New South Wales, convict, ex-piree or non-convict. The haunting possibility of returning convicts (as if from the dead?) is of course explored in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

⁴⁰ For example, Collins, *op. cit.*, reports attempted mutinies, Vol. 1, p. 181 (*Albermarle* 1791), p. 304 (*Boddington* 1793), and p. 455 (*Marquis Cornwallis* 1796). See also E. Christopher, "'Ten Thousand Times Worse than the Convicts": rebellious sailors, convict transportation and the struggle for freedom, 1788-1800', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 5, 2004, pp. 30-46.

for overcoming and killing guards and commanders, and seizing and sailing a ship to Tahiti.⁴¹ Between 1803 and 1820, convicts attempted on four occasions to seize brigs from Sydney Harbour.⁴² Among the most daring and successful were the thirty-five men, led by Robert Stuart, who seized the brig *Harrington* from under its master's nose in 1808 and got clean away.⁴³ Between 1792 and 1807 a series of Irish rebellions were rumoured, planned and/or launched, each aimed at escape, each seemingly igniting the next, and each brutally put down.⁴⁴

What do the escape events themselves tell us? First, escape was overwhelmingly a collective rather than an individualist enterprise. Only twelve of the seventy events involved individual bolters (often repeat escapees, who displayed amazing resilience, resourcefulness, stamina and unwavering determination) while the vast majority made the break in groups of between three and sixty people.⁴⁵ As Marcus Rediker argues, escape was characterised by cooperation between people of the same rank, by shared planning and decisions, and must have involved a level of trust, both between escapees and those who helped them, and within the groups themselves.⁴⁶ Sometimes that trust was misplaced and betrayed, as we shall see. It was a gamble, but integral to the mechanism of escape nonetheless.

Second, escapes were carefully organised. The élite wrote about escapees as deluded, mad, childish, 'unthinking' – that is, irrationally, and they were by turns uncomprehending or accepting of minds which seemed not to make the logical links between cause and effect, actions and outcomes. Yet this may have had more to do with pre-existing ideas about the 'convict' or 'Irish' mind, for, as Collins himself often recorded, it is clear that escapes were usually meticulously planned. Stores, tools and equipment were invariably stockpiled and packed up at secret locations, the time of day or night arranged for rendezvous, and shipmates carefully chosen.

⁴¹ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴² See Bigge, *Report ... on the Judicial Establishments*, Appendix, 'Escapes or attempts made by convicts'.

⁴³ SG, 22 and 29 May 1808.

⁴⁴ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 200; see also reports in *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 9, Vol. 3, pp. 85, 337; Silver, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Eight escape events involved pairs of men.

⁴⁶ M. Reddiker, 'How to Escape Bondage: The Atlantic Adventures of the "Fugitive Traytor" Henry Pitman, 1687', paper given at 'Escape' conference (School of History and Classics, University of Tasmania and International Centre for Convict Studies), Strahan (Tasmania), 26 June 2003.

Third, and most striking, is that the vast majority of escape routes were by sea, not by land. Of the 70 attempts in the sample survey, 56 or 80% tried to board ships or steal boats, while a further 6% made for rivers, coastlines or harbours. While historians have often assumed that inland escapes and destinations were dominant, the convicts, as Anderson observes, 'looked to the sea, not the bush, as a focus for their dreams of freedom'.⁴⁷ So what were their chances of success?

* * *



Figure 1: The colony of New South Wales c.1796, published in 1798, showing the main settlements, known areas and tracks linking Sydney, Parramatta, the Hawkesbury and Cowpastures. Note the settlers at the Northern Boundaries and Ponds, and the track running north from Manly to Broken Bay. From D. Collins, *Account of the English Colony of New South Wales*, Vol. 1, London, 1798, frontispiece, published by Caddell and Davies; courtesy of Mitchell Library, Sydney.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

One reason the élite portrayed escape attempts as illogical and insane was to convince convicts that it was a hopeless enterprise involving suffering, terror and privation. While the élite happily went on exploratory rambles and camping trips into new territory, they assumed that such journeys were fatal for convicts. Collins wrote of 'the extreme danger attendant on a man's going beyond the bounds of his knowledge in the forests of an unsettled country'.⁴⁸ Neither was the ocean any sort of refuge. There, this naval man often concluded grimly, would-be escapees no doubt perished miserably in their frail craft midst howling gales and pitiless waves. How could any man in his right mind contemplate such a risk? On the face of it, the odds *were* pretty bad. Only twenty of the seventy attempts in the sample (28%) were successful. Some of these were caught in other colonial ports, and what happened to others is unknown. On seven other occasions the escapees returned eventually to the colony. The escapes failed in 43 cases because they were betrayed or otherwise detected. Many were severely punished, though this did not always deter them from trying again.

Would these odds really have extinguished hope, though? After all, between a quarter and a third of attempts were successful in leaving the colony, so failure, arrest and punishment were certainly not as inevitable as the authorities tried to convey.⁴⁹ One might reasonably gamble on a one-in-four chance, even though what lay beyond was unknown. And, even in the event of capture and return, the outcome was by no means set in stone, despite the official rhetoric on the inevitability and impartiality of justice. A flogging could vary between 50 and 500 lashes and a sentence of hard labour at one of the outlying settlements was likely; or the escapee might be pardoned and left to recover in hospital. As I have written elsewhere, these were people whose worldview revolved about fate and opportunity: they were highly mobile, they took risks and they were resigned when disaster struck. And if some got away, why not others? As Collins recognised, 'everyone who could find a friend among the seamen to conceal him, hoped that he might prove the fortunate one who should escape'.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 69.

⁴⁹ This figure can be compared with that of Bigge for escapes by ship from NSW between 1803 and 1820. Of 255 convicts who attempted to escape, 61, or almost a quarter, were never seen again; see Bigge, *Report ... on the Judicial Establishments*, p. 79; Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 11; G. Karskens, *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney*, Carlton, 1997, p. 12.

Perhaps more important than the numerical odds was hope. There were wondrous true stories of escape, tales of great dramatic power which spread like wildfire around the colony. Five men who stole a boat and made for Tahiti were given up for dead, but four of them were found five years later, living with Aboriginal people near Port Stephens. For days after their return to Sydney, crowds of both white and black people gathered to listen to their stories.⁵¹ In 1792 the estimated seventeen escapees who left on the *Admiral Barrington* and the *Pitt* were forced off the ships en route to Batavia by the masters and abandoned on an island 'inhabited by savages' who treated them 'inhumanely'. Survivors somehow made their way to Cape Town and one returned to NSW on a Dutch ship with their story.⁵² The men who took the *Harrington* from Sydney Harbour were sighted at the Bay of Islands in New Zealand; then, mirage-like, in London; then off the coast of India, where the leader Robert Stuart was taken and another two were brought back to Australia. The others, though, managed to escape once more.⁵³

Meanwhile, news of the famous voyage of Captain William Bligh from the Friendly Islands to Timor after the 1789 mutiny on the *Bounty* caused a sensation in England, and soon reached Sydney. 'After the escape of Captain Bligh', Tench reported, 'no length of passage, or hazard of navigation, seemed above human accomplishment'.⁵⁴ Bligh's story was apparently one inspiration for the most famous escape, that of Mary Bryant (née Broad). In 1791, she and her husband William, their two young children and seven other men rowed an open boat along the east coast of Australia and succeeded, like Bligh, in reaching Timor. They were welcomed, but later exposed as convicts, apparently through a slip of the tongue.⁵⁵ The arrival of Captain Edwards of the wrecked *Pandora*, sent to capture the *Bounty* mutineers, ironically

51 John Tarwood, George Lee, George Connaway, John Watson and Joseph Sutton (a repeat escapee who died on this expedition) were all recently arrived lifers when they stole a boat and made for Tahiti in 1790. They were given up for dead by the authorities. Five years later Aboriginal people (perhaps Gampignal) inland from Port Stephens, heard that the *Providence* was anchored there. Four of the white men travelled down to meet it – they had been shipwrecked, taken in by local Aborigines and had Aboriginal wives and children. See Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 136, 425-6.

52 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 235, 271.

53 SG, 22 and 29 May, 17 July 1808; 23 April, 20 and 27 August 1809. Terence Flynn and Thomas Dawson were captured and brought back to Sydney; they escaped at Hobart, but shortly after Flynn murdered Dawson, was tried in Sydney, taken back to Hobart and hanged in June 1809.

54 Tench, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

55 W. Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

provided the means of returning the NSW convicts to England. There, those of the party who survived that hazardous voyage found 'the story of their sufferings in the boat excited much compassion'. No doubt the incredible Bligh story fostered fascination and sympathy for these survivors, and instead of being sent back to NSW, they served out their sentences at Newgate. Mary Bryant, by now the celebrated 'Girl from Botany Bay' had lost her whole colonial family. Upon her release, she returned to live quietly in her native Cornwall.⁵⁶

The news caused a sensation when it reached NSW, much to the annoyance of authorities. Hunter claimed that the 'lenity and compassion' shown the group were the direct cause of a string of similar attempts in 1798. 'Had those people been sent back and tried in this country for taking away the boat', he wrote crossly, 'we should not have any schemes of that kind projected now'.⁵⁷

* * *

So ways of escaping were inseparable from the stories of escape, but also from stories told *in order to* escape. The latter — the Irish tales of China, paradise and the fabulous white settlement — have become similarly entangled in the historiography of escape. If escape from NSW was overwhelmingly sea-going, what are we to make of these land-based stories? Were they literal beliefs about destinations, directions and distances? Could the stories, as Carter suggests, have been calculated strategies for escape? We need to compare the myths with the movements, that is, where the convicts *said* they were going, with where they actually went.

First of all, the Irish were not the only ones with fantastic tales, and the authorities did not immediately dismiss these stories as nonsense. English convicts also told tales of gold mines, rivers and quarries which were officially investigated. Only when these failed to materialise were the stories declared wicked impositions on foolish and unthinking minds. As Carter observes, convicts played with, and played up to, enlightenment fantasies about rich resources in new colonies, literally to make a space for escape.⁵⁸ And, as Chris

⁵⁶ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 155-9; Hunter to Portland, 10 January 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 116; Tench, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-20, and see n.10, pp. 321-2.

⁵⁷ Hunter to Portland, 10 January 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 116;

⁵⁸ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 39-40; Tench, *op. cit.*, p. 137; Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 296-8; but Clendinnen, *op. cit.*, p. 250, sees the stories merely as a 'beguiling way of beguiling the time by the exercise of old tricks'.

Cunningham delights in showing, the authorities often eagerly listened to such tales, from convicts and Aborigines alike, and immediately despatched official parties to confirm or deny them.⁵⁹

The China and paradise stories do appear to have originated with the Irish, emerging after the arrival of the first ship from Ireland in 1791. They were a 'delirium still remaining unsubdued among them' in 1798, when recent Irish arrivals were still bolting, but the stories appear to have faded in the early 1800s.⁶⁰ They were repeated in official accounts, orders and in the press so often that they had become a kind of convenient shorthand for the wild, irrational minds of the Irish. Not surprisingly, the authorities were themselves foggy about the details and told different versions. These were, after all, ridiculous myths, ignorant and inconsistent, and did not require rational examination. As we shall see, this failure to query worked in the escapees' favour. Similarly, most historians have been vague about the stories, and tend to conflate them, as though they did not change over the colony's first twenty years. In fact the escape myths were not static: they too have a history. They changed direction and description, shifting effortlessly over the years from north, to south-west to west; from over rivers to over mountains, from China as a paradise of freedom and a passage home, to a distant settlement of white people. Let us briefly track the myths and how they evolved.

In Collins' earliest account there are two destinations: China and paradise, 'some country wherein they would be received and entertained without labour', but he gave no distance or direction.⁶¹ Phillip also reported two destinations: 'Such is their ignorance that some have left the settlement to go to China, which they suppose to be a distance of only one hundred and fifty miles', while others were seeking 'a town ... a few days' walk to the northward'.⁶² Tench too reported the northerly direction and the 150 mile distance. But he was told that the China and paradise were one and the same: China lay on

⁵⁹ C. Cunningham, *The Blue Mountains Rediscovered*, Sydney, 1996, p. 73. In 1794 Aboriginal people of the Hawkesbury told of a great freshwater river south of Botany Bay. A party eagerly sent out found no river. 'The native returned with the soldiers', Collins remarked, 'as cheerfully and as well pleased as if he had led them to the banks of the first river in the world'. Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 368-9. Perhaps they wanted to deflect settlement/invasion, which was just starting in their own river-country.

⁶⁰ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 109.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁶² Phillip to Nepean 18 November 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, pp. 308-9.

the other side of a river, and there convicts would be kindly welcomed by a 'copper coloured people'.⁶³

By 1798 the story had mysteriously transformed: it was now a settlement of white people where, as before, escapees would be free from toil. It was no longer to be found across the river to the north, but southwest of the colony, over the mountains. Aboriginal people were now also claiming to know of such a place. Governor Hunter was vague about the direction of 'paradise' — it was simply 'in some part of this country', but the expedition he commissioned in 1798 to demonstrate its non-existence went southwest to the Cowpastures, and beyond.⁶⁴

By around 1802, China and the white settlement/paradise, now sometimes conflated with home and family, had shifted again. The convicts were said to be victims of an 'illusory persuasion that an Establishment exists on the other side of these immeasurable heights', directly to the *west*, over the blue-hazed escarpment rising from the banks of the Hawkesbury/Nepean River.⁶⁵ Some versions were more elaborate, incorporating a large lake and 'bells, churches, masted vessels, a sterling specie', in short, all the highest accoutrements of empire: towns and commerce.⁶⁶

If we examine these mythical destinations in the context of colonial demography, it is clear that they shadowed the physical expansion of the colony and the exploratory journeys into new country: the way to 'China' always lay over country that was known or newly-familiar. In 1791 there were settlers on land to the north west of Sydney, and the country between the north shore, Manly and Broken Bay to the north was well-known.⁶⁷ From 1795 the south-west became

⁶³ Tench, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

⁶⁴ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 82, 109; Hunter to Portland, 15 February 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, pp. 129-34; Government and General Order, 19 January 1798, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, Vol. 3, pp. 351-2.

⁶⁵ SG, 26 June 1803, probably written by King and/or the editor, George Howe.

⁶⁶ King to Hobart, 28 October 1802, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 691; SG, 26 March and 26 June 1803. For discussion, see Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 122ff, 126, 141; R. Dixon, *The Course of Empire: Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales*, Melbourne, 1986.

⁶⁷ See A.M. Dash, 'Phillip's Exploration of the Hawkesbury River', in J. Powell and L. Banks (eds), *Hawkesbury River History: Governor Phillip, Exploration and Early Settlement*, Sydney, 2000, pp. 11-30. See also 'A Map of the hitherto explored country, contiguous to Port Jackson, laid down from actual survey', J. Walker, engraver, 1791 or 1792, reproduced in P. Ashton and D. Waterson, *Sydney Takes Shape: A History in Maps*, Brisbane, 2000, p. 11.

the focus after the fantastic rumour of the wild cattle flourishing in an arcadian landscape was confirmed. The Cowpastures was immediately declared out of bounds, but by 1798 there were reports of cattle-killing by convicts there.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, familiarity with the country to the west and north-west had grown with the unruly Hawkesbury settlements, spreading north and south along the Hawkesbury/Nepean. Castlereagh, a surveyed and planned settlement on the Nepean, was settled in 1803. Here the rugged Blue Mountains escarpment rose abruptly from the edge of the river, looming over the small farm clearings in the dense riverflat forest.⁶⁹ Cunningham argues convincingly that mountains exploration was commonplace for settlers in this period, and expeditions were generally not reported. The mythical destinations thus shifted rather conveniently with the spread of settlement and the wider footprint of geographic familiarity.

What of the stories of China and paradise themselves – were they utterly irrational? Convicts were probably quite familiar with China as a real place, if an exoticised one. Their houses and huts in the colony were full of Chinese earthenware, mainly bowls of different types and quality.⁷⁰ China was the destination for sealskins from the islands in Bass Strait.⁷¹ And it was quite possible for convicts to get to China – some probably did. Phillip himself reported that 'every ship that stops here on her way to China will carry off some of the best convicts'.⁷²

The mythical 'town' or settlement where fugitives would be welcomed, entertained and live free of labour, bespeaks a longing for release from cruel treatment, strict timetables, relentless toil. Several historians suggest that convicts also extrapolated from what they saw and knew of Aboriginal life and society. Aboriginal people seem to have been able to devote far more time to social and spiritual life than

⁶⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 72ff.

⁶⁹ Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, Vol. 1, pp. 170-4; C. Liston, 'Research Towards a History of Castlereagh to 1906', unpublished report, 1998, courtesy of the author. Some ex-convict settlers, such as Matthew Everingham had a genuine curiosity about what lay beyond these great ramparts, and became early explorers. Everingham wrote: 'I long to see the country on the other side of the mountains, they appear such formidable barriers of nature'. Cunningham thinks his 1795 expedition reached Mt Tomah or Mt Wilson. See V. Ross (ed.), *The Everingham Letterbook*, Sydney, 1985; Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁷⁰ G. Karskens, *Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood*, Sydney, 1999, ch. 2.

⁷¹ Bigge, *Report on the Colony ... of New South Wales*, p. 47.

⁷² Collins reported stowaways found on ships bound for China (the *Ceres* 1796 and *Sylph* 1796). Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 469 and Vol. 2, p. 11; Phillip to Nepean, 22 August 1790, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 207.

to 'work'. Some convicts socialised with Aboriginal people, went hunting with them, enjoyed their company, traded, sang and danced with them. Some, such as the astonishing (and voluble) John Wilson, lived with a Hawkesbury group for years, developed a pidgeon language, took an Aboriginal name (Bunboe) and was scarified according to their custom. From at least the mid 1790s, convicts knew that it was possible to live another sort of life in this country. Stories about a welcoming settlement of white people in the interior also appear to have emerged from the encounters between convicts and Aborigines. As Martin Thomas suggests, they probably crossed both ways, each group having different reasons to tell them.⁷³

There remains, of course, the question that the authorities kept asking. Did people really believe these stories? Were they genuine, or did they serve some other purpose? As we have seen the majority of escape routes led not into the interior, but to the sea and ships; they were not imaginary or symbolic journeys, but real and practical. Still more significantly, until about 1803, those who said they were going to 'China', no matter what its alleged direction, usually headed for the coast or rivers.

Let us closely re-examine an often-cited event: the first major Irish breakout from Rose Hill in early November 1791. As with the Irish stories generally, there are different versions of this famous escape, and the differences are telling. In Tench's version, twenty men and one pregnant woman took their newly acquired clothes, tools and a weeks' rations, left Rose Hill on 1 November and headed 'northwards'. They passed some settlers whom they told of the plan to walk to China, and who tried unsuccessfully to convince them of their folly. One man died of fatigue on the third day and several were speared by Aborigines. Later the Irish told Tench that Broken Bay had 'stopped their progress'. They were 'forced then to turn to the right hand' and 'found themselves on the sea shore' (note the words used here: the escapees were 'stopped', 'forced' and 'found themselves' — these words elide actively chosen destinations). Destitute, living on shellfish, they decided the scheme was 'impracticable' and 'several agreed to return to Rose Hill'. So in the following weeks they staggered back, emaciated and wounded. In the hospital at Parramatta, they told Tench what he

⁷³ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 37. For the story of John Wilson, see Cunningham, *op. cit.*, ch. 4; Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 59 and *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 715 note 58; Silver, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Clendinnen, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-50; Thomas, *op. cit.*, ch. 5.

wanted to hear: sad laments about being 'so grossly deceived' and being 'made to believe'.⁷⁴

In another version, by Collins, there are no settlers along the journey to warn the travellers, no Aboriginal attacks, and no laments for misplaced faith and shameful folly. He was immediately suspicious of the story: 'It was generally supposed ... that this improbable tale was only a cover to their real design, which might be to procure boats, and get on board the transports after they had left the cove'. After they left Rose Hill, they were tracked as far as Lane Cove, on the north shore of the harbour, in the direct line to Broken Bay; then they vanished. A few days later, the woman was found on the 'water side' of the north shore, down the harbour from Sydney, and her husband was located in the same area shortly after. Search parties were sent further down Port Jackson and up to Middle Harbour, but no-one else was found until some time later, when 'some officers' on one of their rambles around 'the lagoon between this harbour and Broken Bay' (probably Narrabeen Lakes) happened to encounter three more escapees. These were not the meek figures in Tench's account, for they 'did not readily give themselves up', proclaiming defiantly that they 'wanted nothing more than to live free of labour'. Somehow they were persuaded to return to Rose Hill, but absconded again a few days later.⁷⁵

What are we to make of these different accounts? If we track them, the composite picture (Clendinnen's 'joining-the-dots'⁷⁶) suggests that the escapees initially did not head north at all, but east towards the Lane Cove area. The settlers who reported seeing them were those recently placed on grants along the Parramatta River around present-day Ryde.⁷⁷ From Lane Cove at least two of the party, a husband and wife, left the main group and made their way east and down to the north shore of Sydney Harbour, where they were found. The rest must have *then* turned northeast towards Broken Bay. Here they were not wandering, utterly lost in strange country, for the area north of Manly, around Middle Harbour, Pittwater and Broken Bay had been explored

⁷⁴ Tench, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-4, 246-7.

⁷⁵ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 185-6.

⁷⁶ Clendinnen, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁷⁷ The settlements at Field of Mars, Northern Boundary, the Ponds, Kissing Point. See Tench, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-2; T. Kass, C. Liston and J. McClymont, *Parramatta: A Past Revealed*, Parramatta, 1996, pp. 31-4; for location of the settlers and the path to Broken Bay, see map of the colony's settlements (1798) in Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, frontispiece.

and assessed in 1788 by three official parties, which had included numbers of convicts. These parties usually walked overland to Pittwater and were met there by boats. By 1791 this was familiar territory, where officers enjoyed rambling and shooting. The escapees probably fell in with the Aboriginal path, used by whites, which ran northwards along the coast from Manly.⁷⁸ At Broken Bay they said they made straight for the seashore, perhaps present day Palm Beach on Barrenjoey Peninsula.

Were the shorelines accidentally found or intentional destinations? These escapees had been in the colony for just over a month when they took off, having arrived on the *Queen* on 26 September. Collins tells us that the *Queen*, along with four other ships, were to be 'discharged from government employ' and then to 'proceed to Bombay ... and load home with cotton'. Given the commonness of talk between sailors and convicts, it is likely that the *Queen* convicts knew this. What they probably did not know was that Phillip suddenly decided to hire the *Queen* to fetch Lieutenant Governor Ross from Norfolk Island. She sailed for the island early in November, the same time as the Irish left Parramatta.⁷⁹

Collins may have been right in his first reaction: the China story appears to be a ruse, masking plans to get to the ships. The frenetic, repeated escapes, the timing, the co-ordination and the destinations suggest not featherbrained wanderings, but a certain, desperate knowledge that the ships were setting sail. There may have been schemes to find boats, to signal, to row out and join the *Queen*. But she had changed course, and never came. No wonder the returning escapees were dejected, or immediately ran off again to try for another ship. Despite his gut reaction, Collins was convinced. Meanwhile, Tench's conversation with the wounded Irish in the hospital at Rose Hill confirmed *his* storyline, that they *were* foolish, gullible victims of wild stories. Carter is rightly sceptical, suggesting Tench put the words in their mouths.⁸⁰ What is significant is that the escapees knew that floggings were likely as they related their miserable stories, carefully veiling sources and using appropriately passive words. In this case, the

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, and see John Hunter, Arthur Phillip and others cited in Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 20ff., and in Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁷⁹ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 179-83, 187.

⁸⁰ Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 301. Clendinnen portrays these Irish as 'desolate creatures ... waiting for their floggings' while Tench 'makes them the butt of an Irish joke'. Clendinnen, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-5.

stories of China and paradise were effective, because the authorities forgave these clearly harmless, stupid creatures. To rational minds the wild tales showed that they were clearly deluded ('Irish'). Their bodies showed they had suffered enough, and their suffering would deter others. Thus, 'this evil will cure itself'.⁸¹

It is of course likely that some in the community believed such stories. The newly-arrived convict, William Noah, wrote to his sister in 1799 that it was the 'opinion of the common people' that the continent joined India, and 'several have been Lost in Indeavouring to find it out'. Noah was demonstrating his own superior knowledge ('the Situation and Extent of this Country is layd Down by several geographers' he wrote assuredly) but he suggests that the tales were part of common knowledge and talk about the town.⁸² Perhaps wide-eyed newcomers were always inducted with such tall tales from old hands? Perhaps 'China' and 'India' had become slang or verbal shorthand for 'another place', a place outside this colony.

But most of our evidence for the China and paradise stories come from the despatches and accounts of the élite, and, after 1803, from the reports in the *Sydney Gazette*. In a way it was this writing that gave them form, a kind of solidity, and ensured their longevity. But the original sources were usually verbal, often quasi-confessional accounts given by convicts who had returned, failed and famished, or those who were caught before or after they left. All of them were facing the prospect of a flogging and hard labour at a penal settlement. If they had robbed or attacked anyone, they would most likely be hanged. Whether or not they were believed and told in the wider community, stories of China and paradise, especially when sorrowfully confessed, were often effective in mitigating punishment. Even when the place where escapees were found totally contradicted the direction in which they said 'paradise' lay, suspicions were not aroused: it merely reinforced the hopeless ignorance of geography, and, conversely, the superior understandings of those in authority.⁸³

81 Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 186; Phillip to Nepean, 18 November 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, pp. 308-9.

82 W. Noah, *Voyage to Sydney in the Ship Hillsborough 1798-1799 and a Description of the Colony*, Sydney, 1978, p. 69.

83 For example, during the 1802 escape of a group allegedly in search of the 'settlement over the mountains', none seem to have headed to the mountains. King reported that of the nine caught, 'some had gone to the sea-side, others had reached the Nepean, while [others] had wandered about the place they had left after being absent nearly ten days'. King to Hobart, 28 October 1802, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 691.

These patterns continued over the 1790s. Irish 'China travellers', although they said they were going 'north' or 'southwest', found their way to rivers and beaches. A series of escapes by the *Brittania* convicts in 1798 included some who headed southeast to the Georges River and Botany Bay. Another group who were caught with their stockpiled provisions, clammed up and 'seemed to be totally ignorant whither they were going'.⁸⁴ Yet they had been in the colony for over seven months, and were surely intelligent enough to look about them, work out the points of a compass, see the mountains to the west and know that the beckoning ocean lay to the east. Their obstinate refusal to confess their destinations (an absence of stories) earned seven of them floggings of 200 lashes and the others stints of hard labour.

Sometimes, to the disgust of the naval men in authority, the escapees carried a piece of paper with a *compass drawn on it* ('the ignorance of these deluded people, my Lord, would scarcely be credited'). One man when questioned about his route explained he had been given written 'instructions' to 'keep the sun on a particular part of his body, varying according to the time of day'. By this method, he travelled eastward to the head of Georges River. Another group searching for a 'road to China' was stranded there in February 1798, and rescued by a boat which had mistakenly sailed up an isolated arm. Atkinson suggests that pieces of paper, writing, compasses and northpoints may have had 'a kind of talismatic authority' for the Irish, and speak both of distinctiveness and brotherhood. They certainly aroused horrified fascination in their betters, and magnified the strangeness of the 'Irish mind'.⁸⁵

At this stage, Governor Hunter tried to convince the convicts of the non-existence of an inland paradise, or China, in the southwest by sending four men into the interior on an expedition. Unsurprisingly, given the oceanic focus of escape attempts, they were not much interested in trudging inland. Three of them only got as far as Mt Hunter, just over the Nepean River at Camden, before turning back. Hunter reported with satisfaction that they returned 'most completely sick of their journey'. Shortly after, the same men tried to escape, heading east to Botany Bay. Meanwhile, the expedition, led by John Wilson, not only showed that there was an easy path over the

⁸⁴ These were the *Brittania* convicts, who had arrived from Cork in May 1797.

⁸⁵ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 200, and Vol. 2, pp. 75-8, 83; Hunter to Portland, 15 February 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, pp. 130-1; Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, Vol. 1, pp. 249-51.

mountains, but discovered fine and promising country on the other side. Not surprisingly this information was not officially published, though it must have travelled fast among the convicts and settlers.⁸⁶

What of the final phase, the fabled stories of the white settlement and China over the mountains to the west, drawing convicts lemming-like to their doom on the desolate ridges and awesome cliffs?⁸⁷ If we separate official rhetoric from reported cases, the evidence for such terrifying ordeals is curiously thin. While scores if not hundreds continued to stow away on ships, or embarked on lives as illegal workers or bushrangers on the fringes, between 1803 and 1810 the *Sydney Gazette* reported only four cases where the escapees' destination was given as 'the other side of the mountains'.⁸⁸ In each case, the escapees were, once more, facing judicial interrogation, sentence and punishment. None of the cases offer good evidence that they actually tried to cross the mountains.

The first of these escapes involved fifteen convicts who fled from Castle Hill and committed a series of robberies and assaults on settlers nearby. A convict servant was shot in the face; sixteen year old Rose Bean was raped in front of her mother. They then retreated with stolen weapons and other goods to the plain 'between the Hawkesbury and the mountains', living near a group of Aborigines. This was an area not settled, yet contiguous to settlement, where they probably planned to live as bushrangers. So it appears they were not escapees in the sense of wanting to escape from the colony. Soon another 'body of natives' alerted the constables and soldiers to their whereabouts and fourteen were arrested and tried. At the trial the evidence for the crimes was undeniable, and the movements of the gang were clearly limited to the plain at the foot of the mountains, where they hid out. Yet, at the last minute, one of the accused ventured a statement that 'he had embarked on this fatal expedition with no other view than of crossing the mountains ... and thereby returning to his family'.

⁸⁶ Hunter to Portland, *ibid.*, pp. 130-1; Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9.

⁸⁷ Cunningham suggests that this description of the Blue Mountains dates from George Bass' 1796 journey, which probably reached Kings Tableland. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁸⁸ Conversely, see Cunningham's evidence for increasing popular familiarity with the mountains. Other mountains/'China' escape journeys may of course have gone unreported, but then again, this is unlikely given the authority's immediate interest in the transgressive and terror-inspiring tales and the large number of columns devoted to reporting them and sermonising about them. It was in their interest to maintain the myth of the uncrossable 'sandstone girdle' as *de facto* gaol walls.

Unlikely as it sounded, this explanation was seized upon as the *raison d'être* for the breakout; it probably reduced the number of hangings which followed (three of the fourteen were capitally convicted, one was reprieved at the gallows). The *Gazette* made it clear that these men were hanged 'for the atrocious and vile crimes they committed', and not for daring to 'countenance flight'. But the implication was that the 'ridiculous plan ... to go into the mountains, to China' had led them to commit their crimes. Note too that it was the editor, George Howe, or Governor King, and not the escapee, who inserted 'China' as the destination.⁸⁹

The other three cases (two in 1803 and one in 1808) all involved groups of men who went missing for days or weeks without permission, and returned in various states of debilitation. John Place, an English convict, gave a long, confessional account of his experience from his hospital bed at Parramatta. He said he and three others decided to 'pass the mountains' for China, 'by which means they would obtain their liberty again' because they were anxious to return to their families. They wandered for seventeen days, exhausted their food, and decided to return. One by one, all but Place weakened and died. 'None can read the above account' commented Howe 'without pitying the ignorance and commiserating the suffering of these deluded prisoners'.⁹⁰

John Place was nursed back to health and spared any further punishment, while his story was the subject of long homilies expounding on the idiocy of crossing attempts and the inland settlement story. Six months later he disappeared again, with another two convicts, and returned sometime after to Sydney with the same tale, this time adding the 'imaginary settlement'. But the story did not work a second time, since the authorities refused to believe anyone would repeat such an ordeal, and in any case Place had not the famished appearance of a genuine China-traveller. It was concluded that his tale was a 'fabrication' and that 'he had concealed himself in remote employ'. He suffered five hundred lashes.⁹¹

⁸⁹ SG, 5, 19 and 26 March 1803. The body of the fifteenth, bushranger, James Hughes, was found by Aborigines three years later 'under the first ridge of the mountains'. SG, 19 January 1806.

⁹⁰ SG, 26 June 1803.

⁹¹ SG, 18 December 1803. Sent back to the Hawkesbury after his flogging, Place was one of the leaders in the Castle Hill Rebellion in the following year and was one of the four hanged in March 1804. SG, 11 March 1804.

We will never know the real journeys of Place and his companions, nor that of James Tracey who went off with two others for a month in 1808 and told the magistrate a similar tale;⁹² nor whether official admonitions citing scores of lonely deaths in the wild mountains had any foundation in truth. As ever, these 'escapees' give only the vaguest geographical descriptions of their journeys, if any, which is odd considering how well the mountains were known by this time. If their actual destinations were not ships and water, what else would explain their absence? Perhaps they had been among the rising numbers of bushrangers — men now able to escape by living in the bush and robbing settlers. A still more likely explanation for their absences was the one guessed at Place's second hearing — 'remote employ'. Large numbers of absconding convicts were given shelter and work by settlers desperate for labour, especially at harvest time in November (the date of Place's second absconding). The government repeated warnings and threats to settlers, and fined them, but with little effect.

Convicts could now use the distance and remoteness of the outlying settlement to live in freedom. Should they return to the towns, and be apprehended there, they might try to use the stories of mountain crossings and the inland settlement, knowing they would not be too closely questioned. So the stories were appropriated by a few bushrangers and absconders for the same purposes as earlier escapees had used them.⁹³ But the instances of this are few, and it appears that the China and paradise stories were waning in this period. (Meanwhile they ironically flourished in the authorities' written reports, orders and editorials). Once the mountains were officially crossed in 1813 and a real white settlement was founded at Bathurst, they lost their usefulness entirely and largely vanished.

Historians have rightly used the stories of 'going to China' as a way of giving convicts a 'voice', of retrieving them from the facelessness, the sheer insignificance accorded them in traditional

⁹² SG, 12 June 1808. Tracey claimed he and his two companions had 'crossed three ridges and three rivers'. His master spoke up for him before the magistrate, but he was nevertheless sentenced to 100 lashes 'to deter others from similar misdeeds'. Nothing was said of the other two men. Tracey was granted his certificate of freedom in 1810. SG, 9 June 1810.

⁹³ Paula Jane Byrne found evidence of utopian hopes and plans for escape to Timor and 'a new settlement' among bushrangers in the 1820s, but argues most robbed for food and stayed near settlements, see *Criminal Law and Colonial Subject*, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 136ff.

imperial history. In this dualistic model, then, the élite have the monopoly on 'reason', 'logic' and 'cartographic geography', and, indeed, used them as tools of repression, while the convicts' mindset, and sole defence, was myth, magic and imagination. But the corollary is this: convicts were incapable of 'rational thought', ideas of 'cause and effect' or learning. In a way they *are* reduced to the 'unthinking beings', the geographically ignorant, childish fools the élite describe them as. But convicts were able to gather information through talk, to look about them as they travelled along rivers or paths to the inland stations, to calculate directions, distances and times, and they seemed to know the minds of those with power over them very well indeed. If we can recognise these abilities, then we can allow that they both planned escapes with real destinations, and invented stories about China and paradise. These were not only defiant geographies and spatial 'last laughs', but strategies to disguise intentions (and intelligence), and to mitigate the savage responses of authority.

* * *

Ships were magnets, and as Commissioner Bigge observed in 1819-20, it was escape by sea, rather than overland, that was the primary problem.⁹⁴ In half the escape events in the sample, people attempted to stow away. They rowed or swam out into Sydney Harbour and clambered aboard vessels. Waves of escapes followed in the wakes of arriving ships, and the ships anchored in Sydney Harbour themselves beckoned as the way of returning. Convicts could 'conceal themselves in the woods for a week or a month before the ship sails', waiting for a time close to departure. In April 1802, convicts at Parramatta apparently staged a '*grande allarme*' (Maurice Margarot's words) as a ploy to have large numbers moved to Sydney — and closer to the recently arrived French ship, *Naturaliste*.⁹⁵ After clearance procedures were introduced, escapees rowed out from the Heads to meet the ship after it had been cleared by authorities.⁹⁶ Seamen, and sometimes masters and mates were persuaded or bribed to 'secrete' escapees. Masters short of hands, as they often were, actively recruited

⁹⁴ Bigge made no mention of overland escapes, recognising that most convicts attempted to escape by water, by stowing away, piracy or by stealing boats. Bigge, *Report ... on the Colony of New South Wales*, pp. 33-4, 47; *Report ... on the Judicial Establishments*, pp. 78-81; and *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry, on the State of Agriculture and Trade in the Colony of New South Wales*, Adelaide, 1966 [London, 1823], pp. 54-5.

⁹⁵ Silver, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁹⁶ Phillip to Nepean, 22 August 1790, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 207.

from amongst the convicts. Sometimes the escapees were found and dragged out by the Row Guard, and sometimes they emerged when a ship was smoked, but often they were so well hidden, they got away.⁹⁷

Again, the key was collectivism — shared information, communication, co-operation. News and knowledge about ships' arrivals, anchorage and departures, about which masters needed labour, which seamen could be sympathetic or bribed, good hiding places; all these must have been well-known, widely shared and avidly studied.⁹⁸ This was more than an aberrant, occasional occurrence: it was a widespread, practice — 'so certain a system' as Collins put it — and it often worked.⁹⁹ Governors from Phillip to Macquarie lamented and raged against 'the connivance of sailors', and ships' masters who flouted the regulations with impunity. American ships in particular were targets of complaint. As the settlement grew and trade flourished, more ships called and the problem worsened.¹⁰⁰

When ships were unavailable or inaccessible, some convicts decided instead to steal boats. They took fishing boats and long boats, small rowboats and sailboats, loading them with provisions, stores, tools and whatever navigational instruments they could procure.¹⁰¹ These attempts tended to involve people who had knowledge of sailing for, as Alan Atkinson points out, many convicts were seamen, or otherwise bred to the sea, like the Cornwall fisherman, William Bryant. The early boat escapes were from Sydney Harbour and the Parramatta River, but by 1798 convicts were seizing larger colonial vessels plying the Hawkesbury River to and from Windsor, and they

⁹⁷ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 130, 190, 191, 195.

⁹⁸ Compare with W. Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 223, 'It was unusual for convicts to receive help in organizing an escape attempt'.

⁹⁹ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ See Phillip to Nepean, 22 and 23 August 1790, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, pp. 206, 207; Phillip to Grenville, 5 November 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 269; Phillip to Nepean, 14 December 1791, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, pp. 317-8; Hunter to Portland, 20 June 1797, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, p. 25; King to Portland, 2 July 1800, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 25; Bligh to Windham 31 October 1807, *HRA 1*, Vol. 6, p. 159; Macquarie to Bathurst, 31 August 1813, *HRA 1*, Vol. 8, pp. 84-5; Macquarie to Bathurst, 16 May 1818, *HRA 1*, Vol. 9, p. 793. On the American ships, see also Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 457. For later rises in shipping activity, see Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁰¹ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 54, 136, 155-9, 190, 200, 228-9, 310, 313, 369, 493; Vol. 2, pp. 52, 58, 102; Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, Vol. 1, pp. 57, 113; Atkinson, 'Pioneers', p. 110; Bigge, *Report ... on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 33.

sailed north or south from Broken Bay.¹⁰² Huge storms always seemed to blow up in their wake, and parties sent in pursuit rarely found any trace of them. Quite often new discoveries were made during these pursuit voyages, as well as by the escapees themselves. Escapes, like rumours and stories, ironically fostered the colony's official geographic knowledge, and its expansion.¹⁰³ Yet, as Bigge observed, the growing settlements, the constant passage of ships between them and thriving trade they attracted, all in turn increased the opportunities for escape. The fundamental problem was that the seaboard position of Sydney and other settlements 'render them unfit places for the residence of convicts, as they multiply their temptations to escape'. The ocean settlements of Australia raised 'discontent' in the minds of otherwise well-behaved convicts. The constant movements of the ports kept longings and restlessness alive. These were feelings and possibilities that only true remoteness 'might gradually suppress'. Sydney, by virtue of its maritime position, was not remote.¹⁰⁴

These various escape strategies elicited a great range of government counter-tactics: punishments inflicted on bodies, and rules and regulations that became increasingly elaborate and restrictive. The methods included pain and terror, threats and exhortations. Phillip told the assembled 1791 arrivals that parties would be sent out in pursuit and escapees would be shot on sight, or stranded on islands, or chained together with only bread and water for sustenance. Those who armed themselves and robbed the stores would be 'instantly put to death'. For now, though, their foolish offences would be forgiven, and they should go 'cheerfully about their labour'.¹⁰⁵ By 1798 those who refused to confess their plans, tried to stow away, or wandered coastward with pieces of paper to guide them were flogged. Those who robbed and assaulted settlers, seized boats or led uprisings were

¹⁰² Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 47; Hunter to Portland, 10 January and 15 February 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, pp. 115-6, 129-30. The destinations of those sailing southwards are not known. Possibly they were reversing their original voyage to NSW.

¹⁰³ For example, the Coal (now Hunter) River was discovered by Lieutenant Shortland while searching for a group of escapees who sailed north from Broken Bay. Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 48. When George Bass made his 1798 voyage of south of Sydney, he reached Philip Island off the coast of present-day Victoria. Soon after turning back, he found seven castaways on another island – they had been dumped there by the rest of an escaped group of 14 who had seized a Hawkesbury boat in October 1797. Hunter to Portland, 1 March 1798, *HRA 1*, Vol. 2, pp. 132-3; Collins, *Account*, Vol. 2, p. 94. See also Cunningham's discussion of the 'diffusion' of people and geographic knowledge. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-1, 73.

¹⁰⁴ Bigge, *Report ... on the Colony of New South Wales*, pp. 33-4, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 186.

publicly hanged, usually at the place from which they had escaped, as a lesson to their countrymen.

Threats were partnered by the supposed power of logic and evidence. Efforts were made to persuade the Irish that escape was pointless and foolish, and it was thought that stories of failure, would spread to counter stories of freedom. Surely the sight of the ragged, emaciated bodies of escapees emerging from the bush would knock the dreams out of them? But the authorities continued to hear that the China and paradise stories circulated unabated. Hunter tried to disperse the Irish in order to dilute and suppress the tales, but this was like scattering seeds, for the words thereby spread to 'irritate and inflame the minds' of formerly docile convicts.¹⁰⁶

If authorities never quite grasped the metaphoric and strategic nature of the Irish stories, they soon recognised the vital role of cooperation, trust and loyalty among the people. Hunter, like Phillip, addressed the convicts in person, telling them not to trust one another, for they were led astray by 'deep and wicked designs of some who pretended a greater share of wisdom'. They should trust instead their governor, and be 'honest and industrious' to procure 'true happiness'. Soon a more effective strategy was introduced: convicts were encouraged to betray one another with the promise of reward. Collins noted that few convicts came forward, except when there had been an accident or argument.¹⁰⁷ However, just under two thirds of the sampled escape attempts were discovered, so it is likely that informants and tip-offs played a considerable part. Here we find the limits of collectivism: loyalty across rank might not be watertight, decisions were made for personal gain. Vertical bonds across the different ranks were also cultivated by convicts and held all kinds of advantages, especially for those who decided to remain in NSW.¹⁰⁸ Bigge reported that officials running the convict workforce 'have always depended upon the treachery of accomplices for information', and that this was 'common in all establishments in which they are collected together'.¹⁰⁹

Boat thefts brought on a volley of official regulations, which were often impractical and unworkable in this waterbound colony. Settlers

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 129.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 232, and Vol. 2, pp. 58, 103.

¹⁰⁸ For discussion see Karskens, *The Rocks*, pp. 8-9, 147-9, 166-7.

¹⁰⁹ Bigge, *Report ... on the Colony of New South Wales*, p. 33.

were not to leave their boats lying about; they were to secure them at night, and if left with 'oars, rudders, masts or sails, they would be laid on shore and burnt'. At first the size of new boats was limited; by 1797 permission was required to build a boat of any kind.¹¹⁰ After the successful escapes from Broken Bay, the crews of schooners on the Hawkesbury run were instructed to 'cut away the masts and rigging and run the boats ashore and bilge them' at the first sign of pirates.¹¹¹ But since orders were liable to be 'worn out of their recollection' and boats were essential to the colony's workings, they continued nevertheless to be built, sailed, left lying about, and stolen.¹¹²

Ships were the main means of escape, and they were the most difficult to control. Governors constantly ordered ships' masters to prevent the practice of secreting escapees and complained bitterly in their despatches home about non-compliance. They repeatedly requested severe penalties and prosecutions be imposed and enforced, or that contracts stipulate such rules. By 1801 there were £500 fines for those who carried convicts away, though evidently these often had little impact.¹¹³ Each governor added regulations, usually following successful escapes, so Macquarie inherited a complex edifice of accumulated legislation, and he added more. Ships could only be moored in certain parts of the harbour and had to be properly secured against seizure. Masters were required to give ten days notice of departure, so that passenger lists could be compared with convict indents. Ships had to be cleared by the Chief Constable, who mustered and inspected crew and passengers on the decks, and a Row Guard was established to accompany departing ships until they cleared the Heads. Each regulation was a response to various convicts' escape tactics – a dialogue of movement and restriction. Convict escape meant

¹¹⁰ Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 53.

¹¹¹ Government and General Order, 9 November 1800, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 38.

¹¹² Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 132; see also Vol. 1, p. 53. Tench commented that such orders were instigated after the Bryant escape, but added mischievously that 'an order of this sort had been issued' earlier, so 'it was now repeated with additional restrictions'. Tench, *op. cit.*, p. 220. By 1820, boats had to be secured with an iron chain between sunrise and sunset, on pain of seizure by the Row Guard, whose members could divide one third of the boat's value between them. Bigge, *Report ... on the Judicial Establishments*, p. 81. On the importance of boats, see Karskens, *The Rocks*, ch. 16.

¹¹³ Phillip to Nepean, 22 August 1790, *HRA 1*, Vol. 1, p. 206; Phillip to Nepean, 14 December 1791, *HRA*, Series 1, Vol. 1, p. 317; Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 230, and Vol. 2, p. 136. Governors were well-aware of both the seamen's 'systems' and the masters' need for labour. King himself pardoned seamen convicts so they could man the *Lady Nelson* in 1801. King to Portland, 10 March 1801, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 85.

that, by 1820, Sydney's port regulations had provisions unknown anywhere else in the British empire, making it perhaps the empire's most inconvenient and expensive port.¹¹⁴

Governors were also under pressure to stop the shipboard escapes because numbers of convicts did manage to reach other colonies and countries in the early colonial period, including Timor, India, Cape Town, China and the many islands of the Dutch-East India Company. Names and descriptions of escapees were circulated around the global colonial networks in an attempt to block routes and destinations, and these became more efficient and effective with improvements in communication and record-keeping. As Anderson points out, NSW escapees were unwanted in other British colonies because, as poor whites bearing the 'convict stain', they undermined the racial homogeneity and moral superiority necessary for colonial rule.¹¹⁵ When a group managed to 'clandestinely establish themselves' in Calcutta, the Governor-General wrote to Hunter demanding he prevent further escapes because of the 'prejudicious consequences ... to the British character and interest'. Proclamations prohibiting the entry of any former convict were made, and convicts were told, once more, that 'even if they reached another country' they were forever marked and unwanted as 'convicts from Botany Bay'.¹¹⁶ The net of capture extended beyond NSW: it would ensnare them in almost any place they landed around the globe. In 1802 King attempted to block the ultimate destination: home. He announced that lists of escaped convicts would be sent to the 'Sheriffs of the counties in which they were tried, as well as to the Chief Magistrates in each metropolis of the Three Kingdoms'.¹¹⁷ Even if they survived the vast ocean voyages, they would not be wanted at home: they would be recognised, arrested, and pay with their lives.

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¹¹⁴ Bigge, *Report ... on the Judicial Establishments*, pp. 78-81; *Report ... on the State of Agriculture and Trade*, pp. 54-5; Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 13.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12; Governor-General in Council, Bengal, to Hunter, 3 July 1800, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, pp. 22-3; Collins, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 11.

¹¹⁷ Government and General Order, 19 November 1802, in King to Hobart, 7 August 1803, *HRA 1*, Vol. 3, p. 327.

Convicts still under sentence continued to escape from Sydney and the other settlements for the entire convict period — some evidence suggests that the number actually rose between 1825 and 1830, a period of severity for convicts.¹¹⁸ At the same time, Sydney itself also became the longed-for destination of convicts escaping from the newer coastal settlements — Coal River (Newcastle), Hobart Town, George Town, and Port Phillip. However, the overall rate of departure of both convicts and ex-convicts appears to have fallen. Shaw traced declining numbers of ex-convict departures, from around 25% by 1821 to about 7% in 1826. He estimates that, over the whole convict period, only 5% returned home to Britain from Australia, while a growing majority stayed in NSW, either by force of circumstance or desire.¹¹⁹ Perhaps the underlying message — your native country has rejected you; you are not wanted — was demoralising. Anderson suggests that the effectiveness of official measures in smartly returning escapees to Australia explains the proportional decline in convict escape. A parallel explanation is that convicts for whom homesickness and disorientation gradually subsided found themselves with some stake in the colony, and, to some extent, at home. In the rapidly growing town of Sydney, they recreated the things that most mattered to them, and for which, it appears, so many tried to escape — economic opportunities, material decency, community, culture, companionship, a familiar place, a sense of connection, and, for the lucky ones, family. In an immigrant place, forever haunted by the possibility of escape and return, these were the things that might turn minds towards staying.¹²⁰

Escape stories, and stories told in order to escape, had the power to capture minds. They inspired actions and shaped official accounts in the early colony. As our earlier historians knew, they continue to exert that narrative power. Ironically, the imaginary stories the Irish people told the authorities about China and paradise have largely eclipsed the astonishing geographical stories of the escapes themselves. Some

¹¹⁸ W. Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 217. Hirst compares Bigge's estimate (225 escapees between 1803 and 1820) with that of the *Reports from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments*, 1831 (132 escapees between 1825 and 1830).

¹¹⁹ Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-3.

¹²⁰ See Karskens, *The Rocks and Inside the Rocks*; Noah, *op. cit.*; A. Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings*, Melbourne, 1995, ch. 11; R. Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788-1840*, Sydney, 2002; R. Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture Since 1788*, Melbourne, 1996, ch. 1; J. Hirst, *op. cit.*; Hirst points out that 'the colonists considered that the best security against escape was the high standard of living which the convicts enjoyed and the special indulgences and rewards', p. 138.

escapes criss-crossed the entire globe along the risky sea-routes, and took their chances in foreign ports. Others 'discovered' and explored strange lands and coastlines far ahead of official parties, and still others made the first contacts with Aboriginal peoples, lived with them and learned their languages. Their journeys challenge long-held ideas of the colony's remoteness, of distance as the factor shaping the settlement and later the nation, yet they so often became footnotes in the 'real' story of colony building. Where in current popular and general historical understandings of early NSW are the extraordinary feats of daring, courage and resilience by ordinary people whose names we often do not even know? Exploring their histories and geographies allow us to escape from what Kay Daniels called the 'unconscious scaffolding' of much early colonial and convict historiography, and the stories we tell ourselves about settlement and nascent nationhood.¹²¹

¹²¹ K. Daniels, 'Prostitution in Tasmania during the transition from penal settlement to "civilized society"', in K. Daniels (ed.), *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australia*, Sydney, 1984, p. 27.