

The Lure of the Lash: Spectacular Violence and White Ethnonationalism at an Australian Convict Site

a response by Megan J. Sheard

In the winter of 2021, I took a tour of the former convict settlement of Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour, lutruwita/Tasmania.¹ With dramatic relish, our tour guide explained that an especially brutal version of the cat-o-nine-tails was used to punish infractions by the convicts incarcerated there. Nicknamed the Macquarie Cat, the lash had added to its original knotted cord design small pieces of lead which cut ferociously into the backs of the punished. With a macabre enthusiasm reminiscent of theatrical pirate imitations, our guide proclaimed that the Cat could cut to the bone in three lashes. I let out a little noise, clearly being insufficiently piratical. The other visitors, possibly more accustomed to the variety of macabre drama that accompanies the narration of convict history in Australia, made no sound, but they looked a little uneasy as they huddled under the shelter from the pouring rain of a winter's day in Macquarie Harbour.

This moment crystallized the strange blend of historical rigor and darkly romanticized violence present in narrations of convict sites in an unmissable fashion. It was a tension I had noticed in tour guide narratives and institutionally produced interpretive materials at other convict sites in lutruwita/Tasmania, particularly at the

¹ In this response, I use the palawa kani term for Tasmania where practicable, while acknowledging the contested status of dual naming in Tasmania with respect to inclusivity. Where I address Tasmania as it appears in colonial discourse specifically, I use only Tasmania; for practicality, I do the same for grammatical variations, e.g. Tasmanian.

large Port Arthur Penal Settlement, in Paredarerme/Oyster Bay country in the state's southeast. Founded in 1830 as a small timber station, the settlement grew into the state's largest site of secondary punishment for male convicts who reoffended, and made use of the peninsula's highly defensible isthmus in its carceral strategy. It is today a protected historic site with an extensive set of interpretive materials and tours to facilitate the visitor's encounter with the deprivations of convict life.² The description of the Macquarie Cat at Sarah Island distilled a broader ambivalence in the way these materials present convict sites: a prosaic episode in what Hamish Maxwell-Stewart has called the "historiography of the lash."³

Like the transformation of a rice plantation and site of Black enslavement into an English-style garden discussed by Connor Hamm in this volume, Port Arthur has navigated the process of reinventing a site of involuntary and often brutal labor as a tourist destination, a transformation already underway at its closure in the late-nineteenth century. However, while U.S. plantations suppress their violent histories through reinvention, Australian penal settlements instead offer up their brutality as spectacle. This tendency continues alongside a growing body of historical scholarship on convict life, research which is being actively incorporated into visitor experiences. If Hamm's exploration of the Black history of Magnolia Gardens troubles romanticizing it as a space of white leisure—as surely it must—how can such revelry in spectacularized violence against convict bodies coexist with the meticulous unearthing of their stories?⁴ I suggest that the answer lies partly in the historically specific form of white ethnonationalism that has grown up around convict narratives in Australia, in which white tourists identify themselves with convicts rather than their masters. In

² James Findlay notes that this ambivalent character makes visiting convict sites part of "dark tourism," a practice—and an industry—premised upon the fascination with sites of human trauma. See James Findlay, "Cinematic Landscapes, Dark Tourism and the Ghosts of Port Arthur," *History Australia* 16, no. 4 (2019): 678–694.

³ Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, "Convict Workers, 'Penal Labour' and Sarah Island: Life at Macquarie Harbour, 1822-34." In *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration*, eds. Ian Duffield and James Bradley (London: Leicester University Press, 1997): 142-162.

⁴ This duality is often inherent in the research process itself. For example, a history of public archaeology at Port Arthur notes the development of themes for public tours introducing tourists to the site which include "a bold social experiment" to describe the Puer Boy's Prison, and Jeremy Bentham's phrase "a machine for grinding rogues honest" as the overarching Port Arthur guidebook catchphrase. While capturing important historical themes, such phrases are steeped in the perspective of the colonizer and the masters in particular, presenting visitors with an idea of arguably-virtuous reformatory experimentation rather than a carceral-structured colonialism. See Jody Steele, Julia Clark, Richard Tuffin, and Greg Jackman, "The Archaeology of Conviction: Public Archaeology at Port Arthur Historic Site," In *Past Meets Present: Archaeologists Partnering with Museum Curators, Teachers, and Community Groups*, eds. John H. Jameson, Jr. and Sherene Baugher, 69–85 (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2007): 74-75.

lutruwita/Tasmania, such identifications take place against a longer history of colonial romanticizing of landscape that some have referred to as the “Tasmanian Gothic.”⁵

Such romanticization of Tasmanian landscapes can be seen in a series of travel posters produced by the Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau in the 1930s. These posters share with the postcards and advertisements of Magnolia Gardens an adjacent visual language of the picturesque, and extolled Tasmania’s virtues as a tourist destination to a white public. The series draws on a striking art deco style of bold, contrasting colors to praise Tasmania’s natural beauty, accompanied by slogans such as *Tasmania, The Wonderland* and *Tasmania, the Switzerland of the South*.⁶ Tasmania emerges in the posters as a landscape of leisure and escape: *Tasmania, The Angler’s Paradise*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the dramatic views of the landscape framed for the prospective tourist’s

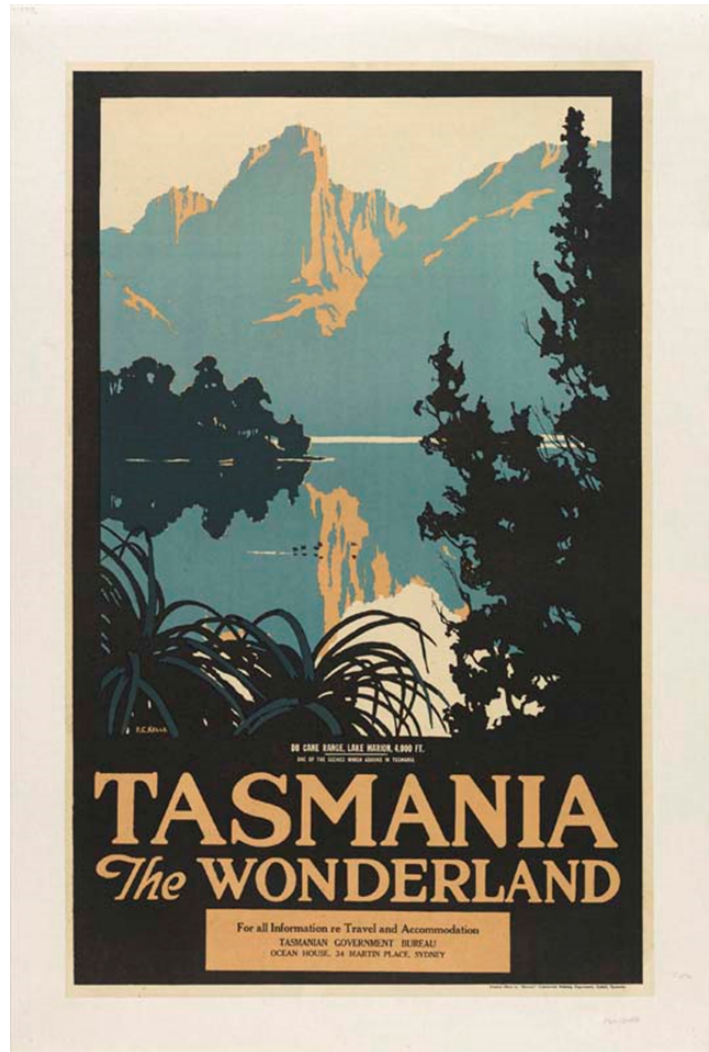


Figure 1. Harry Kelly, 193-. *Tasmania, The Wonderland*, colored lithograph on paper with linen backing, poster 102 x 64cm, backing 114 x 76cm. Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau. The image shows the Du Cane Range, Lake Marion, on the edge of Lairmairrener/Big River country. Source: Tasmanian Archives, Hobart: 849231.

⁵ Relating especially to art, literature, and film. For the original articulation of the concept, see Jim Davidson, “Tasmanian Gothic,” *Meanjin* 48, no. 2 (1989): 307–24; for a discussion which inflects the idea to include the memory of Tasmania’s genocidal war against Tasmanian Aboriginal people, see Greg Lehman, “Tasmanian Gothic: the art of Tasmania’s Forgotten War,” *Griffith Review*, no. 39 (2013): 193–204.

⁶ The posters share a visual vocabulary with the U.S. Works Progress Administration’s “See America” series in the 1930s, as well as its strategy of evoking national pride by constructing a sense of shared history and geographical specificity. See Cory Pillen, “See America: WPA Posters and the Mapping of a New Deal Democracy,” *The Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 1 (2008): 49–65. Though outside the scope of this response, global economic depression forms an important context for such advertising strategies in both cases.

gaze show no traces of the Aboriginal histories and practices animating them, projecting instead a romantic wilderness ready for discovery (fig. 1).⁷

Two of these posters feature the settlement at Port Arthur. One, entitled *Historic Tasmania: Port Arthur*, displays the ruins of its convict-built gothic revival church. Built from striking red-banded Tasmanian sandstone in 1836-7 as an experiment in interdenominational worship to accommodate Catholic and Protestant convicts, the church has a striking presence on the gently sloping grounds of the Port Arthur settlement, with its multiple spires and crenellated tower. The poster shows the church from a vantage point on the hillside above, its roof missing due to a fire in 1884 that gutted the building (fig. 2). No other structures are visible in the image aside from a white-posted fence arcing across a hill, suggesting the quietude of an abandoned pastoral landscape, with a single sailboat anchored peacefully by Point Puer in the background. The softly graduated

blues of the cove throw the bespired profile of the rosy-hued ruins into relief, as sunlight illuminates walls within naked lancet openings and casts long shadows across the ground. In keeping with the romantic trope of using figures to emphasize the grandeur

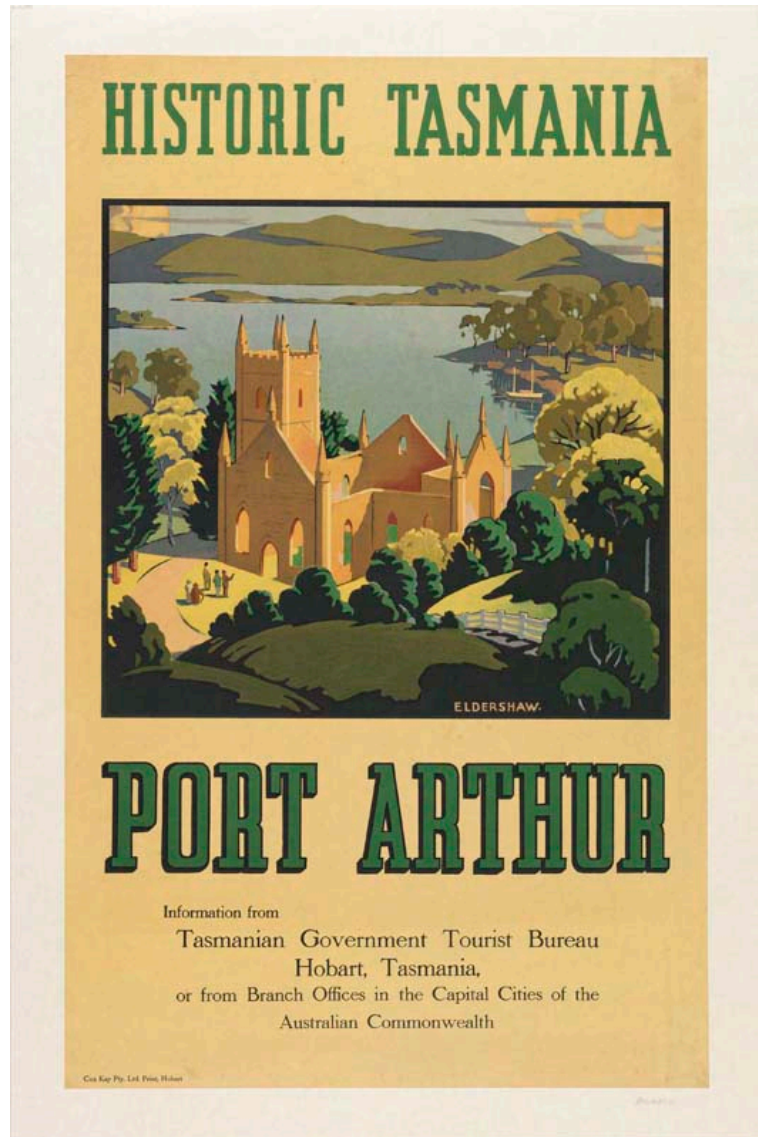


Figure 2. John Eldershaw, 193-. *Historic Tasmania, Port Arthur*, colored lithograph on paper with linen backing, poster 101 x 63cm, backing 111 x 73cm. Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau. Source: Tasmanian Archives, Hobart: 849230.

⁷ Tasmania's Aboriginal population is comprised of many clans grouped into eight distinct nations: for a map showing regional boundaries, see Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), "Map of Indigenous Australia," 2022. Accessed 5 May 2023. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>.

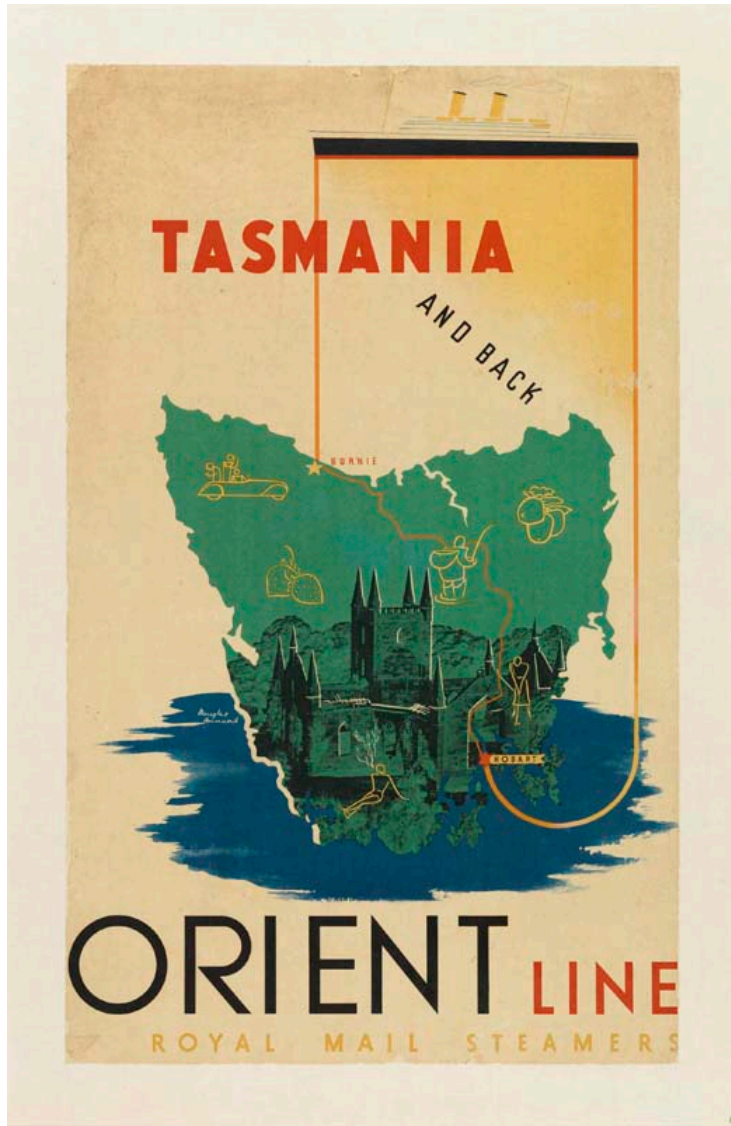


Figure 3. Douglas Annand, 193-. *Tasmania and Back*, Orient Line Royal Mail Steamers, colored lithograph on paper with linen backing, poster 99.3 x 61cm, backing 111.3 x 63cm. Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau. Source: Tasmanian Archives, Hobart: 834251.

of the landscape, five small figures are visible on a patch of yellow grass before the church's façade: one gestures toward it, indicating their status as sightseers. These visual tropes make the church appear as a remnant of historic labor in an ancient landscape.

Such idealization of the convict church at Port Arthur appears in a second poster advertising Orient Line Royal Mail Steamers as a way to travel to *Tasmania—and back* (fig. 3). Here, stylized line drawings of Tasmania's attractions are scattered across the state's land mass in the form of figures participating in leisure activities and drawings of berries and apples. Transposed over the lower portion of the state's land mass is a depiction of the Port Arthur church, with its recognizable spires and roofless emptiness. The ruins are not specifically identified in any way and seem to stand in for historicity itself, as imagined through settler ideas of architectural monumentality: part of a visual

canvas of leisure and the consumption of a romanticized historical past, all accessible via a neat return passage on the Orient Line.⁸

⁸ For a more detailed treatment Romanticism's translation into a territorial ideology and the Tasmanian visual tradition that grows up around it, see Jarrod Hore, *Visions of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022), Chapter 5. Hore demonstrates that images of ruins and monumental landscapes help to establish a specific sense of settler colonial time in Tasmania, which projects Aboriginal people into the past. As Hore notes, romantic conceptions of landscape become absorbed into global settler colonial wilderness narratives in the late-

These depictions of Tasmania reconstitute a site of forced labor as an encounter with a romantic and ancient historicity, offering it up for consumption for white tourists in an interpretive tradition that continues into the present. This imagination of landscape becomes powerfully joined to a new “convict consciousness” during the later reinvention Port Arthur as a foundational site of Australian history between the 1970s and 1990s, with convicts recast as noble pioneers as part of Australia’s “underdog” nationalism. As archaeologist Greg Jackman has argued, this was especially evident after the Bicentenary in 1988, when every woman and her dog suddenly discovered a convict ancestor.⁹ As Jackman notes, such identifications—valid or spurious—are linked to a white ethnonationalist projects of seeking common origins which are also geographically specific.¹⁰ Against the background of a landscape already invested with gothic drama, the claims on convict identity by a white Australian public allow the drama of identity-forging violence to coexist with detailed narratives of convict lives with surprising ease. The power of this story means that the fact that most white Australians descend from free settlers never raises the alternative possibility of identifying with the convict’s masters.

The comparison with former sites of slavery is useful precisely because the idea of spectacularizing violence against slaves is so unthinkable, even and especially for descendants of slaveholders wishing to rake in profits from their landholdings. If that possibility is troubling, romanticizing violence against the bodies of the transported should be too. The non-permanent nature of convictism, its diverse racial profile, and the central ideological role of criminality (real or imagined, since convicts might be paupers stealing to survive or political dissidents) give convictism an ambiguous status, in which we are left to wonder if it might have been deserved and if, in any case, it was really “that bad,” especially when some former convicts later became prosperous members of the white settler classes. However, I suggest that foregrounding such questions is the product of an Australian nationalist imagination which has already accepted convicts as renegade forefathers foundational to “our” identity—the gendered designation intentional here since convicts are overwhelmingly imagined as male.¹¹ With paternity identified, all that remains is to reckon with that heritage and what it means for a white “us,” in spite of overwhelming evidence of Australia’s multicultural

nineteenth century, an observation particularly pertinent to Tasmania, where the uptake of wilderness discourse by environmentalism has made it especially hard to eradicate.

⁹ Greg Jackman, “From Stain to Saint: Ancestry, Archaeology and Agendas in Tasmania’s Convict Heritage—A View from Port Arthur,” *Historical Archaeology* 43, no. 3 (2009): 101-112, 103.

¹⁰ Jackman questions the veracity of the 49% of Tasmanians claiming convict ancestry in 1999 as compared with the 50% of the population made up of convicts in 1847, given the significance of post-convict migration.

¹¹ Convict women were transported in much smaller numbers, although this is not enough to account for their relative absence from the Australian popular imagination.

demography. Hamm's project of reconstructing Black histories of U.S. plantations and their subsequent touristic manifestations has a potency that the best scholarship on convict perspectives struggles to achieve, since the latter have been coopted in advance into a white ethnonationalist story.¹²

Rather than speculating on the moral status of convictism, a more useful set of questions is suggested by linking it with land colonization and global movements of labor. Like slavery, convictism was one of many forms of unfree labor providing the muscle power for colonization around the world; the arrival of convicts in Australia was linked directly to U.S. history via North American refusal to accept British convicts after the American War of Independence.¹³ Instead of investing convict stories with disturbing world-birthing drama, we should read them against the horizon of their conscription into the dispossession of Aboriginal lands. If depictions of the Port Arthur convict church in 1930s travel posters construct a mythic past from a nineteenth-century ruin—the oldest settler architecture you can lay your hands on in Australia—they belie the genuine ancientness of the cultural landscape it occupies, landscape occupied by Paredarmerme/Oyster Bay clans for 40,000 years and counting.¹⁴ In this sense, no history from the perspective of involuntary laborers—slaves or convicts—can be complete without accounting for the settler colonial context for which their labor is a crucial condition of possibility.

Note: an earlier version of this article gave an occupation figure of 60,000 years, the currently accepted figure for occupation of the Australian continent. It has been corrected to reflect current estimates for lutruwita/Tasmania.

¹² An important exception here is an emerging literature on convicts of color, including Aboriginal people removed from their own Country. See Kristyn Harman, *Aboriginal Convicts: Australian, Khoisan and Maori Exiles* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2012).

¹³ For a discussion of the connection between white Australian ethnonationalism and U.S. history in the development of the "White Australia" Policy, see Marilyn Lake, "White Man's Country: The Trans-National History of a National Project," *Australian Historical Studies* 34, no. 122 (2003): 346–363.

¹⁴ I follow Patsy Cameron's use of "clans" rather than the more common "tribes" here, in part to avoid the colonial loading of that term. See Patsy Cameron, *Grease and Ochre: The Blending of Two Cultures at the Colonial Sea Frontier*, (Hobart, TAS: Fullers Bookshop, 2016). For a discussion of the tension between external stereotyping and internal identity in the term, see also Daniel P. Biebuyk, "On the Concept of Tribe," *Civilizations*, 16, no. 4 (1966): 500-515.

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