

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03598-9 - Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past

Edited by Stephen Nicholas

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**Studies in Australian History**

**Series editors: Alan Gilbert and Peter Spearritt**

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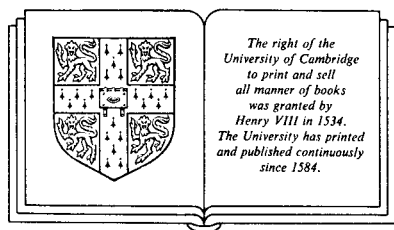
Reinterpreting Australia's past

Edited by

*Stephen Nicholas*

School of Economics

University of New South Wales



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press  
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 Edited by Stephen Nicholas  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

*For Jennifer Nicholas and Amy Shergold*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521361262

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First published 1988  
 Reprinted 1989  
 This digitally printed first paperback version 2007

*National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data*

Convict workers: reinterpreting Australia's past.

Bibliography.  
 Includes index.  
 ISBN 0 521 36126 5.

[1]. Convicts — Australia — History. 2. Convict labor — Australia — History. 3. Penal colonies — Australia — History. 4. Australia — History — 1788-1900. I. Nicholas, Stephen. (Series: Studies in Australian history (Cambridge, England)).

364.3'0994

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication data*

Convict workers: reinterpreting Australia's past

1. Australia. British criminals. Social conditions, 1788-1890  
 I. Nicholas, Stephen

364.3'08921094

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Convict workers: reinterpreting Australia's past / edited by Stephen Nicholas.

p. ca. — (Studies in Australian history series)

Bibliography: p.  
 Includes index.  
 ISBN 0 521 36126 5

1. Convict labor — Australia — History — 19th century. 2. Penal colonies — Australia — History — 19th century. 3. Penal colonies — Great Britain — History — 19th century. I. Nicholas, Stephen, 1946- . II. Series.

HV8931.A86C86 1988

365'.65'0994—dc19

ISBN-13 978-0-521-36126-2 hardback  
 ISBN-10 0-521-36126-5 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03598-9 paperback  
 ISBN-10 0-521-03598-8 paperback

## CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables and Figures	vii
Foreword	viii
Preface	ix
<b>PART ONE: REVISING THE PAST</b>	
Chapter One: Unshackling the Past <i>Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold</i>	3
Chapter Two: Full Circle? Contemporary Views on Transportation <i>David Meredith</i>	14
Chapter Three: Transportation as Global Migration <i>Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold</i>	28
<b>PART TWO: THE WORKERS</b>	
Chapter Four: Convicts as Migrants <i>Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold</i>	43
Chapter Five: Convicts as Workers <i>Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold</i>	62
Chapter Six: Female Convicts <i>Deborah Oxley</i>	85
Chapter Seven: A Labour Aristocracy in Chains <i>Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold</i>	98
<b>PART THREE: THE SYSTEM</b>	
Chapter Eight: The Convict Labour Market <i>Stephen Nicholas</i>	111
Chapter Nine: Public Employment and Assignment to Private Masters, 1788–1821 <i>Barrie Dyster</i>	127

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

vi	Contents	
Chapter Ten:	<b>The Organisation of Public Work</b> <i>Stephen Nicholas</i>	152
Chapter Eleven:	<b>Convict Labour and the Australian Agricultural Company</b> <i>John Perkins</i>	167
Chapter Twelve:	<b>The Care and Feeding of Convicts</b> <i>Stephen Nicholas</i>	180
Chapter Thirteen:	<b>A New Past</b> <i>Stephen Nicholas</i>	199
	<b>Statistical Appendix: Kris Corcoran and Stephen Nicholas</b>	202
	<b>Bibliography</b>	225
	<b>Index</b>	235

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03598-9 - Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past

Edited by Stephen Nicholas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

### Table

- 2.1 Cost of Transportation
- 3.1 Forced Migration of Convict Labour, 1787–1920
- 4.1 Young Age Dependents in Immigrant Flows to the Australian Colonies, 1817–51
- 4.2 Comparative Age Distributions: Convict and Free Immigrants to the United States in 1831
- 4.3 Male Workforce in New South Wales 1815–40
- 4.4 Distances Moved by English and Irish Workers Before Transportation
- 4.5 Pre-Transportation Mobility: Logit Equations for Stayers-Movers
- 5.1 Regional Basis of Convict Occupations
- 5.2 Literacy Rate for Major Occupations
- 5.3 Work-related Theft: Occupations with at least 30 Observations
- 5.4 Armstrong Skill Classification of English Workforce and English Convicts
- 5.5 Nicholas-Shergold Skill Classification of English Workforce and English Convicts
- 5.6 Occupational Breakdown of Irish Workforce and Irish Convicts
- 5.7 Literacy Rates of Convicts, Irish and English Workforces: Ability to Read and/or Write
- 5.8 Literacy Rates of the Convicts as Compared with the Population in Today's Less Developed Countries: Ability to Read/Write
- 5.9 Height-by-age of Convict, Poor London and Manchester Factory Boys
- 5.10 Height of Convicts by Date of Birth, Birthplace and Sex
- 6.1 Classification of Items Stolen
- 6.2 Occupations of Female Convicts Prior to Transportation
- 7.1 Reconstruction of the Convict Labour Aristocracy: Ability to Write
- 7.2 Reconstruction of the Convict Labour Aristocracy: Ability to Read or Write
- 7.3 Comparison of Crossick's Kentish London Labour Aristocrats/ Elites with the 1841 Census and Convict Sample
- 8.1 Matching of Male Convict Skills to New South Wales Occupations 1817–28 by Occupation
- 8.2 Matching of Male United Kingdom and New South Wales Occupations 1817–28 by Skill-Industry Categories
- 8.3 Matching of Male United Kingdom and New South Wales Occupations 1817–28 by Worker's Status
- 9.2 Number of Indulgences Issued to Convicts 1810–20
- 9.2 Convict Male Arrivals and Number Retained by the Government 1814–20
- 9.3 Distribution of Males, from Six Ships Arriving in 1821
- 10.1 The Organisation of Public Work
- 12.1 Probability of Flogging for the Average Convict Serving a Five-Year Sentence
- 12.2 Rations and Calories of Convict, Coerced and Unfree Labour
- 12.3 Grading System of Energy Expenditure for Men
- 12.4 Energy and Nutrient Requirements
- 12.5 Hours of Work and Length of Work Week for Comparative Labour Systems

### Figure

- 8.1 Public (Government) Labour Market
- 8.2 Private Labour Market

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978-0-521-03598-9 - *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## FOREWORD

*Convict Workers* forces us to re-assess the foundations of those values which we recognise as distinctively Australian. In two hundred years we have developed from a British open prison to an independent nation enmeshed in the economies of Asia and the Pacific Rim. That remarkable development has coloured the way in which we have viewed our past.

In 1888 convictism was viewed as a stain on our history, a deep embarrassment to an affluent society in which workers were building one of the world's first Labor parties. In 1938, the transported criminals had been retrospectively pardoned. Australian school children were taught that those who were really guilty remained back in Britain: the convicts were victims, pushed into poaching or theft by poverty, and often sent to Australia for their political persuasions. In my generation a new historical vision emerged, expounded most brilliantly by Manning Clark. I was taught that we had to be more honest about our past — and that honesty meant coming to terms with our unsavoury beginnings, and recognising that those transported were unskilled hardened criminals. But, as Manning Clark himself emphasised recently, each generation has the task of re-interpreting its history, of viewing the past from a new present. *Convict Workers* is just such a radical challenge to prevailing orthodoxy.

At a time when our immigration policy has become a matter of debate, *Convict Workers* examines transported criminals as migrants. Our contemporary concern with improving education and training opportunities for Australian workers has found expression in a book which assesses our convict forbears, both women and men, in terms of their human capital — not as thieves but as youthful workers possessing high levels of literacy, work skills and physical fitness; not prisoners undergoing punishment but as a well-organised, efficient labour force. *Convict Workers* achieves a sophisticated re-examination of our beginning as a convict society, and the impact of that experience on our values today.

No doubt many of the conclusions — that convict diet was nutritionally sound, that working conditions were good, that the lash was used in moderation — will arouse considerable controversy. But more fundamentally this book, by presenting transported convicts as migrants and workers, allows Australia's history as a penal settlement to become an integral part of the economic history of an immigrant society, rather than an unsavoury aberration that preceded free settlement.

The Hon R. J. L. Hawke, A.C. M.P.  
Prime Minister of Australia



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[More information](#)

## PREFACE

Each generation rewrites its history. A reaction against familiar ways of understanding our past is a common historiographic phenomenon. It reflects the task of historians to pursue the 'truth' through the continuous critical reassessment of established interpretations. The result is revisionist history. By overturning traditional views, revisionist history offers new and radically different ways of understanding the past. The success of revisionist history depends on the new and different questions asked, and the methodology and new data sources employed to answer those questions. By asking new questions, collecting new data and relying on a different methodology, this book offers a radical reinterpretation of our convict past.

The book is a collaborative work. Although individual chapters carry attributions to specific authors, we all read each other's chapters and during early 1987 held weekly seminars to discuss the general interpretations in our drafts. While each author remains responsible for her or his own chapter, each chapter emerged stronger after the criticisms of other members of the group. The result is a single book, with each chapter contributing to a consistent story about different aspects of the convict system.

At the beginning of 1987 Peter Shergold was seconded to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as Director of Multicultural Affairs and was not available for the seminar discussions. He was to have been co-editor of the book and I missed his insights, energy and enthusiasm on a day-to-day basis. In spite of his other commitments, he actively supported the book and is co-author of Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 7; he also co-authored the introductory chapter. I would like to acknowledge his help as colleague and friend over nearly seven years' work on this project. I would also like to acknowledge the help of my other co-workers, particularly Barrie Dyster, and their criticisms and comments.

Between 1980 and 1982 David Alexander, Mariane Chaffe, Martin Woodhams and Christine Regan were employed part-time to transcribe the details of nearly twenty thousand convicts onto coding sheets. We were fortunate to find such diligent and careful workers. Kris Corcoran joined the team as a research assistant in 1983 and remained as a co-author, responsible for the statistical appendix. During mid-1987 Mariane Chaffe returned to the project to help with the final stages of the book, and I express my particular thanks to her. The project was funded by Special Research Grants from the Faculty of Commerce at the University of New South Wales and I appreciate Dean John Nevile's long term financial support for the project.

Over the past seven years the project has accumulated numerous debts of gratitude. Mr John Cross, chief archivist at the New South Wales Archives Office made available to our research assistants the printed indents which greatly facilitated transcription of

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the data onto coding sheets. The staff of the New South Wales State Archives, Mitchell Library, State Library and University of New South Wales Library have been especially helpful, answering numerous enquiries. The Academic Computing Service at the University of New South Wales made special concession to one of their larger users.

During 1985–87 while I was a visitor at the University of Reading, Mark Casson, Peter Hart, Colin Ash and Tim Worrall discussed several chapters with me and read some early drafts. Ann Walker, from the Food Sciences Department at Reading, provided me with the computer program to calculate the calories and nutritional content of the convict ration. Roderick Floud and Ann Gregory, from Birkbeck College, University of London gave us access to their pre-published results of the height of male recruits into the British army in the early nineteenth century. Stephen Foster, from the Research School of the Social Sciences at the Australian National University, kindly sent us his working notes on convict assignment in the 1830s. John Perkins would like to thank Ms Penny Pemberton, Australian National University Archives of Business and Labour, and Kris Corcoran is grateful for the research assistance of Mrs M. Little.

Robin Derricourt at Cambridge University Press was a tolerant and helpful editor, giving the book his full support. My thanks also to M. Metz for the proof-reading and to A. Walker for the index. Kathy Cheeseman typed the early drafts of Chapters 9 and 11. Charleen Borlase typed numerous drafts of the bulk of the book, then the final manuscript, subject to a very tight schedule. Her efficiency, carefulness and goodwill meant that we met our final deadline. I greatly appreciate her help. Most of all, I thank my wife and daughter for their help and encouragement.

*Stephen Nicholas*