



Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly : Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*

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Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, x + 221 p., ISBN 0 521 58723 9 (p/b).

The technique employed by Joy Damousi initially dazzles and impresses. The claims made in her mission statement promise a new interpretation of the female convicts transported to New South Wales (1788-1840) and to Van Diemen's Land (1803-1853). The chapters draw on the rich archive data as well as utilising the research carried out by current historians. Damousi's work has not enjoyed entirely favourable reviews in the Australian academy¹. Whether that hostility was governed by Damousi's failure to pay homage to those who have laboured in the field for considerably longer than she is not the issue of this review. Overall this is an important development within the areas of research being carried out both in Britain and Australia: an alternative perspective is suggested.

The result could be defined as a marriage between «modern» and «post-modern» historical scholarship with the role of the officiating clergyman being taken by cultural studies. This union is not always felicitous. Damousi's stated agenda is ambitious: an exploration of «the range of meanings» relative to a broad assembly of categories including masculinity, femininity, and sexuality with particular reference to the two penal colonies, New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land between 1820-1840. With the statement that the meanings of «cultural signs» are «historically determined» it is disconcerting to discover a mobile timeframe, expanded on each side as and when convenient for her arguments. The absence of a temporal dynamic is demonstrated through her selection of evidence. This has been drawn from the early commentators of the late 18th century – many of whom had returned to Europe before 1820. At the other end of her timeframe Damousi draws on evidence from the Court Records of 1853, the year transportation ended in Van Diemen's Land. This lack of clarity in timescale could lead to the assumption that there was little transformation in either policy or conditions for female convicts between 1788-1853, and that there was a uniformity in both colonies in their approach to the convicts. Such an assumption is not borne out either by the evidence or from other scholars in this field².

The eclectic approach adopted by Damousi is more convincing in the first four chapters appearing under a collective title «Sexuality, Punishment and Resistance». Unfortunately the energy and enthusiasm of these chapters is not sustained throughout the remaining chapters under the umbrella of «Family Life and the Convict System». These latter chapters fail to persuade; the arguments become repetitive, strained and lack intellectual coherence. This lack of conviction in the second section is conveyed through unsubstantiated statements.

Despite acknowledging that the records gave no reasons as to why convict women deserted their families the claim is made that it was «probably because of physical assault or alcoholism» (p. 158). And four pages later (p. 162) «...the aban-

¹ Kay Daniels, *Labour History*, No. 73, November 1997, p. 247-8; Paula J. Byrne, *Journal of Australian Studies*, p. 222-3. Raymond Evans, *Australian Historical Studies*, 111, 1998, p. 386-7 by contrast reviewed this work in glowing terms.

² Lyndall Ryan, From stridency to silence: The policing of convict women, 1803-1853, in Diane Kirkby (ed.) *Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on Law in Australia* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 70-85.

doning and absent mother was cause for considerable anxiety for government authorities». No supporting evidence from the period is provided for this claim.

Despite Damousi's claim to a new approach in methodology her focus retains a clear binary opposition from the much earlier histories of this period. Although her stated intention is to reinterpret the «cultural meanings» embedded in the texts, the female convicts remain as a collective object within Damousi's investigation. What the reader is invited to participate in is the re-examination of a patriarchal dominant class ideology relative to various aspects of female convict experiences during this period. This reinforces earlier approaches: envisaging female convicts as «victims» – from the illustration on the front cover portraying a provocative and eroticized female from the 20th century to the content of the chapters. Damousi's emphasis on the discourse of authority and her interpretation of the cultural meanings embedded in these texts reinforces a supposition regarding the power of ideology and its accompanying symbolism. Damousi thus fails to show the female convicts as other than how they were described by the dominant class. What Damousi has set out to explore is a very one-sided vision: – the cultural meanings she discloses are not those of the female convicts but those of the various figures of authority. Her definition of play, laughter and sulking as strategies of «resistance» takes no account of these activities having a creative element as response to the crashing boredom prevalent within the walls of incarceration institutions.

To use a culinary image, *Depraved and Disorderly* resembles a visually appealing dessert – appetising to the eye but lacking substance for the stomach.

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R. Lenoir and J.-J. Yvoret, (eds.): Michel Foucault. *Surveiller et punir: la prison vingt ans après* (*Sociétés & Représentations*, 1996, 443 p.), ISSN 1262 2966.

In the English speaking world there is no lack of books or collections of essays somehow related to the work of Michel Foucault. One only has to consider the enormous flow of publications on «Gouvernementality» easily accessible in Current Contents. But the publication under review was only possible in France. In accordance with Michel Foucault's own way to do philosophy and politics, this book combines in a very interesting way different approaches to his seminal work about prisons: The book starts with two papers on reading Foucault, written by Bourdieu and Fadat, the latter describing reading experiences with social workers. Some authors remember Michel Foucault as a person, his intellectual development (Castel) or his influence on their proper work (Chauvière), others reconstruct crucial crossroads in the relations between historians and M.F. (Agulhon, Perrot, Petit) or the relation between the judicial world and M.F. (Lenoir), some interpret Foucault's way to do science (Mauger, Yvoret) or show the crucial importance of Rusche and Kirchheimer to M.F. when working out *Surveiller et punir* (=S&P) (Lévy and Zander), Lascoumes attempts to develop the notion of «l'illégalisme». Others continue to do research where Foucault had stopped. This is especially true for several articles on confinement and pedagogic attempts to better children in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Bourquin, Pierre, Fillaut, Dupont, Chauvaud, Dekker,