

***Exiled: The Port Arthur Convict Photographs*** by Edwin Barnard. Canberra: National Library of Australia Press, 2010, pp.224, AUD \$39.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780642277091

This is a handsomely produced volume on high-quality glossy paper, central to which are photographs of 81 men held by the National Library of Australia (NLA), and a further four from the collections of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. These photographs, taken in the 1870s, show men originally transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land as well as those born free in the colonies who committed crimes. The book begins with a brief introduction to the photographs and the convict period, before twenty of the 85 men are given short biographical sections through which the author explores their experiences of the convict system. The mini-biographies are interspersed with a number of double-page spreads expanding upon aspects of the convict system, such as 'the path to freedom' (pp.40-1), 'masters and servants' (pp.62-3), and 'the convict ration' (pp.106-7). In an appendix, all 85 photographs are reproduced as miniature portraits along with basic biographical information.

There is a disappointing lack of detailed information about the photographs, the photographer, or the process of capturing the images. Indeed, there is some controversy regarding their attribution, which Barnard sidesteps save for a single paragraph (p.15). For many years, the photographs were attributed to the commercial photographer Thomas Nevin, whereas more recently they have been attributed—and the NLA catalogue amended accordingly—to Adolarius Humphrey Boyd, commandant at Port Arthur between 1871 and 1874.<sup>1</sup> This attribution has been disputed by other researchers who argue in great detail that, rather than being taken at Port Arthur, the photographs were in fact shot in Hobart, and picture men arrested, arraigned and discharged from gaol.<sup>2</sup> This would necessitate interpreting the 'Port Arthur photographs' in a very different light.

This is not an argument into which I would like to step, as I am a historian of convictism rather than a historian of photography and this is a review rather than a research paper, but given the book's title and subject matter Barnard might have provided his own interpretation. Yet whatever their origin there is no denying that they are hugely striking images, giving us an all too rare glimpse at how convicts – or, more accurately, convicts who offended again years after being transported – looked like, from the defiantly jugged chin of George White, to the rather knowing gaze of the scarred George Ediker, to the somewhat pathetic old men Ephraim Doe and George Ediker.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Clark, 'A Question of Attribution: Port Arthur's Convict Photographs', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 12 (2010), 77-97.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, 'A Question of Stupidity & the NLA', <https://thomasnevin.wordpress.com/2010/05/22/julia-clark-a-question-of-stupidity-the-nla>, and <http://thomasnevin.wordpress.com/2010/10/22/thomas-francis-was-photographed-by-t-j-nevin-on-6th-february-1874>, accessed 5 March 2010.

Barnard often veers off into ‘convict gothic’. For example, despite the past thirty years or so of research exploring the multifaceted nature of the convict experience, Barnard claims simplistically that ‘[i]f anything has come to symbolise the convict era it is the cat-o’-nine tails’ (p.74). There is likewise little contextualisation of ‘unnatural crime’ (Victorian-speak for same-sex sexual relations) other than to say that ‘it was particularly prevalent’ in penal settlements such as Norfolk Island and Cockatoo Island’ (p.61), when the available evidence suggests otherwise, and that when men had sex with each other it was largely unattended with violence. Indeed, one of the least satisfactory aspects of the book is its dealings with Norfolk Island, throughout the text and within its own sub-section which has the wearisome title of ‘Heart of Darkness’ (pp.128-9). Barnard follows the traditional and sensational interpretation of the Island’s history, and in doing so makes errors of interpretation and fact which draw into question his conclusions. This is primarily a result of his using the recollections of Thomas Rogers—one of Norfolk Island’s Anglican chaplains—as unproblematic evidence of the inhumanity of the infamous commandant, John Price.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to Price’s biographer’s claim that Rogers provided ‘[c]ogent evidence that Price was guilty of grave cruelty and abuse of power’, Rogers is emphatically not a reliable or unbiased witness. Though seemingly morally outraged at what he regarded as the abuse of prisoners, Rogers was vain, prickly, and relished controversy having fallen out with a number of Norfolk Island officials before he was sacked and left the Island in February 1847. After this time any of his claims about Norfolk Island come from reports sent from an unnamed official (or officials) still on the Island, and Rogers’ writings upon this later period are thus second-hand at best. After his dismissal from Norfolk Island, Rogers attempted to prevail upon the Van Diemonian government to give him another appointment within the convict department. Once it became clear this campaign had failed, Rogers published his correspondence with the colonial government along with an attack on the Comptroller-General of Convicts, John Hampton, in 1849.<sup>4</sup> Rogers was also prone to exaggeration: often cited is his claim that during the last sixteen months of the term of Price’s predecessor, Joseph Childs, 26,204 lashes were administered; the real total is around 10,000 lashes fewer, a terrible enough total without embellishment.<sup>5</sup> In summary, we have a jaundiced witness who saw barely six months of Price’s time in charge at the Island being cited as an authority on Price’s seven-year term. Barnard is, admittedly, not the first to fall into the trap of relying upon Rogers. This is perhaps understandable, as his recollections are one of the few published sources pertaining to Price’s time as commandant.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Commandant from August 1846 to January 1853.

<sup>4</sup> John Vincent Barry, ‘Price, John Giles’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A020306b.htm>, accessed 27 March 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Childs was commandant from February 1844 to August 1846.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the unreliability of Rogers and the generally unsatisfactory state of discussions about punishment at Norfolk Island, see Chapter Six, Tim Causer, ‘“Only a Place for Angels and Eagles”: the Norfolk Island Penal Settlement, 1825-1855’. PhD thesis. (University of London, 2009).

To demonstrate that Price's 'treatment of prisoners was arbitrary and cruel in the extreme', in the section on the convict Denis Doherty Barnard cites a list drawn up by Rogers on (supposedly) 12 February 1846, detailing prisoners then in the old gaol and the offences for which they were confined. Barnard concludes that Doherty was punished on 11 February 1846 for '[v]iolent & threatening language' and received six months hard labour in chains, even though such a sentence did not necessitate imprisonment (p.67-8). The correct date for this list was in fact 12 February 1847; few of the men on Rogers's full list were punished in early 1846 and one, John Duggan, did not even arrive at Norfolk Island until December 1846. Even if the list did refer to February 1846, it is unclear how these punishments were supposed to represent Price's methods given that he only took command in August 1846.<sup>7</sup> As for Doherty, he was in reality confined to gaol on 12 February 1847 under a sentence of fourteen days solitary confinement for misconduct, given on 3 February. Furthermore, quantitative analysis of punishment at Norfolk Island from the conduct records shows that while Price's first eighteen months or so were indeed characterised by a high level of punishment, it was not great as during the preceding two years under Childs. Punishment dropped dramatically from 1848 to 1851 when the convict population was reduced, to the point where Price flogged less than in 1842 and 1843 when the reformer Alexander Maconochie was superintendent of Norfolk Island.<sup>8</sup>

There are other issues with the book. Denis Doherty's grim conduct record is printed in full (pp.72-3) and while it does indeed make 'sombre reading', his experience of the convict system is entirely unrepresentative. From a historian's perspective, I am uneasy with Barnard's biographical summaries in each biographical section—detailing a man's trade, native place, crime and so on—which are presented as scraps of paper with period-style handwriting. They are essentially harmless, but in a book which reproduces so many primary documents they should perhaps be identified as being written by the author so as not to mislead. Most illustrations and quotations from primary sources are generally interesting, but a painting of Sydney in about 1874 (p.11) has little relevance to men who were originally transported upwards of 50 years earlier and who never saw Sydney again after the 1840s, and Joseph Holt's recollections of a flogging of 300 lashes from 1804 and a painting of the Castle Hill rebellion of the same year likewise have no bearing upon men whose experiences of the convict system were mostly of the 1830s onwards. Indeed, only two of the 85 men featured in the book were alive in 1804, and both were then toddlers.

The micro-biographies of the men are of great interest and offer glimpses into the workings of the convict system and individual experiences, as well as what the men looked like decades after transportation. Yet there is a general lack of critical analysis and

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<sup>7</sup> See W. Foster Rogers, 'A Chaplain's Chronicle of Norfolk Island in the Forties'. Typescript MS. Based upon the journal of Rev. Thomas Rogers. ML c214, Mitchell Library, Sydney. Compare with the conduct records of the prisoners named, e.g. John Tree, CON37/1/4 1361, John Dougan/Duggan, CON33/1/46 10917, and Denis Doherty, CON35/1/1 1728, all Archives Office of Tasmania.

<sup>8</sup> Causer, 'Angels and Eagles', chapter six and appendix six.

contextualisation of the convict period, and little discussion of the photographs which are the book's *raison d'être*. Perhaps it is overly harsh to criticise on these grounds though, as *Exiled* is essentially a coffee-table book aimed at a general audience, to be dipped in and out of; in this sense, *Exiled* works up to a point. The book is also presumably intended to showcase the NLA's superb photographic collections, but it does not necessarily do this particularly well: only 20 of the 85 featured photographs are given full-page reproductions. I would happily pay for a book reproducing all of the images in a larger format, and those interested purely in the photographs are instead better served by the NLA's excellent [Picture Australia](#) website.

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