Convicts in the Cowpastures, an untold story

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Abstract
The story of European settlement in the Cowpastures is intimately connected to the story of the convicts and their masters. This story has not been told and there is little understanding of the role of the convicts in the Cowpastures district before 1840. Who were they? What did they do? Did they stay in the district? The convicts that ended up in Cowpastures district were part of the 160,000 who were transported to the Australian colonies from England, Wales, Ireland and the British colonies. The convicts were a form of forced labour, with a global history that goes back to Roman times. Amongst those who were landed were human souls who were part of the dark story of banishment and exile.

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The story of European settlement in the Cowpastures is intimately connected to the story of the convicts and their masters. This story has not been told and there is little understanding of the role of the convicts in the Cowpastures district before 1840. Who were they? What did they do? Did they stay in the district?

View near Woolwich in Kent shewing [sic] the employment of the convicts from the hulks, c. 1800 (State Library of NSW)

Part of a global story

The convicts were a form of forced labour, with a global history that goes back to Roman times. Amongst those who were landed were human souls who were part of the dark story of banishment and exile. The story of convicts and banishment is an integral part of the European colonialism from the 16th century and the rise of labour camps. The story parallels that of slavery. Convicts came to New South Wales after the British lost the American colonies in the revolutionary wars in the 1780s.

Convicts in the Australian colonies

The convicts that ended up in the Cowpastures district were part of the 160,000 who were transported to the Australian colonies from England, Wales, Ireland and the British colonies. Convicts were usually employed in a number of ways by the colonial authorities: assignment; government work gangs; Tickets of Leave; Conditional Pardon; and an Absolute Pardon with complete freedom to do as they wished including returning to Britain.

Generally speaking most convict women could be classified as domestic servants, while male convicts had a host of skills with town trades dominating over rural workers. The literacy rates and skills of convicts were the same or better than the English and Irish working classes.
The Cowpastures district

The Cowpastures district was an ill-defined area that included Governor Hunter’s government reserve from 1795. The reserve covered an area that generally south of the Nepean River between Stonequarry Creek (Picton), The Oaks and Menangle to the east. By 1840 the Cowpastures district had become a general locality name that extended north of the Nepean River to include Nanellian and Bringelly.

Stories of Convicts

The best short reference of the convicts in the Cowpastures is Ken Williams’ 1824 Cawdor Bench of Magistrates Population, Land and Stock Book (2011), where he lists the names and masters. Williams indicates that in the Cowpasture in 1824 there were 430 convicts
and of them 15 were women, who were listed as domestic servants.\[11\] Elizabeth Villy indicates that the stock books indicates 29
landholders, who were mostly absentee landlords.\[2\]

The best account to date of the activities of the convicts in the Cowpastures is Elizabeth Villy’s The Old Razorback Road (2011). She
states that in the 1820s in the last days of the Cowpastures Government Reserve there were around 550 convicts assigned to settlers
including around 100 at Camden Park estate. These men were employed as shepherds and labourers, who were clearing land, and
preparing ground for ploughing and growing pasture.\[3\]

Convicts and civil works in the Cowpastures

The Great South Road was one of the major civil engineering projects in the Cowpastures district that employed convicts. A major
bridge (Cowpasture Bridge) was constructed by convicts across the Nepean River mid-way between the river crossings at the Home
Farm at Belgenny and the Hassalls at Macquarie Grove. Villy details how the bridge was built by a team of convicts between 1824 and
1826. The construction was supervised by convict Samuel Wainwright, a Cheshire carpenter, who arrived on the Neptune in 1818. Villy
lists 24 convicts who worked on the bridge construction between 1827 and 1829.\[4\]

The other major project was The Great South Road itself and in the Cowpastures section Villy estimates that around 400 men worked
on the road. Her research indicates that they left no surviving records and many just ‘melted into society at the conclusion of their
sentences’ (p.67). The ethnography of the convicts up to 1828 were mainly English, with smaller numbers of Welsh and Scots. From
this time as more Irish were sent out the ratio English to Irish was around half and half. If the convicts misbehaved they were punished
by whipping and the Cawdor Bench imposed punishments up to 50 lashes. Mostly they involved insolence, absconding, drunkenness
and laziness. On the Camden-Stonequarry road section there were no portable stockades or vans. Villy provides interesting accounts of
the activities of individual convicts, their punishments and the convict lifestyle of the road gangs.\[5\]

Elderslie

Convicts were part of the John Oxley’s Elderslie enterprise and when John Hawdon leased it in 1826 off Francis Irvine he was
impressed the range of trades amongst the 30 ‘government men’ who worked on Elderslie. He was not deterred by dark Gothic notions
of the penal settlement and expressed his frustration with the attitude of his countrymen in a letter home.\[6\] Hawdon felt that the dark
stories and fear about the colony were over-rated. He wrote:

“I am aware of the feeling you all have at home about us having so many convicts around us. Your fears, I can assure you
are most unfounded.”\[7\]

Elderslie according to Alan Atkinson supported 9 convicts when Oxley sold the grant to Francis Irvine in 1827.\[8\] At Macquarie Grove
under Samual Hassall there were 30 convicts with 3 families of children.\[9\]

Denbigh
Reverend Thomas Hassall who purchased Denbigh in 1826 on the death of Charles Hook had 20 convicts, according to his son James Hassall in his In Old Australia, Records and Reminiscences from 1794. The worked from six in the morning in summer and from eight in winter until sundown. The convicts were managed by a Scottish overseer and they carried out the farming activities on the property. The rations included tea, sugar, meat, flour or when which they ground for themselves on a small steel mill.[10]

Notes


