



Women of the wild frontier



Come to
Australia! 1928
poster.

What was it about Australia that attracted thousands of women to leave Britain to face the challenges of making a completely new life? **Emily Manktelow** investigates.



In the 19th century emigration was a viable option for many people's ancestors. The emerging empire of British settlement offered opportunities that often weren't available in Britain – better employment and social prospects, and perhaps the chance to buy (or even be given) land for farming. From 1815 to 1914 around 22.6m people emigrated from the British Isles, but don't dismiss these ancestors as dead-ends in your family history. Rather, their lives should prove a rich source of interest to genealogists and historians alike – there are numerous resources available in Britain, abroad and online to help you keep track of your emigrant ancestors.

Australia needs women

In 1922 the Development and Migration Commission published a 24-page pamphlet designed to attract British domestic workers to post-war Australia. *Australia Invites the British Domestic Girl* promised free passage to domestics approved by the Director of Migration and Settlement in Australia House in London and spoke encouragingly of 'a bright, genial and exceptionally healthy climate', 'numerous large and prosperous cities, set in pleasant surroundings', and 'social conditions unexcelled in any part of the world'. Australia was apparently a land of abundant work, good people and tempting marriage prospects. But if this represented an accurate picture of emigration to Australia, why was the advertisement necessary? And if your ancestor migrated to Australia, what was life like?

Free & unfree migration

Australia's early colonial history is predominantly that of convict transportation. From the first convict fleet in 1788 until the last transportation to eastern Australia in 1853, c160,000 convicts were transported there:
 | 25,000 were women
 | 60 per cent were first-time offenders (mostly convicted of larceny)
 | Around 11 out of every 1,000 people died
 | About one-third were Irish
 | Just over half were from major cities
 | Most were aged 15-29
 ● More than half were sentenced to seven years
 | One quarter for life
 | The remainder for 14 years.
 Conditions were brutal – manual labour in blistering heat, minimal food and the ever-present danger of disease. For women, conditions were exceptionally dangerous. Overwhelmingly outnumbered by men starved of female company, many women turned to prostitution (if they had the choice), although prostitution was not a transportable offence.
 The first free migrants arrived in 1793, but by 1830 90 per cent of the white population were convicts or

convict-born. However, the tide was turning against transportation and both the colony and the authorities in London were beginning to see a new economic and social future for Australia as an imperial nation built upon a thriving pastoral economy and the promise of the Victoria gold rush (1851). By the end of the 19th century 1.6m free immigrants had made their home down under – and 750,000 had received some level of state assistance. The average cost of passage to Australia in the 1820s was £30 per head. This compared unfavourably with passage to America, which only cost £5 per head, largely explaining why migration to America and Canada was overwhelming the most popular route in the 19th century.

Nonetheless, the emerging nation of Australia sought to redefine its social roots by encouraging legitimate and respectable migrants. The colony was turning from a convict to a migrant nation. Respectability, piety and family were seen as crucial to this process. But if you want families you need women, and female convicts were both far fewer in number than men (about 15 per cent), and not exactly seen as the ideal mothers of a new imperial nation. Like all of the settler colonies from mid-

century, Australia increasingly sought respectable women from 'home' to morally and socially 'civilise' their bachelor society. From 1884-1914 some 20,000 women were dispatched from Britain by charitable emigration societies. Most went to Canada and South Africa, but this number was dwarfed by those who emigrated as part of families – women and men on the colonial frontier.

Female migration to Australia

Australia wanted women, but why would British women choose to migrate there in the face of the long journey (251 days for the first fleet; five to six weeks by the 1920s), a rude and uncivilised society, and a nation apparently populated by convicts? As with all migration, the factors leading to that decision can be split into two categories: push and pull. Of course the vast majority of women migrated to Australia for the same reason as the men they travelled with – better social and economic opportunities. But women could also have particular reasons for wishing to migrate in the 19th century:

| **The 'woman problem':** the 1851 Census recorded that 43 per cent of women in Britain were either spinsters



or widows. This sent a wave of panic through the country, consolidating fears about 'surplus women' that had circulated since the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815). Emigration was seen as a quick fix to this problem, and conveniently addressed the vast demographic imbalance of emerging colonial societies at the same time.

| **Social mobility:** the social structure in Britain could of course be extremely confining for both women and men. Migrants could seek a new social standing in the colonies, where there was more room for social advancement – former convicts (or those descended from convicts) had emerged from the transportation system willing and able to make a new life for themselves with the opportunities afforded by colonial settlement.

| **Employment:** women in particular had better employment prospects in the colonies than in Britain. As teachers, doctors and nurses, women could find the kind of professional value in the colonies that was broadly unavailable at home. While Britain pressed these 'right sorts of women' on the colonies through middle-class emigration schemes, most colonies of settlement really preferred women suited to domestic labour: humble, pious and respectable working-class women.

Both push and pull: respectable women were needed to raise families and some women were attracted by the opportunities.

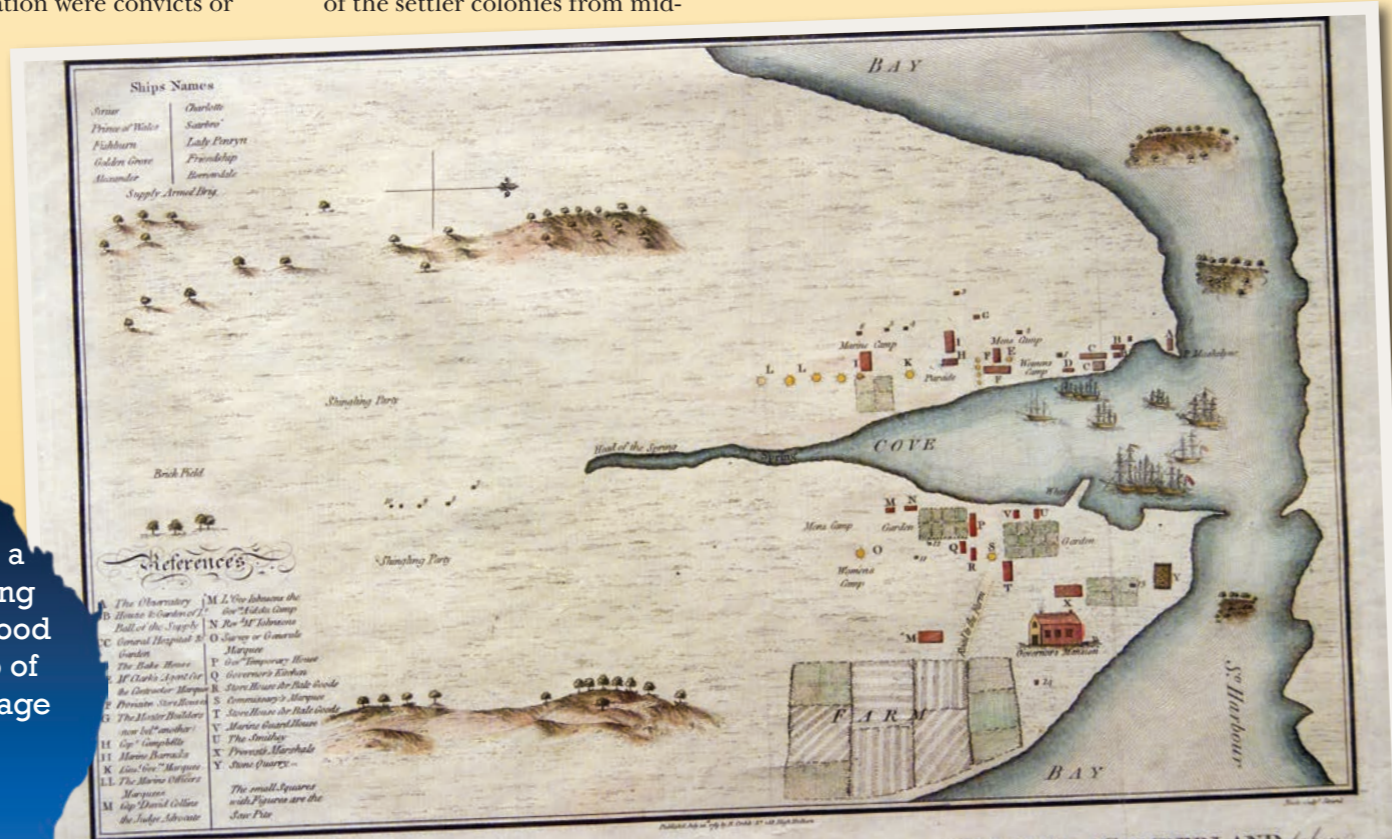
experience was like for women can be inferred from the objectives of the British Ladies' Female Emigrant Society (founded in 1849). This charitable organisation was designed to 'protect female emigrants from the moral dangers incident to a long voyage' through the 'selection of judicious matrons' for their superintendence, 'to relieve the weariness of their life on board by furnishing them with useful employment, [and] to procure for them the protection and advice which they may be in need of on arrival at their destination' ('Women and Emigration', *Englishwoman's Review*, 1881).

Indeed, emigration was no pleasure cruise for women in the 19th century. On the voyage itself they had to negotiate sea-sickness, cramped (and foul) conditions, plus the lasciviousness of sailors starved of female company. On arrival they entered a world overwhelming populated by men – and frontiersmen at that. Drinking, gambling and whoring were common amusements and diversions from tough frontier life. Of course, the nature and make-up of colonial towns changed markedly over time, aspiring to Victorian standards of civility and

The 'Right Sort of Woman'

Something of what the emigrant

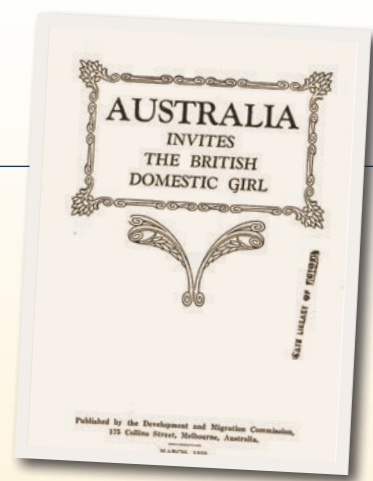
A 1788 map of Sydney Cove, Port Jackson in the county of Cumberland, made by a convict.



Sketch & Description of the Settlement at SYDNEY COVE PORT JACKSON in the COUNTY of CUMBERLAND taken by a transported Convict on the 16th of April, 1788 which was not quite 3. Months after Commodore Phillip's Landing there - Sydney Cove lies 3 Leagues to the Northward of BOTANY BAY which is situated in Lat. 34° S. Long. 151° E.



'Unlike Britain..., which has a surplus of women, the Commonwealth has a surplus of men...The domestic girl, in coming to Australia, has the certainty not only of a good living while she needs to earn one, but also of improving her chances of satisfactory marriage and... a home of her own'



Australia's call for domestic workers from Britain can read at: www.slv.vic.gov.au/aushispam/0/0/9/pdf/ag0096.pdf.

respectability; women were seen as a crucial part of this process, shipped in to 'civilise' the colony through their supposedly greater moral worth.

What was required for the colonies were suitably educated, middle-class women from the motherland: the

'right sort of woman'. Charitable institutions in Britain wished to use women to morally and socially develop these 'backward' colonial spaces – and numerous societies were founded to encourage women to emigrate. What the colonies most needed in the female line, however, were domestic workers: respectable, humble and well-trained working-class women. Here was both a mismatch between metropolitan and colonial expectations, but as importantly for family historians, a social breadth of emigration. Your female emigrant ancestor could be anything from the wife of the colonial governor, to a charwoman from the industrial north; once in Australia, her economic and social status could dramatically change in this new land of opportunity.

Women in the colonies

Class and location are key determinants in the female migrant experience: women in the towns bustling between the shops and social engagements in their heavy clothing and the sweltering heat; women in the bush carving out a homestead in a potentially barren landscape – making their own soap and candles, relying on infrequent supplies from the town, and making good use of the 'tea billy' (open-fire kettle) in the midst of wagon-life and frontier disarray; barmaids drawing ale for the local farmers or miners or sailors, batting away their advances and joining in their jocular cussing; teachers, doctors and nurses making a place for themselves in a man-made world. All of these women would have had diverse experiences of empire and migration, and have left behind them differing legacies of families, businesses, and institutions; towns, nations and empires.

And what of those women lured by *Australia Invites the Domestic Girl*? Needless to say the new land of opportunity was not always what they had envisaged. Working hours were longer than they expected and promises of good pay were not always fulfilled. The work was hard, sometimes even harder than for domestic workers in Britain. After all, these workers were mimicking western domestic respectability in

the heat and dust of the bush (or even the city). Opportunities to meet their new husband also seemed few and far between, and even Miss Ball, superintendent of the Market Harborough Domestic Training Centre (for women bound for Australia) noted in 1929 that there were 'few opportunities for the girls to meet men of their own kind, especially in the towns'.

So how much has changed? In August 2008 the mayor of Mount Isa, an isolated and demographically imbalanced mining town in Queensland, got himself in a heap of trouble when he commented to a local newspaper: 'May I suggest if there are five blokes to every girl, we should find out where there are beauty-disadvantaged women and ask them to proceed to Mount Isa.' *Plus ça change!*

'Throughout the social life of the Commonwealth, there is an absence of the stiff conventionality which is, perhaps, the inevitable development of older lands'

About the author

Emily Manktelow is lecturer in British Imperial History at the University of Kent. She works on colonial family history, and is one of the founders of the Family and Colonialism Research Network: colonialfamilies.wordpress.com. She has also recently published *Missionary Families: race, gender and generation on the spiritual frontier* (Manchester University Press, 2013), RRP £70.



Top resources

Convicts

| www.convictrecords.com.au Convict Records of Australia; search or browse by surname, alias, ship name and year.

| search.ancestry.co.uk/search/group/auconvicts Ancestry.com's Australian Convict Collection includes transportation registers, certificates of freedom and death records plus censuses and electoral rolls.

| www.convictcentral.com Convict Central has a wealth of information, including a helpful research guide and extensive contextual overview.

Free settlers

| www.nla.gov.au/our-services/family-history The National Library of Australia's great guide to starting your family history. Also check out the library's selected websites page at www.nla.gov.au/family-history/genealogy-selected-websites.

| afhc.cohsoft.com.au The Australian Family History Compendium directs you to birth, death and marriage records, plus materials on immigration, landholdings and war.

Women

| www.lse.ac.uk/library/newsandinformation/womenslibraryatLSE/home.aspx The Women's Library, now relocated to the London School of Economics library, has records relating to the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, including letters from newly-arrived emigrants.

| www.slv.vic.gov.au/aushispam/0/0/9/pdf/ag0096.pdf *Australia Invites the British Domestic Girl*.

| www.imdb.com/title/tt0428134 Watch 'The Incredible Journey of Mary Bryant' about a young Cornish convict on the First Fleet (2005, DVD).

| Read *We of the Never-Never* by Mrs Aeneas Gunn (1908, free download from www.gutenberg.org).