CONVICT WOMEN

MONIKA SCHWARZ

Monika Schwarz uses modern data analysis to shed new light on how 19th Century female convicts resisted the system designed to keep them in place...

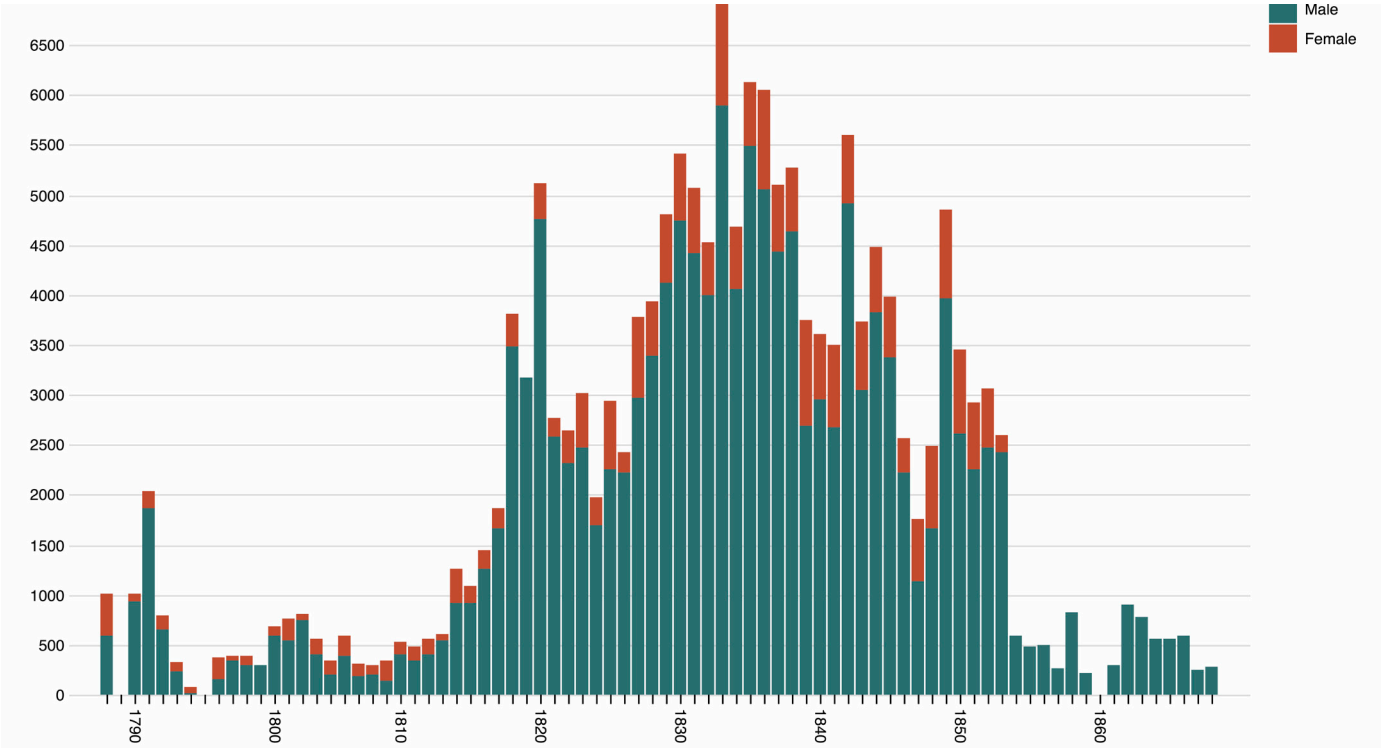
THE BREAD RIOT

In May 1839 the usual proceedings in the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart were disrupted by a major incident. 200 convict women, all held at the crime class[1] of the institution at the time, instigated a food riot after they found that instead of wheat the bread they received, as their ration that day, had been made of inferior barley. The women took control over the factory, forcing the principal superintendent for convicts, Josiah Spode, to hurry to the scene, followed by the chief constable and a dozen police men. When they arrived, the Colonial Times, a Hobart newspaper at the time, claimed that they were held 'absolutely in deviance' by the women (Smith 2021, p. 205). It wasn't the only riot ever to occur in a female factory with similar events documented in Parramatta or Launceston (Daniels 1998, pp.146-151).

The Function of the Female Factories

Female Convicts could see the insides of a female factory at various stages of their passage through the colonial penal system. The first time was usually directly after their arrival, as the factories were used as distribution centres. In total, between 1788 and 1868, 168.000 convicts, predominantly from England and Ireland, were transported to Australia. Instead of filling up English gaols, they were brought across the seas to help with the colonisation of the newest addition to the British Empire. One in every six convicts was female, about 25,500 women overall. After their first brief stint in the assignment class of a factory, female convicts were usually assigned as servants into the settler households.

Image 1 Chart Showing Convict Arrival by Gender (visit https://monalena.github.io/vue-colonialbackdrop/ to explore this interactive visualisation)



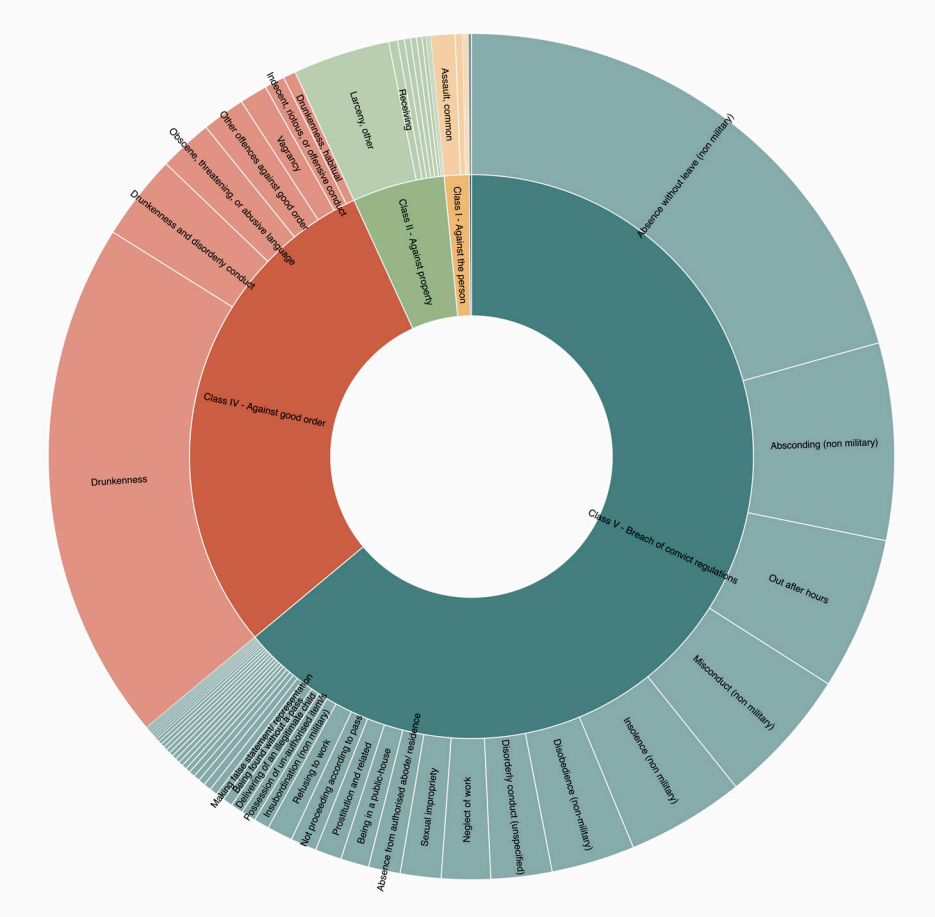
THE CONDUCT REGISTERS

Every offence perpetrated by a convict while 'under servitude' and brought to a prosecution was entered into the conduct registers. Female convicts, different to male convicts, often worked and lived in very close proximity to their employers, usually under the same roof, and under the constant surveillance of their mistresses. Naturally, this situation could cause a lot of friction. An analysis of the offences recorded for female convicts bears witness to the kind of workplace battles in which the female convict servants and their colonial keepers were embroiled. 65% of the entries can be classified as offences against convict regulations, and ranged, in escalating order, from mere insolence and disobedience to neglect of work or refusing to work, to being out after hours or absent without leave, and finally, if things turned really sour, absconding (Cowley et al. 2021, pp. 29-30).

Image 2 Chart Showing Female Offences per Classification (visit [https://monalena.github.io/vue-colonialback-drop/ to explore this interactive visualisation](https://monalena.github.io/vue-colonialback-drop/))

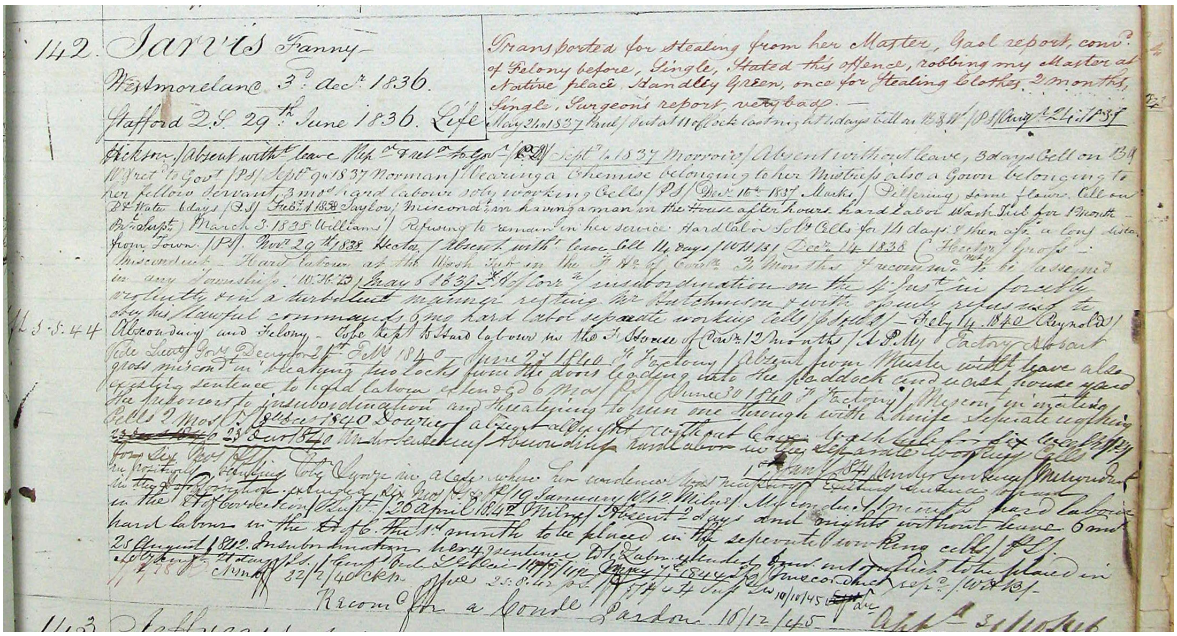
Repeated offences, or severe offences like absconding, could bring a convict woman back into the factory, but this time she would serve a limited time, ranging from one month to a year, in the crime class. And while the women could be cut off from their peers while assigned to a specific household, the crime class in the factory gave them a chance to exchange experiences and get organised. As the superintendent of the Cascades Female Factory, Mr. Hutchinson, put it when he was interviewed for an official inquiry into the state of the factories, the biggest problem in the factory was that the women 'talked' (Smith 2021, p. 193).

It is incredibly lucky that the convict archives of Van Diemen's Land have been fully preserved. And, through massive volunteering efforts like the one spear-headed by the Female Convicts Research Centre (https://female-convicts.org.au/), recent years have seen the complete digitisation and transcription of all female convict records. Having the conduct registers available in tabular, machine-readable form has a particular advantage. The original conduct registers are large leather-bound



ledgers, where, for each arriving ship, details about every new convict, like their name, birthplace, age on arrival and reason for transportation, were recorded. After those details a part of the page was initially left empty, but every time a convict was brought to trial, the ledger would come out again to record the new offence along with its date, the sitting magistrate and the resulting sentence. Until now, these conduct registers were mostly used to reconstruct individual life courses. But in machine-readable form it is now possible to reorder the recorded offences by date and find connections between them. It is now possible to read the conduct registers across the grain.

Image 3 Fanny Jarvis Conduct Register (CON40-1-6P117 file downloaded from https://libraries.tas.gov.au)



and has been described by historians previously (e.g. Frost 2012, p.71; Smith 2021, p. 205). But through digital analysis we now know 49 names of participating female convicts.

One of these convict women was Fanny Jarvis. Originally a servant girl from Staffordshire, she was sentenced to life after stealing from her employer. It was a harsh sentence which may have caused Fanny's recalcitrance. Her conduct register tells us that she spent long stints in the factories rather than serving some employer. She tried to incite her fellow prisoners to insubordination on at least one more occasion and once refused to testify in court (Follow this link to Conviction Politics' documentary Fanny Jarvis - Right in the Middle)

THE PLOT THICKENS

This means that we can now identify collective action in the female factories, in total 87 incidents between the years 1823 and 1854, when counting every instance where more than two women were sentenced for the same offence on the same day, in the same factory and by the same magistrate (Schwarz 2023, pp. 177-78). For example, the Bread Riot mentioned above led to the sentencing of 49 women, presumably the ring leaders. On the 6th of May 1839, every one of their offence registers received the same peculiar entry 'Insubordination on the 4th instant in a forcibly, violently and turbulent manner resisting Mr. Hutchinson & and openly refusing to obey his lawful commands'.

The Bread Riot as an event made the news at the time and has been described by historians previously (e.g. Frost 2012, p.71; Smith 2021, p. 205). But through digital analysis we now know 49 names of participating female convicts.

And she participated not only in the Bread Riot, but ,three years later, also in the second largest collective event in the Cascades Female Factory, now dubbed the We Are All Alike incident:

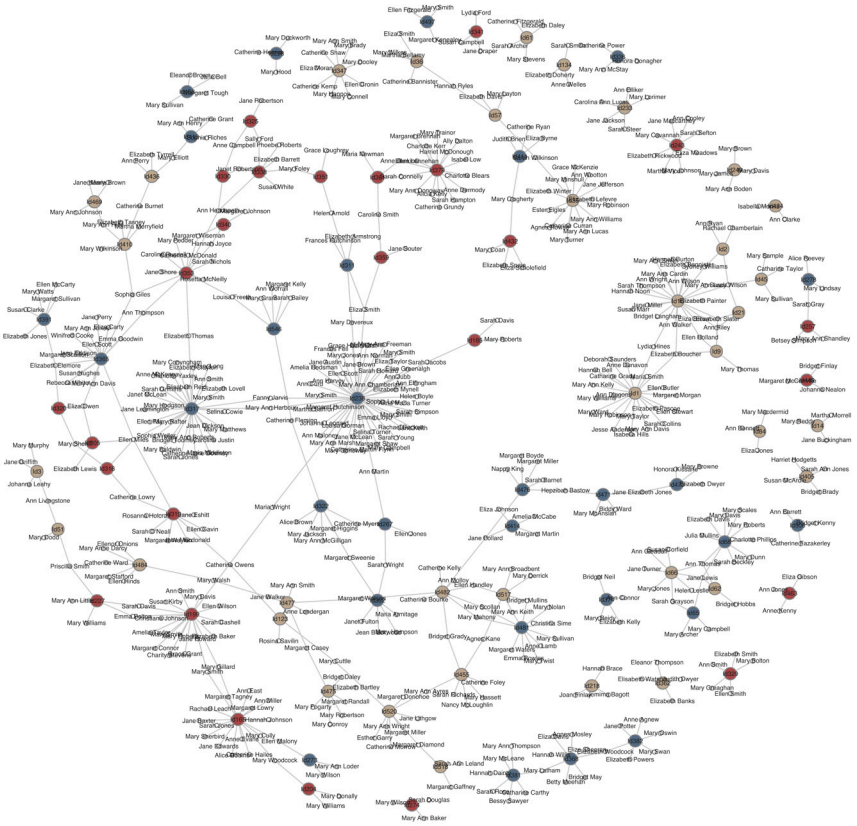
In August 1842 the water pipes in the wash yard, where most of the women of the crime class would spend their day washing the colony's linen, froze and broke down. Workmen had to be brought in to repair them, and the women were locked up in one of the upper bedrooms instead.

'By mid-afternoon about 150 of them had reached frustration point. They began singing, dancing, shouting, clapping their hands and stamping their feet' (Smith 2021, p. 206). When pressed for their ringleader's names,

the women first started chanting 'We are all alike'. Eventually, 31 women were sentenced as a result of their involvement in this incident.

It is possible to look back at these events from a network analysis angle. By participating in the two separate events Fanny Jarvis created a connection between them, just like other women who participated in multiple events created further connections. And it is possible to visualise this network. It proves that collective resistance in the female factories were not isolated incidents. They were connected events, carried out by a body of women grouping together, time and again, to fight back against a system designed to exploit them as a cheap labour force. The network visualisation shows an intriguing amount of collusion, reflecting the social network the women became part of in the factories. The network also shows that the web of collusion spread across the different Van Diemen's Land factories, most prominently the Cascades Female Factory, a converted distillery in the west of Hobart and the custom-built panopticon- style Female Factory at Launceston (Frost and Maxwell-Stewart 2022).

Image 4 Visualisation of the Female Factories Resistance Network (blue nodes: Cascades Female Factory, red nodes: Launceston Female Factory, beige nodes: other factories)



CONCLUSION

Historically, convict women were judged harshly. Comments by their contemporaries, usually coming from male writers with little to no experience nor understanding of the life of the lower classes, described them as 'rebellious hussies' (Frost 2012, pp. 66-67) or 'contumacious, ungovernable and incorrigible' (Reid 1997, p.106). This judgment was repeated for decades and only questioned by a first wave of female historians in the nineteen nineties (Daniels 1996, Oxley 1996, Damousi 1997). A lot of the early misconception around convict women, the female part of this first forced wave of European settlers, came from their own voices being largely absent. The use of modern data analysis can continue to change this perception. Originally the conduct registers were designed by the British bureaucracy to keep convicts in check by minutely recording every single one of their colonial perpetrations. Now, through digitisation and a modern 'big data' approach, the same registers can be used to show the convict women in a new light. Not as criminals. Not as victims. But as courageous and determined women, ready to organise themselves to fight back.

ENDNOTE

1. Crime class - the part of the factory set aside for female convicts who were repeat offenders.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Monika Schwarz is a research fellow at Monash University's SensiLab. She holds a PhD in archaeology, with over 15 years of experience in that field, and a Master's degree in information technology. Now specialising in the analysis, visualisation and even physicalisation of historical data, she has been and continues to work on various projects like 'Conviction Politics' (ARC funded), 'A Stitch in Time' (Whyte fund grant), 'Putting Death in its Place' (ARC funded) or 'Making Crime Pay' (ARC funded) since 2020. In these projects she is combining skills from her two careers in archaeology and information technology, for example by turning 19th century convict records into interactive data visualisations. Monika's work has a particular focus on female narratives.

In 2024, Monika presented at the CPL's course: *Women in History: Reclaiming Invisible Women*