Unlikely Hero: Convict Maid Ellen Scott

by Deborah Swiss

In 1829, Ellen Scott worked as a housemaid in Limerick City. Like many among the desperately poor, the seventeen-year-old did whatever it took to survive. Living on the edge of society, with no safety net, and no way out, she sold a watch chain to make it through another day. This transgression would cost Ellen her homeland and transport her to Van Diemen’s Land (present-day Tasmania). In an untamed settlement on the other side of the world, this Irish rebel would rise to legendary status as the celebrated leader of the “Flash Mob” at the Cascades Female Factory. Ellen was among the 25,000 girls and women who were transported to Australia from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the nineteenth century. The British government targeted them as “tanners and breeders” for their new colony in the Antipodes. Van Diemen’s Land was many a struggling Irish girl’s final destination following her arrest for petty theft, often the only means to survive other than prostitution.

For nearly one hundred years, England had routinely disposed of its convict population in the American colonies, and built its rich empire on the backs of convict and slave labour. However, the American Revolution, followed by the abolition of slavery, eliminated this option. During the frenzied imperial land grab at the dawn of the nineteenth century, Great Britain could not persuade its “proper” citizenry to homestead its new colonies in Van Diemen’s Land and in New South Wales. Few responded to ads in London newspapers seeking single women to populate a wild frontier where men outnumbered them nine to one. Parliament’s solution was to conscript a slave labour force using the Transportation Act, a law passed in 1718 that allowed prisoners to be shipped anywhere in the empire. Originally crafted to be a humane substitute for the death penalty, it served a new purpose at the close of the eighteenth century.

Under the pretense of justice, a greed-driven government expropriated the powerless. Ever since Captain James Cook’s discovery of Australia in 1770, England resolved to keep the resource-rich continent for herself. The empire was especially concerned with France, its longtime enemy which had already laid claim to Tahiti. Under the Transportation Act, 162,000 women, men, and children were exiled to Australia from 1788 to 1858. This legislation supplied cheap, disposable labour and removed the “unsightly” poor from Britain’s shores. This was an era when poverty was treated not only as a crime but also as...
Despite these condemnations, it made for good copy so the Colonial Times filled many columns with tawdry tidbits about the rebellious women so often deemed unworthy of its time and attention. Queen Victoria ruled the empire, but Ellen Scott ruled the crime class. A hero among the Female Factory women, the girl from Limerick City behaved fearlessly. Her story achieved mythic proportions when she confronted the Reverend William Bedford who led mandatory chapel for the prisoners every morning and every night. Nicknamed 'Holy Willie' by the prisoners, Bedford was charged with raising moral standards for the colony. Perhaps the biggest hypocrite ever to step foot inside Cascades, he was despised bitterly by the women for forcing himself on many of them. An impostor of all sorts, he had no theological training, though he'd received an honorary degree. 'Holy Willie' was a married man, the father of two sons and a daughter, but that didn't stop him from abusing the women he was supposed to guide and protect.

In October 1833, Ellen Scott took outlaw justice into her own hands. With a life sentence, she had nothing to lose. Ellen's cheeky response to another condescending lecture by Holy Willie was the ultimate working-class insult. The petticoat Irish prisoner turned around in her pew, lifted her skirt and, wearing no undergarments (as was the case for the poor) slapped her bare behind. She was charged with 'indecent behaviour during the performance of divine service' and sentenced to an additional two months in Crime Class, commencing with thirty days in solitary confinement. Shorn hair and solitary confinement seemed a small price to pay for the unflappable Irish renegade. Rebellion renewed hope for the future, fueled the spirit, and offered the imprisoned women something they could call their own. Convict maids like Ellen Scott defied their captors not only to survive but also to thrive and to prosper. Even a life sentence wasn't the end of the line. In 1847, Ellen shed her chains and was granted a conditional pardon, later marrying a freed convict in Van Diemen's Land.

For other Irish citizens, their journey through desperation and injustice was just beginning. The aftermath of An Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger, brought a dramatic spike in Irish transports. Fathers were arrested for stealing livestock to feed their starving families. Children were transported for pilfering bread or clothing. Some women were arrested for deliberately committing arson in hopes that they might be reunited with sons, husbands, or brothers who had been shipped to Australia. Nearly one-quarter of the Irish immigrants transported were Irish: thirty thousand men and nine thousand women. Nearly half were arrested during the famine years, most for larceny. The deep-seated conflict between Ireland and Great Britain escalated with every Irish arrest, particularly when political activists were sentenced to transport. In 1868, the Hougomont, Britain's last convict ship to Western Australia, trans-
ported 279 male prisoners, including a band of 63 Irish political prisoners known as the Fenians. By this time, the Irish constituted about 20 per cent of Australia’s population. Among their ranks were Irish rebels who had emigrated as free citizens, many of whom played an essential role in shaping workers’ rights and a democratic government in the Australian colonies.

The Australian gold fields became a hotbed for political change. Peter Lalor, an upper class Irish activist, had migrated to Australia as a free man in 1852. An eloquent speaker, he inspired and led a diggers’ revolt in 1854 known as the Eureka Rebellion. This was the spark for democracy in Victoria, Australia.

Battle lines had been drawn because of unfair taxes on the miners. The British attacked the rebels’ makeshift stockade early on a Sunday morning when most were at church. Bayonets drawn, the British troops quickly overwhelmed the miners. In the bloody aftermath, women raced to the scene to protect their loved ones by throwing themselves over the fallen. Among them were brave Irish lasses, including nineteen-year-old Bridget Callinan, originally from County Clare. She helped rescue her two wounded brothers, Patrick and Michael. Michael had received two bullets in his thigh, and Patrick suffered two bayonet wounds. As British troops began to systematically murder the wounded and burn the hospital tents, Bridget confronted the armed soldiers and created a diversion that allowed her two brothers to escape.8

Often overlooked, the Irish had a profound effect on Australia’s colonial history. In a distant land down under, free convicts and Irish social activists helped found one of the most progressive societies of the time, including leading the world in women’s rights. For nearly a century, the history of the 162,000 women, men and children who were transported to Australia was covered up or ignored. Today, an estimated 22 per cent of Australians and two million in the UK share convict ancestry.

Within the walls of the Cascades Female Factory, there is a simple stone epitaph with the inscription ‘more sinned against than sinning’. It stands as a stinging reminder of women who refused to relinquish the essence of what it means to be human. The miracle of their legacy is that the vast majority of the 25,000 transported women became loving mothers and grandmothers rather than the hardened human beings one might expect from years of maltreatment, abuse, and abandonment by an empire that deemed them worthless. Their resilience, ingenuity, and perseverance defied the odds and defined a culture. Once freed, these iron-willed maidens helped form the very backbone for modern Australia.

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