

# Unlikely Hero: Convict Maid Ellen Scott\*

**I**n 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 pilfered 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 "tamers 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 expatriated 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 1868. 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

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*by Deborah Swiss*

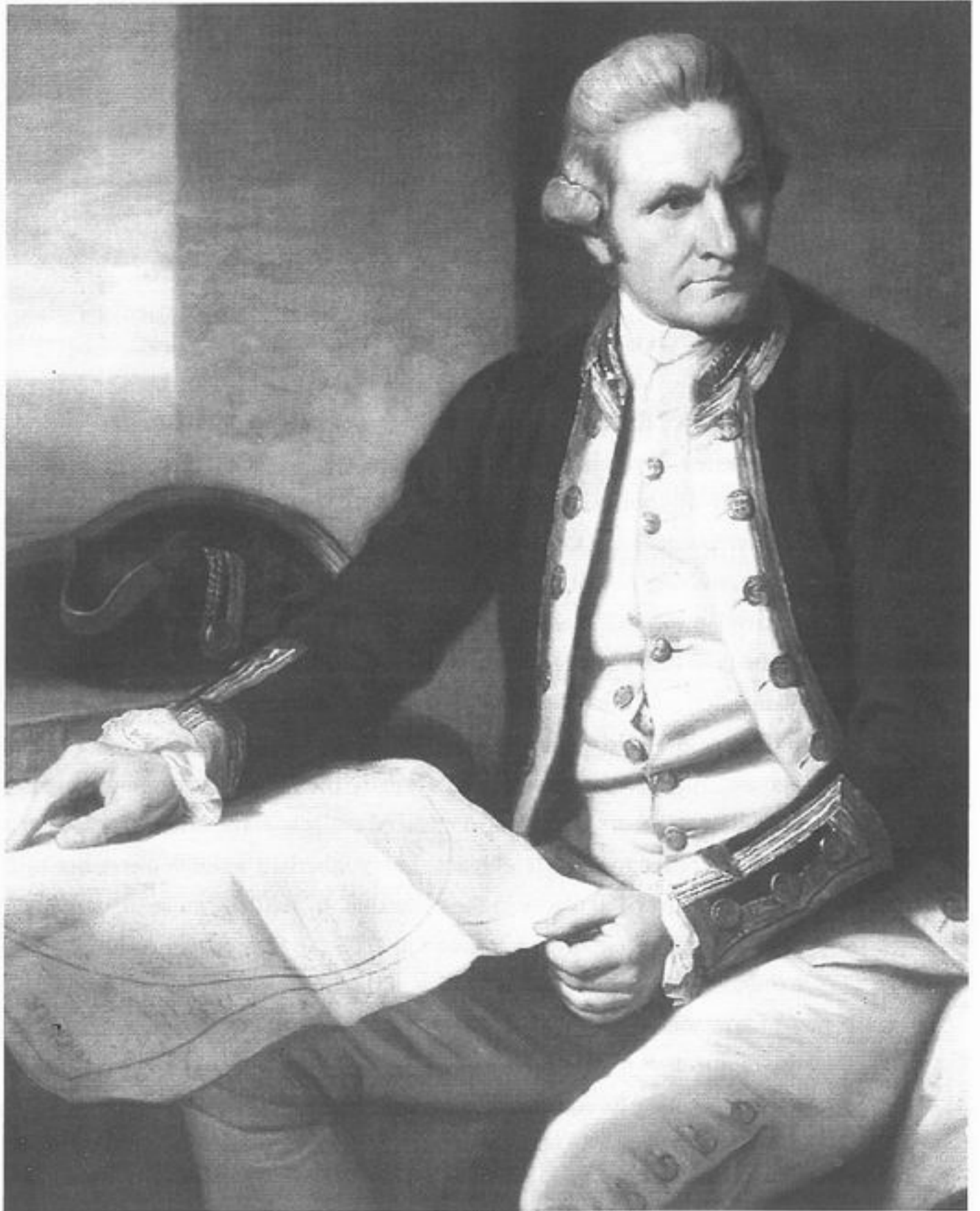
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a sin, thereby conveniently alleviating the conscience of the upper classes. Poorhouses were designed to be as miserable as possible to discourage use by people who needed help most. The Industrial Revolution only heightened society's imbalances. It fattened the prosperous and starved the weak, widening the chasm between classes.

To make matters worse, female labourers earned between one-third and one-half of what a man brought home. Like many among the working class, Ellen Scott could barely feed and clothe herself on her servant wages. She took a big gamble and stole a watch-chain which would have

yielded a few coins at a pawnshop. Ellen had been arrested once before on vagrancy charges so the court mandated a life sentence to 'lands beyond the seas'. She would never see Ireland again. Most women transported for petty theft received a sentence of seven to ten years of indentured servitude. But Irish women, men, and children received the harshest sentences because of terrible discrimination by the British. A writer traveling to Australia in 1847 made this observation about the transported: 'a man is banished from Scotland for a great crime, from England for a small one, and from Ireland, morally speaking, for no crime at all'.<sup>1</sup>

For her crime of poverty, Ellen Scott would pay dearly. Like her fellow transports, she was exiled for life. The women awaited deportation inside a filthy, over-



James Cook (1728-1779)



Stone wash tub remains at Cascades Female Factory

crowded jail for up to six months. Brought to the docks in carriages that were often pelted by onlookers, the human cargo was crammed into converted slave ships. Girls as young as twelve were at the mercy of the crew during the treacherous four-month sea journey around Africa. Each was assigned a number as property of the Crown. Many were forced to wear the number on a tiny tin ticket hung around their necks.<sup>2</sup> The women were shipped to either Van Diemen's Land or mainland Australia.

Ellen Scott, no. 163, was sent to the euphemistically named Cascades Female Factory. It was one of the prisons that housed transports upon arrival in Hobart Town, the capital of Van Diemen's Land. With her shipmates she awaited assignment to local settlers. Twelve thousand miles from their homeland, many convict maids ran away from their masters due to mistreatment or abuse. They were summarily punished with hard labour at Cascades, a damp converted distillery dubbed 'the valley of the shadow of death' by newspapers of the day. Standing along the Female Factory's stone washtubs and humiliated with freshly shorn hair, the women were forced to sew large yellow C's, for Crime Class, on their jackets. They stood ankle-deep in muddy water for twelve-hour shifts, in temperatures that dropped to freezing. Communication was forbidden. Yet the moment the matron turned her head, whispers were passed from one girl to the next with details for the next "Flash Mob" caper. Most of these events were purposefully crafted to torment their keepers. The women deemed expendable by their own government had good reason to be insubordinate. Fewer than two per cent were violent offenders and sixty five per cent were transported upon their first offense.

A rebellious sub-culture sprang to life as soon as the candles were snuffed out in the warden's quarters. Igniting unity, friendship, and strength from one another,

the Cascades contingent adorned themselves with bright scarves and gaudy jewelry that had been smuggled in through a well-oiled underground economy. They sang and danced under the moonlit cliffs of Mount Wellington; sometimes naked and free of the prison shifts that had been deliberately designed to feel scratchy.<sup>3</sup> These clever survivors even devised schemes to meet paramours in town, including smuggling love letters inside chickens that were delivered to corrupt wardens.<sup>4</sup>

Cascades' fiery lasses lived large in spite of their lot in life. Defiance was their religion and solidarity their sustenance. The Colonial Times a Hobart newspaper first reported Flash Mob shenanigans in February 1840 and described 'tricks, maneuvers, and misconduct' that 'baffled the exertions of every person appointed to control and correct them'.<sup>5</sup> The rowdy gang was christened for its 'flash' language, the jargon of thieves. The seventeen-year-old rebel from Limerick City became the leader of the Flash Mob whose escapades were scandalously recorded by the Australian press. Both fearful of and fascinated by Ellen Scott and her conspirators, the Hobart Town Colonial Times wrote:

We have appended to the title of this article, the term "Flash Mob; that this term is technical, is sufficiently obvious; but few of our readers, - few, indeed, of any who possess the ordinary attributes of human nature, can even conjecture the frightful abominations, which are practiced by the women, who compose this mob. Of course, we cannot pollute our columns with the disgusting details, which have been conveyed to us; but we may, with propriety, call the notice of the proper Functionaries to a system of vice, immorality, and iniquity, which has tended, mainly, to render the majority of female assigned servants, the annoying and untractable [sic] animals, that they are.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these condemnations, it made for good copy so the Colonial Times filled many columns with tasty 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 affronted 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 petite 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.<sup>7</sup> Shorn hair and solitary confinement seemed a small price to pay for the unflappable Irish renegade. Rebellion renewed hope for the future, fuelled the spirit, and offered the imprisoned women something they could call their own. Convict maids like Ellen Scott defied their captors by daring 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 Mór, 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 all transports 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 Hougoumont, Britain's last convict ship to Western Australia, trans-



### THE IRISH EMIGRANT

BRIDGET.—"Shure, ma'am, I knows jography 'too, we seans taught it coming out"  
 MISTRESS.—"Indeed; then do you know how many hemispheres there are?"  
 BRIDGET (just landed).—"Shure, an there's two, ma'am, Oirland and Australy!"

1872 cartoon from *Melbourne Punch* depicting an Irish female emigrant

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 fall-

en. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Often overlooked, the Irish had a profound effect on Australia's colonial history. In a distant land down under, freed 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 stoic 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 malnourishment, 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.

### ELLEN SCOTT'S CONVICT DESCRIPTION LIST

(Eliza, AOT CON 19/1/12 p. 357)

Police Number	163
Name	Scott, Ellen
Trade	Servant (City of Limerick)
Height	5' ¼" (without shoes)
Age	18
Complexion	pale
Head	round
Hair	brown
Visage	round
Forehead	ppen dic (Perpendicular)
Eyebrows	brown
Eyes	lt. Brown
Nose	M L (medium long)
Mouth	M W (medium wide)
Chin	M L (medium long)
Remarks	J T & B N. & I L above elbow joint right arm

### REFERENCES

\*Portions of this article are excerpted from *The Tin Ticket: The Heroic Journey of Australia's Convict Women* by Deborah Swiss, Berkley/Penguin Group USA, 2010, 2011.

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- 3 Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
- 4 John Price, Letter to Josiah Spode, Principal Superintendent of Convicts, March 19, 1841, Archives of Tasmania, Colonial Secretary's Office 5/1/282/ 7406.
- 5 Colonial Times (Hobart, Australia), Tuesday, 18 February 1840, 4.
- 6 Colonial Times (Hobart, Australia), Tuesday, 10 March 1840, 4.
- 7 Conduct Record, Ellen Scott, Archives of Tasmania, CON 40/1/9.
- 8 Laurel Johnson, *Women of Eureka* (Historic Montrose Cottage and Eureka Museum, 1995), 22.



Remaining walls of Cascades Female Factory