Unlikely Hero: Convict Maid Ellen Scott*

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 neither safety net nor way out, she pilfered a watch chain to make it through another day. This transgression would cost Ellen her homestead 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 “tumblers 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 up 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 extirpated 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

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 transported 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.”

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-
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. 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 violence. They were summarily punished with hard labour at Cascades, a dump converted distillery dubbed ‘the valley of the shadow of death’ by newspapers of the day. Standing along the Female Factory’s stone wash tubs and humidified with fresh shorn hair, the women were forced to sew large yellow Cs, 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 ninety-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. These clever survivors even devised schemes to meet paramours in town, including smuggling love letters inside chickens that were delivered to corrupt wardens.

Cascades’ fiery ladies 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. The rowdy-gang was christened for its ‘Flash Mob’ style of escape, 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 co-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, 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 intemperance, which has tended, mainly, to render the majority of female assigned servants, the annoying and untractable [sic] animals, that they are.
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 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 maldens helped form the very backbone for modern Australia.

**ELLEN SCOTT'S CONVICT DESCRIPTION LIST**

* (Elna) *AT* 17/12 p. 357
* Police Number: 163
* Name: Scott, Ellen
* Trade: Servant (City of Limerick)
* Height: 5' 4" (without shoes)
* Age: 18
* Complexion: fair
* Head: round
* Hair: brown
* Visage: round
* Forehead: tapering (Perpendicular)
* Eyebrows: brown
* Eyes: R. Brown
* Nose: M L. (medium long)
* Mouth: M W (medium wide)
* Chin: M L. (medium long)
* Remarks: J T & B N. & I 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 Swies, Berkley/Penguin Group USA, 2010, 2011.*


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