Convict lives

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Only the most basic details are known about the lives and crimes of many of the convicts sent to Australia – government records, shipping lists and court records show little more than their name, date of birth, crime, sentence, the court at which they were convicted, the ship they sailed on and date of sailing. However, the Library has a collection of contemporary newspaper reports, broadsides, personal diaries and letters, which make it possible to piece together the lives and stories of a number of convicts.

Some stories are surprisingly ordinary; others are quite extraordinary.

Margaret Catchpole (1762-1819), horse thief

Margaret Catchpole was born in Suffolk and worked as a servant before being employed by the Cobbold family in Ipswich, one of the major towns in Suffolk. John Cobbold was a brewer, and his wife, Elizabeth, a writer. Catchpole’s job in the household was as under-cook and under-nurse. She was a valued member of the household and learnt to read and write.

Catchpole stopped working for the Cobbolds in 1795, and after being very ill and unemployed for quite some time, stole John Cobbold’s horse in May 1797 and rode it more than 100 kilometres to London where she planned to sell it. Before she had a chance to do so, she was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death at Suffolk Summer Assizes. She managed to escape the gallows when her sentence was commuted to seven years’ transportation.

It took some years before she found herself in Australia. For several years she languished in New Gaol, Ipswich, in the custody of John Ripshaw. In March 1800, she used a clothesline to help scale the 22-foot (6.7m) gaol walls. Margaret was recaptured almost immediately and sentenced to death - for the second time in her life. Once again, that sentence was commuted to transportation for the term of her natural life. Margaret Catchpole left England on board the Nile in 1801.

Arriving in Sydney on 14 December 1801, she initially worked as a cook for the New South Wales Commissary, John Palmer in Woolloomooloo. Subsequently Catchpole worked for various well-known families, including the Faithfulls, Rouses, Dights, Woods and Skinners. Like the Cobbolds, many of these employers treated her as one of the family, and she was given an enormous amount of responsibility. Her hard work and decent attitude paid off – Governor Macquarie pardoned her on 31 January 1814.

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Margaret Catchpole portrait, c. 1800s
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Even though she was no longer forced to stay in Australia, Margaret Catchpole never returned to England. She stayed in Australia the rest of her life, running a small shop in Richmond, acting as midwife and nurse and helping others as much as she could. Unfortunately, her life as a free woman didn’t last for long – she died of influenza on 13 May 1819.

The Catchpole letters

In spite of stealing their horse, it seems as if the Cobbolds didn’t hold a grudge against Margaret Catchpole. She stayed in contact with them during her time in Australia and the collection of her letters and papers is now at the State Library of NSW, acquired from a Cobbold descendant in 1922. Her descriptions of events and places are incredibly vivid and engaging, and her writings give a personal and very cheerful first-hand account of early life in the colony. Her spelling is mainly phonetic, as was often the case at the time because dictionaries were not widely available and therefore, spelling was not standardised. The spelling of her name also changes, however this was not uncommon then, as people rarely saw their names written down.

Transcript of the letters

Letter to Mrs Cobbold from Sydney, 21 January 1802

Sedney January th 21 st. 1802

Honred madam

with grat plesher i take up my penn to a Quaint you, my good Ladday, of my saf a rivel at port Jackson new South Wales sedeny on the 20th Day of Desember 1801.

As i was a Going to be Landed, on the Left hand of me, it put me in mind of the Cleeff - Both the housen and Lik wise the hills so as it put me in very Good spirites seeing a places so much Like my owen nativ home.

It is a Grat deel Moor Lik englent then ever i Did expet to a seen for hear is Gardden stuff of all koind.expt gosbres an Currenes and appelles. The Garddenes are very Buttefull in ded all planted with geraniums and thay run up 7 and 8 foot hy.

It is a very woodey Cuntry, for if i goo out, aney a Distences hear is going throw woodes for miles - But thay are very Buttefull - and very prettey Beardes.

I only wish my my Good Laddey i Could send you one of these parrotes, for thay are very Buttefull, But i see so many Dy on Bord it mak me so very unwilling to send you one - But if i should Continner Long in this Countrey i suarteneley will send you sumthing out of this wicked Countrey - FOR I MUST SAY THIS IS THE WICKEDES PLACE I EVER WAS IN ALL MY LIFE.

The weat harvest was all most over just as i Landded. Hear weat is 8 shillenes pear Bussshell at this time, hear is 2 Cropes in the summer, one with weat and one with indey Corn. I Cannot give you not much a Count of the Countrey, not in this letter, But i will Giv you moor in the next for i river shorll for Git yuir Goodness my Good Laddey you shew to me Befor i Left englent - i took every thing over with me safe and thay are a Grat sarves to me in Deed.

Not that i am in such Grat trobell at pressent, But God oneley know how it may

[page 2]

Be for hear is maney one that hav Benn hear for maney year and thay hav thar poor head shaved and sent up to the Coole river and hear Carrey Cooles from Day Light in the morning till Dark at Knight, and half starved, but i
hear that is a Going to Be put By, and so it had need, for it is very crouell in ded.

Norfolk islent is a Bad places a nof to send aney poor Cratuer, with steel Corler on thear poor neckes, But i will tak Good keear of myself from that.

I am prettey well of at present for i was taken of the stores 2 Days after i Landed so i hav no Govment work to do, nor thay hav nothing to do with me - oneley when hear Be a generel mustter, then i must a peear to Leat them know i am hear - and - if i hav a mind i goo up to Parramatta, 20 miles, or to towen Gabbey, 30 mile, or to Oxberrey, 40 mile i hav to git a pass or elce i should Be taken up and put into prison - for a very Lettell will do that hear.

My Dear Good Laddey i wont to say a grat Deel moor But time will not permit for i expet the ship to saill every Day.

I have Benn very Bad sinces i Com on shor, i thought i shold a Lorst my Life, But Bless Be to the Lord i am a grat Deel Better - i was Charmenley all my passeg Considren we Com over the Beay of Beskey, and wee Crost the Line very well in ded.

I was tossed a Bout very much in Ded But i should not mind it if I was But a Coming to old englent onces moor, for i Cannot say that I Lik this Contrey - no, nor niver shorll.

The Governor hav a good maney Cowes and a notheh gentleman hear is a good maney horses and verrry smart wishes and Leetell shay cartes and passeg Bootes

my Dear madam i must con Clud an send you moor acount the next time

from your unfortuned searvant Margaret Catchpole

madam pray Be so koind as to Leet docter Stebbenes hav that sid of the Letter. I hop thes few scroules find you and all your Good famley well and i hop my Good ladey you writ to the fust transport ship that do Come out for i should Be very glad to hear from you.

[page 3]

for Docter Stebbenes

Dear Sir

this is to a Quaint you of our saf Landen at Sedney on the 20th. day of december.

Wee wear all well - Barker is a Live, But she was very much fritened at the rufness of the sea - she youst to very often Cry out "i wish i was with my Dear mr. Stebenes for i niver shorll see ipswich no moor" - But she is much the sam as ever.

Elesabeth kellett Live very neear to me and do very well and she is off the stores so as we ar not driv about after work for the Govment Lik horseas - wee are free from all hard work.

sarey Barker hav to spinn for Govment and she is up on the stors But she Can Git har work don By 12 or 1 a clock if she work hard at it.

sir pray Giv my Best respects to all my old fellear prisnors and tell them niver to say "Dead Hearted" at the thoughts of coming to Boteny Bay for it is Likley you may niver see it - for it is not in hapited - onely By the Blackes, the nativs of this place - thay are very saveg for thay all wais Carrey with them spears and tommeay horkes so when thay can meet with a wit man thay will rob them and speer them. - i for my part do not Like them - i do not know how to Look at them - thay are such poor naked Craturs - thay Behav them selves well a nof when thay Com in to my house for if not wee would Git them punнeshed. thay very often hav a grand fite with them selves 20 and 30 all to gether - and we pray to be spared. sum of them are kild - thear is nothing said to them for killing one a nother.
The Crops of wheat is very good in this County for it produces forty bushels per acre - it is a very bountiful place in deed for I understand them that never had a child in all their lives had some after they came here.

[continued from last page of letter]

Dear sir

Jan the 21 the Blacks the natives of this place killed and wounded 8 men and women and children - 1 man they cut off his arms half way up and broke the bones that they left on very much and cut their legs of up to their knees and the poor man was carried into the hospital alive - but the Governor has sent men out after them to shoot every 1 they find - so as I hope I shall give you better a count the next letter.

Pray sir send me word if you know where Dinah Parker and her child is.

Sir I will write more about the country when I write again. Tea is 22's to 20 and 15 shillings - sugar 2 shillings to 18 and 15 pence per pound - salt beef 1 shilling per pound - mutton 2d per pound - fifteen shillings for a pair of shoes - 10d for a pair of stockings - 5 shillings for a yard of common print - 3d for a yard of calker - 3 shillings for a pound of sop - fish is as cheap as any thing we can buy - but we have no money to trade with.

Pray my good sir remember me to Mrs. Ripshaw and tell her hear is one of Mr. Ripshaw's own daughters living up in the country - but I have not seen her - not yet.

Sir I hope you will be so kind as to write to me by the first ship that do come out to Botany Bay and direct to me at samewell rolley in the Brickfields no 40 sedney.

Sir we had not one died - no not all the passage out in so many a woman.
My dear uncle and aunt you must well think what a Comfort it would be for me to hear from you all as I her englent is in a ver Bad Stat and this is the fourth time of my wrighten.

fust i sent you a Letter by the ship i com in and the next was the Glatton and the next was the Calcutter - hopping that i should a had a Letter Long Before this. Time hear is Long - i's a noto to mak me go out of my Mind to se so maney Letters Com from London and poor i cannot git no not one - i all waves thought that Mrs Cobbold woud a sent me one Befor this time - But i hop my Dear uncle you will not neglect me this time for i am very unhappey to think that i cannot hear from you and my Aunt and all my Dear Cusanes.

I am in grat hopes that - please God - i should Live so Long as 2 or 3 year - i shorll hav that plesher and that grat Joy of seeing you all - for this Gouvener is a very Good Man to pardon such as has heavy sentences for Life - Hear hav Bin a Grat maney that hav got thear free parden.

The young Man that Bring this Letter was for Lif But now he is Com free to his owen hom - wich is in London - I lived with him at Mr John palmers a squirs - for i lived thear twelve Monthes as a Cook and Darrey Searvent and this William lived thear as Fotman so he promised me he would bring this letter saf to London i hav left that places for this 18 Monthes and more - At this present time i am housekeeper to a free sattler that had the miss fortin to Loos a Good Wife and left him with tow children - thay com over in the sam ship i did.

Thes free peopell are the farmers they hav one hundred ackers giv to them wen they Com hear But it is all Lik a Wood so thay hav to Cut downe the tres and burn

[page 6]

them a Way Befor thear can be aney Corn grow - Wee Begun to sow Wheat in March and aprell and harvest com on in November and as soon as that is of thay seet feerer to the stubbell and Burn it of and then put in Corn Dyrickely- not plow it nor how it.

Ower land is most part Brak up with min and larg howes wich is very hard work and hav kiled maney a good man. This is a very Daingres Countrrey to Liv in for the natives thay are Black minn and wimen - thay Goo nacked - thay youst to kill the wight poopell very much But thay are Better - But bad a nof - now, the Black Snakes is very Bad for thay will fly at you Lik a Dog and if thay Bit us wee dy at sun downen - Hear is som 12 feet Long and as big as your thy and maney very Daingress thinges and maney grat Quorstess thinges - but if can onces git a leeter from your Dear Handes i will send you a List of the holl Countrrey.

My Dear Uncle and aunt pray Giv my Lov to my Dear uncle and aunt Leedder and all my Cusanes - and for Gods sak and for my Sak Leet all that is Liven see this Letter.

This is a very hot Countrrey - the Ground burn ouer Feet in the Summer part - wich is at this time - and in the Winter it is very Could, but no snow-just very white frostes - It is a grat Deel Couldeer than it youst to Be for it was a very woodey places but now it onely is in sum places - it will be a very poples places in Time - it is a grat Deel Better then it was whin i fust Com hear.

Hear is a few appeall and pear trees and Grapes - a few oke trees but no other sort exept petches and apery Cot - no gosbress nor currenes.

Monney is very scarce Cus a penney Goo for 2 pences - all Coppes go the sam - silver and Gould is hard to Be com at By the Lik of me.

Thay trad from Indey and Chainry to hear - Tea hav bin for fourer pound four shillenes par pound. Sarah Barker and

[page 7]

the other Young Wooman that went with me is Liven so my Dear uncle if the young man should wright from London to you - send to him Diddareckley and then he will bring it saf to me - for he intend to Com Back a Gain.
So i must Con Clud with all my Best Prayers and Wiches to you all - and i remain your Loven Cusen

Margreath Catchpoule

pray Goo to mrs. Cobbold and tell har that i hope she will send me wert how all the good fammeley do for i longt to hear from them all and should be very glad to know if Doter Stebben Be a live - and then i will send to you all a Gain if the young Man wright to you and if you send to me Drect at Sydney new South Wales port Jackson, i hav sent a Letter to mrs. Cobbold - Let my Letter be left at Govment houes.

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the Black Snakes is very Bad for thay will fly at you Lik a Dog and if thay Bit us wee dy at sun downen - Hear is som 12 feet Long and as big as your thy and maney very Daingress thinges

This is a very hot Countrey - the Ground burn ouer Feet in the Summer part - wich is at this time - and in the Winter it is very Could, but no snow-just very white frostes - It is a grat Deel Cooler than it youst to Be for it was a very woodey places but now it onely is in sum places - it will be a very poples places in Time - it is a grat Deel Better then it was whin i fust Com hear.

Margaret Catchpole makes it to the stage

Margaret Catchpole certainly seems to have made an impression on all the Cobbolds: one of the children in the family, Richard Cobbold (1797-1877), even published a novel about her in 1845. While the name he gave it – The history of Margaret Catchpole, a Suffolk girl doesn’t give much away, it inspired a play, with the far more sensational title, Margaret Catchpole, the female horse-stealer. This turned to be very popular, playing to packed houses in England. Both the novel and the play were wildly inaccurate in places, depicting her as ending up as a wealthy married woman. It is believed that Richard Cobbold may have partly confused her life with that of Mary Reiby.

Part of the broadside reads:

"This extraordinary Female underwent some of the most singular vicissitudes that perhaps ever marked the career of woman. She was tried and condemned to death at Bury assizes in 1797; broke out of prison at Ipswich; was re-taken, sentenced again to death, and her punishment changed to transport for life. Retrieving her character in Australia, she distinguished herself in many new adventures; obtained a free pardon; and married a wealthy Settler, who left her sole mistress of an immense fortune."

While the novel and play may have largely been forgotten, Margaret Catchpole’s name lives on at the Hawkesbury Private Hospital in Windsor (not far from where she lived in Richmond). In honour of her occupation as a midwife, the maternity ward is named after her.
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