

RS 16/1(2) 16  
Letter to a friend Mr. Fry Government House Hobart

3<sup>rd</sup> August 1841

My dear Mr. Fry  
For four years & more, that is, for as long  
a period as I have lived in this country, I have been  
recollected to write to you, & in fact, with the warmest wish  
you expressed to me in parting, that I would do so. —  
You will I think be more sorry to hear why I have failed  
to execute my recollection, than disposed to blame me for it.  
I had little to tell you respecting the condition of the female  
prisoner population here, which it would give you any satisfaction  
to hear, & I shrank from the painful task of being the  
reporter of evil, & of confessing how little I had personally  
done, or <sup>had</sup> been able to do to alleviate it. —

I wish in my present letter to explain to you, (as to compare  
myself to this one point,) that the circumstances in which  
female prisoners are placed in this colony, & the influence  
to reformation, but rather have an directly contrary effect.

You are aware that this Assignment of Men has  
ceased, or is in the course of being abolished. — It has  
been pronounced "Domestic Slavery" — & the odium of  
this name has strangled the victims that bore it. —  
You must not suppose however, by saying this,  
that I am ready to advocate the cause of Assignment.  
In my opinion, whatever may be said in its favor,  
(and something may be said,) it is an unrighteous evil,  
& I rejoice in its abolition. — But is it really abolished  
What becomes then of the fact, that all the women convicts  
who come out here, are still sent into Assignment?  
And not a single voice that I know of, has been raised  
in England to save them from this tyranny, & this degradation?

Are the women wholly forgotten in England? or is Slavery  
stripped of its horror & cleansed from its iniquity, when applied  
to them? No! the fact is otherwise. The Slavery of  
women is an infinitely worse thing than the Slavery of Men.  
It has all the evils of Men's Slavery, both as respects the  
"Slave" & the Master or mistress, & still more. The woman not  
only suffers but produces more mischief. I will substantiate  
this in two points of view only. \* Landed from the ship after  
a voyage which itself a course of increased demoralization,  
they are thrown at once on the bosom of society, to be diffused  
over every part of it - no corner of this island so remote in  
which their presence is not to be found. - few families so  
mean that they cannot afford to maintain a single female  
prisoner servant. - But chiefly they are congregated in the  
Towns, in the midst of every temptation to the lowest licentiousness  
& vice. These women in fact, but the highest families, & not  
infrequently in their own, are the nurses & nurseries, & not  
of our Annual households, the earliest teachers consequently  
of the infant generation, the waiting maids probably of the  
grown up daughters. And of whom is this affirmed? of our  
whole host crime perhaps it is that they are the source of  
women whose "trade" in England. I have blushed to see  
recorded in letters of shame in the Surgeon Superintendant's  
name-book. - That such a state of things appears to  
have but little injurious effect on the minds & manners of  
the female youth of this colony, can only be accounted for, by  
the fact that these female helots are held up by parents  
to their children, as a class apart, to be avoided, even  
while it is made use of. - but that profligacy should be the  
prevailing sin of the prisoner population, will excite no  
wonder. It is followed by the association of male & female  
prisoners in the same family, by the temptations to which

They are eventually exposed, & the very few coercive restrictions  
to which they are subjected in assigned service, & it is unavailing  
by any sufficient penalties of the law, if indeed it be not,  
from a mistaken philanthropy, directly encouraged by the  
Institutions which exist in this colony, to relieve the pious  
parents from all burden of their offspring. —

It may be necessary for me to explain this matter —  
when a female assigned servant is likely to become a Mother  
she is conducted from her master's residence, wherever it  
may be, to the Factory of Hobart or of Launceston, where  
she is retained & carefully tended till recovered from her  
confinement. — She is then sent with her child (if at Hobart,  
to a small house in the town called the Factory nursery,  
to nurse it. — There she has plenty of companions, plenty of  
food, no work, & moreover is liable to the agreeable calamity  
of being selected some day, on application being made by  
any individual wanting a wet nurse, to enter in that  
capacity into a private family, a rich one perhaps (such  
is the paucity of free women for even the best service)  
where she meets with the usual bribes by which tender  
mothers strive to secure to their children the care of their  
hired substitutes. — In ordinary cases however, the child  
being weaned, at the end of from 9 to 12 months, the mother  
either is removed into the nursery as a nurse of the class  
of weaned children, where she remains till reassigned  
to service, or she goes back to the factory, not this time  
to be tended with peculiar care, but professedly to be  
punished for her original transgression. You will ask  
what is the nature of this punishment, with which she  
is now to be visited, & may perhaps suppose that on  
re-entering the prison where, in compassion to her situation

She was before treated with tenderness, instead of severity,  
some signal mark of the reprobation in which her offence  
is held, will be inflicted on her. - You might conclude  
perhaps, that she is subjected to that most baronless, yet  
most efficacious of female punishments, the being deprived  
of the ornament of her hair, as practiced I am told in  
the Milbank Penitentiary. - Oh no! this most wicked  
& inhuman of punishments, as the "Blow Press" of the  
Colonies used I believe to treat it, is not fit, they say, for  
human beings. It was said the same God disapproved of  
it. At any rate it was abolished in the time of the late  
St. Governor & it has not been revived. - tho' all the success  
of the prison spiritual, medical, or otherwise, units  
in tending to its efficiency. At least then, it will be concluded  
that these abandoned inmates of the Factory, go into solitary  
cells, or are put to hard labour. But this would be a mistake  
supposition. They are put into that <sup>or</sup> Yard in the Factory  
which has the best ration, are in no way separated from  
the rest, have no harder labour than the picking a little  
sawdust & sleep in the same common room with the  
other women of their division. The only shadow of  
punishment they receive, is the detention in the Factory  
itself which is of 6 months duration.

But I have not yet told you the whole of this melancholy  
system. The Brixton school completes the picture. This is  
an expensive institution entirely supported by Govt for the  
offspring of convicts, a few poor destitute children, who  
have lost one or both parents. - These two classes of  
children are mingled together in the institution, nor I  
think there be any great harm in this, since they are received  
at the early age of two years (till which age, they are kept

in the Nursery before mentioned) were they all alike with  
drawn from the corrupt influence of the connexions of a  
portion of them - In all the Foundling Hospitals of  
other countries, the unhappy objects of their Society are  
received when infants, & in parting with them the Parents  
know them no more - The State which charges itself with  
their maintenance & education, has also the exclusive  
rights of a Parent over them - even that of imposing on  
them an arbitrary name, to the absolute superseding of  
the rights of nature, & this law, whatever else may be  
thought of it, is, it may be supposed, more checked by  
the violence which it does to the maternal instinct -  
to the profligacy which such Institutions directly encourage,  
as well as an effectual security against the contamination  
to be derived by the children, from the depravity of the  
beings who gave them birth - But in the Great Foundling  
Hospital of S. D. Land, there is no check whatever, the  
children, as has been seen have been nursed or visited  
by their mothers during the first 2 years of their childhood,  
long enough to return the fondness for which they have  
become the objects, & in the orphan School, the same  
intercourse is allowed & carried on, of course under  
certain restrictions, which however, from the want of  
sufficient Officers to exert the necessary vigilance, must  
be wholly insufficient to neutralize the evil - Children  
who in their earliest infancy, have never had to  
experience the privations, & the hard usage of which  
the lot of the infant poor amongst the poor, are here  
acquainted with their parents, only as ministers to their  
of pleasure & enjoyment in contrast with the constraints  
of school - From them, they derive probably, their knowledge

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of the outer world, their enjoyment of some of its  
purchased pleasures, their knowledge of its vicious language  
& their aspirations after its alluring novelties & gross  
excitements. - But this is not all - the children thus  
maintained & educated by the Govt. are not so that, not  
less the exclusive property of their parents, whenever the  
latter think proper to claim them. - The virtuous training  
(presuming it to be so) which they have received from the  
age of 2. to 10, or 12. may be arrested at the latter age,  
or at any other, by a claim advanced by the mother for  
the possession of her child, founded upon her ability to  
maintain it, such ability arising either from the marriage  
of the woman, while yet a prisoner, to a man who is gaining  
a competent livelihood, or by the woman herself, having obtained  
her ticket of leave, or her pardon - In such a case, the  
child is unconditionally given up - No claim need first  
be liquidated by the parent for the expense of the child's  
education, which alone wd be a considerable check to the  
children being withdrawn, but without penalty or payment  
of any kind, the parent is allowed to take it away -  
Such an occurrence is by no means uncommon after the  
age of 10 or 12, when the services of a boy or girl in this  
Colony become <sup>of some</sup> valuable, & thus an Institution, capable  
even under the common conditions of a foreign smuggling  
Hospital, of becoming a merciful & wise provision for  
transmuting evil into good, is degraded into a mere  
nursery - for the encouragement of vice, wasting its  
resources, & its care on objects which can bring it no  
virtuous remuneration. (I have purposely  
avoided bringing forward ~~some~~ which might be considered as  
exceptions to these evil tendencies - In looking to the principles

of things, we only perplex & falsify our judgment by dwelling on such particular consequences as were not reasonably to be anticipated from them. There is more good perhaps in this country than could be expected from the abundant evil materials with which it is stocked. What an encouragement is this for earnest endeavour after amendment! but what a dishonest & unholy reason would it be for leaving things as they are!

Dr. Dawson tells me that you fear for the poor women who arrive here (some of them under devious insinuations of penitence / the evils of indiscriminate assignments. He wondered that there should be 180 families or individuals, a three fourths in the island, who, at the moment the ship arrived were ready to receive the 180 women she brought. "Were they all proper persons?" - I told him he might himself answer that question when he had ascertained by walking up one street & down another, in less than ten many hours of moderately decent appearance were without a female convict <sup>servant</sup> ~~servant~~; I know of none whom he need <sup>exclude</sup> ~~except~~ except the Publican, who, as well as the Ticket of leave holders have been by Sir John's regulations deprived of the power of receiving convict servants - It always happens when a female convict ship arrives, that as many people as there are prisoners on board & more besides are candidates for their services. These candidates are not bound to show any qualifications of their fitness to be the employers of convict servants - such a thing would be impossible. Their fitness lies in their want of the prisoners' services & in their sense of having as much right to them as others - The best of the prisoners, or those supposed to be the best, are reserved for the best masters or mistresses, (an arrangement which falls under the <sup>control</sup> of the Chief Superintendent of Convicts) that is to say those who are in the most respectable classes of society. The others fall to the lot of the lower ranks. Such, tho' I have never heard it so stated, is undoubtedly the principle of distribution, & there perhaps could not be a better as respects the best, but what can be said of the other? What should we say, if in a hospital, the most severely afflicted patients, the most difficult cases, were always made over to the worst physician! and that many of these employers of convict servants are

the difference enough may be concluded from the fact just alluded to that there is scarcely a petty tradesman in the town where a great proportion of the tradesmen are emancipated convicts themselves, who has not one female prisoner in his employ. This system is as ancient as the origin of this penal colony & it is pursued from something very like necessity. There are no other women (the number of originally free female servants is quite insignificant) & until a very extensive system of female emigration is entered into, it would be considered & would in fact be, the most intolerable of hardships, to put a stop to it. This observation will enable you to see the great difficulty which always attends the discussion of remedies on this subject, the difficulty viz. that the interests of the prisoner & those of the colonist are not identical. Besides this, there are no receptacles for women but the homes of the colonists - The whole arrangements of the convict system till now have been based on the principle that the ~~convicts~~ colonists are to be the prisoners' jailors, & that their dwelling-houses, adapted as many of them are only to the rude & some what gross habits of colonial or hardworking life, their only prisons. The Factory is only a large sleeping house for the women whether on their first arrival or in their transition from one place of servitude to another, it is also a house of correction for faults committed in domestic service, but has no pretension to be a place of reformatory discipline - it seldom fails to turn out the women worse than it finds them - hence the constant endeavour of the authorities here to remove the women at once from the ship into private service rather than to send them into the Factory. Thus few women remain long enough to be materially acted upon by any reformatory process even did such exist, but it has in fact none, unless a religious service on the Sabbath, sometimes performed by the Superintendent of the Prison; & other by a Chaplain who has also an extensive parish to attend to, can be considered as such. There is no classification which is worth the name. The separate cells are few in number & used only by award of a police magistrate for special offences. Silence is not only not enforced, but the utmost confusion of tongues prevails in every yard & every room, in short, without catering into

more particulars, its character may be ascertained from the fact that even as a place of punishment, it fails in its object. The women return to it again & again - When they wish to change their place of servitude, they are known to commit offences on purpose to be sent back to it preparatory to their re-assignment elsewhere.

If your full astonishment that a state of things such as I have generally described, should still endure, & that too at a time when the colony is in a state of moral prostration as well as of physical prosperity greater perhaps than ever existed before, & at a time too when the Home Government has sanctioned some experimental ameliorations of the condition of convict men which promise the best results, I must remind you that the poor women have been altogether overlooked in the general renovation. No, they have not I suppose been overlooked, but it has been found much more difficult to deal with the women than the men & the subject, as perplexing subjects are apt to be, has been put aside - Tell very lately the expenses of Convict Discipline were regulated by the same rigid economy which was exacted in all other branches of the public expenditure, & the Governor has been called upon rather to shew grounds of justification for what he could not help spending, than encouraged to propose ameliorations which to be adequate, must be costly. - The Assignment System had its origin in economy - the vice of the Factory originates in the same - it is only the Orphan School which sets this principle at defiance. This from the want of room & the want of officers that the evils prevailing in them chiefly arise. Not only do we want building of vastly increased capacity, but had we even a Millbank Penitentiary, it would be useless without the officers to administer its discipline. These are wholly wanting. The Colony cannot furnish them. They do not exist in the country - At present, there are only 5 free people, men or women, employed in the Factory,  
(Signed) David Franklin

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which contained the other day above 4000 women. If any one, or  
any couple of these were to go away, I do not know where to  
be found who could fill their place. A stronger ground for  
the endurance of what is amiss, could scarcely be imagined. X X X X

I have stated all these evils without disguise or pellation, but  
not without doing more than any one perhaps can do who has  
not lived a few years in the colony all the difficulties that lie  
in the way of removing them. I cannot believe however but that  
the present ministry who have shown so much desire to relieve  
transportation from some of its greatest faults, would not do still  
more to cleanse it from the foulest blot of all, the female  
Apprentice & Factory System, if they are aware of its nature. How  
I should rejoice to hear that investigations were set on foot, that  
every vice & abuse were exposed, and an unflinching hand applied  
to the correction, and may be, of the whole system. Without  
great reinforcements <sup>however</sup> from some of our qualified people, such a  
reform would be totally out of the question, the more so as the present  
system is interwoven with the habits & prejudices of the Community, with  
its interests also as they suppose, & a not inconsiderable body of officials  
would be perplexed by any change. I have known some of the best men  
in the country while they deplore existing evil, console themselves with  
the observation that it is not so bad as it used to be, & give ingenious reasons  
why it never should be any better. (I do not think Sir John is of this  
opinion, & I know he has it in contemplation to erect a penitentiary in  
the center of the island, on an improved principle of plan, but he has not  
yet been able to procure the plans from the Civil Engineer who has the  
direction of these matters, & he has also upon his hands at this moment  
the execution of instructions from the Secretary of State to carry this great  
change in the management of the male convicts, (involving as they do great  
wealth with an inadequate moral machinery to produce them) which  
require his unremitting energies.)

~~He gave me, what I have attempted to express in a former letter~~  
(the rest chiefly about Miss Taylor -