‘A White Rag Burning’:
Irish women who committed arson
in order to be transported to Van Diemen’s Land

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

Dianne Maree Snowden
Dianne Maree Snowden
To my family,

for understanding
Abstract

Between 1841 and 1853, 248 women were transported from Ireland to Van Diemen's Land for arson. Of this number, there is evidence that at least seventy-nine women in the Famine and post-Famine period committed arson in order to be transported. This group of deliberate offenders challenges traditional notions of convict historiography and raises questions about the fundamental nature of criminality and transportation. This thesis argues that the women, as active agents, were using transportation as a form of emigration. For many poor women in Famine and post-Famine Ireland, emigration was not an option because they did not meet selection criteria for assisted emigration schemes, or could not afford the costs associated with emigration. Arson was a perfect crime for those who wished to be caught. It was visible, immediate, and effective. It was serious enough to warrant transportation. By the early 1850s, it was entrenched as a means of engineering transportation among women, a fact recognised by the Irish courts and frequently commented upon in Irish newspapers. There is no evidence that the deliberate arsonists were social or political protesters. For them, arson was a means to an end, not a political statement.

More than passive economic victims, the deliberate arsonists were marginalised women actively seeking to change their circumstances. Initially, this was from the dislocation and chaos of Famine and post-Famine Ireland but the process continued in Van Diemen's Land. A major focus of this thesis is the colonial experience of the deliberate arsonists, tracing what happened to them and examining whether there was evidence that they tried to improve their position in
the colony, especially when they were free. This thesis argues that, by using a number of survival strategies, the women's attempts to seek control over their lives continued.

This thesis is presented in two parts. The first contains an historiographical survey, an explanation of the methodology, the Irish background to the phenomenon as well as a profile of the deliberate arsonists. The second part analyses social and economic outcomes for the women in Van Diemen's Land: marriage, economic survival, and death. Research has been primarily based on convict records, newspaper reports of trials, civil registration records, colonial newspapers, colonial court records, and family papers. Detailed biographies of the seventy-nine deliberate arsonists have been compiled as Volume Two of the thesis.

This thesis adds to the body of knowledge about the female convict experience, generally, and the deliberate arsonists, specifically. As far as I am aware, this is the first time that a comprehensive study of a group of convict women, grouped by crime, has been carried out. It is also the first time that a study has looked specifically and extensively at 'courting transportation', at transportation as emigration, and, in this respect, it has only touched the tip of an iceberg. The phenomenon of deliberately courting transportation was not limited to the female arsonists or post-Famine Ireland, although it was a period when it was undeniably most effectively and publicly used. Transportation was not regarded as punishment by impoverished, marginalised women in Famine and post-Famine
Ireland but a way of improving their situation. This thesis is also the first time that the female post-sentence convict experience has been looked at in detail in a Tasmanian context, with a focus on individuals, and using family history techniques. It concludes that, despite economic, political and social constraints imposed on them, in Ireland and Van Diemen’s Land, the deliberate arsonists exercised agency over their lives by using a number of survival strategies.
I wish to place on record my gratitude to all those who have helped me complete this thesis.

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