“According to the fair play of the world
let me have audience”:

Reading Convict Life-Narratives of Van Diemen’s Land

by

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Abstract:

“According to the fair play of the world let me have audience”: Reading Convict Life-Narratives of Van Diemen’s Land.

This thesis examines published convict life-narratives of Van Diemen’s Land. I analyse eighteen self-referential accounts of convictism, written by male transportees and published in Britain, Ireland, America or Australia during the nineteenth century. I scrutinise how convict authors gained access to public autobiographical space and how they negotiated an authoritative speaking position within that space. My approach follows the precedent of autobiography theorists like Gillian Whitlock, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who encourage readers of life-narrative to understand self-referential writing as an historically situated conversation between the personal and the public. I understand autobiographical narrative not as the story of a life as lived, but as a site where, as Smith and Watson suggest in Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, “the personal story of a remembered past is always in dialogue with emergent cultural formations” (83). My thesis is underpinned by the assumption that publication attests to that dialogue. I conduct an historicist reading of the narratives and use the retrievable history of each text to situate it within the historical context of its first publication.

Chapter One interrogates the narrative and material forms of each text to locate evidence of how a personal recollection of crime and convictism was shaped and packaged for commercial readership. I borrow from Whitlock’s The
Intimate Empire the notion of the “unlikely autobiographer.” I suggest that, like former slave Mary Prince, convict life-writers were disenfranchised and disempowered within the operative and discursive frameworks of convictism, which rendered their access to publication unlikely and the eighteen published accounts consequently exceptional. I identify five kinds of extra-textual conditions that facilitated the original publication of each extant narrative. I locate each text within the promotional, propagandist, political, pragmatic or historical conditions of its initial publication.

Chapter Two considers how the dictates of publication impacted upon convict writers’ autobiographical authority. Again, I borrow from readings of Mary Prince’s narrative, by both Whitlock and Moira Ferguson, which recover Prince’s agency within a highly scripted collaborative production. I argue that authorial employment of autobiographical space as a site for self-determination and self-reconstruction demonstrates some degree of protagonist and authorial agency in these texts. I then return to the notion of dialogue and consider several features of some accounts which complicate their status as autobiography. In this final discussion, I posit that convict life-narrative is a polyvocal site and that attending to this polyvocalism furnishes a fuller portrayal of the experiences, meanings and ramifications of convictism for individuals than does a reading that presumes life-narrative is a unitary utterance of a life as lived.
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