

# CONVICT WOMEN & ORPHAN GIRLS

## SERIES SYNOPSIS

From 1787 to 1853, over 25,000 women, nearly half of them Irish, were transported in the dark holds of ships on a 16,000-mile journey to the other end of the earth. Arriving alone, or with small children in the colonies, these single, married and widowed women, lived, loved, toiled and died under Australian skies, there was no repatriation.

In a two-year period during the Great Famine, over 4,000 young orphan girls, inmates of the overcrowded Irish workhouses, were carefully selected and transported as free migrants on what became known as the *Famine Bride Ships*, to the colonies where men outnumbered women by 9 to 1 in the outback.

Such infusions of Irish female blood at the end of the 18th and in the 19th centuries had a telling influence on the development of colonial Australia. Neither 'damned whores' or passive victims, these women and young girls and the choices they made, shaped the world in which they lived. They were the founding mothers of Modern Australia.

CONVICT WOMAN & ORPHAN GIRLS is a pioneering documentary series that fuses history, genealogy and drama to reveal the stories of these forgotten women and their experiences in a strange and harsh new world. The series deals with the establishment of the enterprise that would give birth to the Australian nation and the roles that Irish female convicts and the orphan girls played in it's formation.

Filmed in Australia and Ireland, the programmes set the colonial project in context. The characters of the programme, single, widowed, and married women of various ages come from a variety of counties in Ireland including counties Down, Limerick, Carlow, Tyrone, Roscommon, Clare, Dublin, Cork, Galway and Tipperary, thus allowing us to understand the local, as well as the general, social, political and economic conditions and the situation of women at different points in the transportation era, including the experience of women who were already economic migrants to England, part of the ongoing migrations of poor Irish into England that with anti-Irish sentiments in newspapers fuelled British prejudice.

Through vivid recreations we learn of the horrendous sea journeys to the other side of the earth, the forced separation on arrival in the colonies of young children from their mothers and their cruel, often fatal treatment in the nurseries and orphan schools in which the children were incarcerated.

The series explores the resistance of convict women, the self preservation strategies they developed to survive their own incarceration, the strategies employed by the convict women to endure assignment to masters as bonded labour and by the orphan girls as indentured labour. We get an insight into the various challenges women faced and the lives they lived when they got their free certificates and we meet descendants of convict women and of orphan girls with some wonderful stories of achievements, The overall vulnerability of women derived from their dependence on men and the state, resilient in spite of their circumstances, many of them somehow maintained a dogged determination to fight for their rights, others broken by abuse and the difficulties they encountered were just not able to keep up the spark.

CONVICT WOMEN & ORPHAN GIRLS is a celebration of these women and girls. It rescues them from obscurity and restores their historical importance in building the modern Australian nation, the young orphan girls viewed as “the moral dregs of the workhouses – the most stupid, the most ignorant, the most unmanageable set of beings that ever cursed a country by their presence”, and the transported women, who, because of contemporary attitudes towards them and the shame of the convict 'stain' have not gained any place as pioneers in the legends and histories of their home and adopted countries.

The series is a testament to the lives, struggles and legacy of these 18th and 19th century women and girls but it leaves us with a question – what have we learned from the experience? What is it in our own culture that has allowed us through the 20th and 21st century to continuously banish from our midst, those who make us feel uncomfortable, or are considered undesirable in our communities?

To Contact the filmmakers

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