

# CONVICT WOMEN & ORPHAN GIRLS

## EPISODE 2 - SUMMARY

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 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 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.**

## EPISODE 2 - THE JOURNEY

Episode 2 gives insight into the 16,000-mile sea journey of the convict women, the children that were allowed to accompany them, and of the young orphan girls traveling on the Earl Grey Scheme to the other end of the earth.

This journey even when tightly regulated took up to 4 months, sailing across oceans in cold and stormy weather, through the stifling heat of the tropics and the void of the great southern ocean. For much of the time the precious human cargo was locked down in the hold of the ship.

The story follows the journey of women like Ellen Scott from Limerick, aged 16 when she arrived in London to escape poverty, who was then transported for stealing a gold watch; Rose Ann Hyland, from Castlewellan Co Down, convicted of stealing money, one of only 6 women out of 155 women who survived the shipwreck of the NEVA - all 55 children on board perished. We are introduced to Ellen Curley, transported for killing her 2 month old baby, the lovechild of her extra marital relationship with soldier Amos Brooks, a member of the same battalion as her husband who at the time was away fighting the Queens wars. We follow Margaret Butler, transported for stealing 12 potatoes, a 41-year old widow, and mother of 6 children who despite her pleas to the Lord Lieutenant was allowed to take only 2 of her 6 children with her. She traveled with 4 other widow women accompanied by 9 of their children, and with whom she was convicted of stealing potatoes in Carlow in 1845. We journey with Catherine Bartley from Roscommon, aged 17 when convicted of stealing a cow; Jane Cook, and her daughter, the young Co Tyrone widow sentenced to 10 years transportation for stealing a pot-lid; the Hart sisters, orphans from the Galway Workhouse and Brigid McMahon the

young orphan girl from Rathkeale Co Limerick.

We get glimpses of conditions on board ship and how women were treated; the seasickness and ill health suffered by the women and the treatments of the day that included bloodletting and blistering of their shaven heads and stomachs; the trauma of giving birth or of a miscarriage or post natal deaths and the dumping of babies overboard. We see many examples of the resilience of the women on board ship, and begin to understand the importance of the friendships made that would sustain them in the colony far from family or community.

There could be much commotion at the docks with the arrival of another shipload of women, potential wives and servants. But first there would have to be the demeaning classification and processing of the women and to the horror of the children and their mothers a terrifying separation and taking of the children to nurseries and the orphan school where they would be incarcerated so that their mothers could be distributed amongst the colonists.

The orphan girls on arrival in Sydney were sent to Hyde Park Barracks where they were processed before being indentured to masters. Some 2,000 of them were sent to Melbourne and Adelaide.

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