

# ‘We must be quickly sailing’: Convict contributions to the economic development of Australia

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## Abstract

For many, convict transportation was a nightmare; for some, it became an opportunity; for Australia, it is an enduring element in our national economic story. Convicts have been both reviled and revered in the Australian public consciousness—portrayed as criminal blights or as incarcerated innocents. This essay puts aside this discourse to argue that convicts played a crucial role in the development of the colonial Australian economy. Convicts both during their incarceration and after their emancipation were significant in supporting public development, private enterprise, and trade. Moreover, this essay argues that notions of economic ‘contributions’ ought to be reconsidered. It highlights the silences of historical and economic data, and how historiographical trends have marginalised both the contributions of female convicts and the impact that convicts had on Indigenous people in this economic story. This essay concludes by emphasising that convicts have made significant direct and indirect contributions to the economic development of Australia.

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What if the parting day is at hand,  
Never at fate be railing,  
Though from a rich and plentiful land,  
We must be quickly sailing;  
Let not our bosoms fear display,  
Future events concerning,  
Though we are going to Botany Bay,  
Never from thence returning.

—John Freeth, ‘The Convict’s Departure’ (1790)<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 1788 with the establishment of New South Wales, and ending in 1868 in Western Australia, over 163 000 convicts—sentenced for fixed terms, usually 7 or 14 years, or life—were transported to the colonies.<sup>2</sup> The labour, enterprise, and lives of these convicts—both men and women—created, sustained, and radically altered colonial economic history. This essay will reconsider existing historiography alongside archival primary sources to construct an account of convicts’ contributions. It will first examine a traditional view of the contributions of convicts to Australia’s economy by exploring the role that convicts played in directly supporting both public development and private enterprise. To add colour to this analysis, it will then reinterpret the meaning of ‘contribution’ to the economy. This latter view will emphasise the significance of female convicts—traditionally undervalued by both contemporary sources and historians—as well as highlight the impact that the exclusive, imported workforce of convicts had on the economic dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. Thus, this essay

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<sup>1</sup> John Freeth, *The Political Songster: Or, a Touch on the Times, on Various Subjects, and Adapted to Common Tunes*, 6th ed. (Birmingham: Thomas Pearson, 1790), 126.

<sup>2</sup> David Meredith and Deborah Oxley, ‘The Convict Economy’, In *The Cambridge Economic History of Australia*, ed. Simon Ville and Glenn Withers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 102, [doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.009](https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.009).

argues that the contours of Australia's economic development were lastingly shaped in both direct and indirect ways by the hands of convict women and men.

## Traditional contributions

The contributions of convicts have largely been measured in relation to their supply of skilled labour to the government, their supply of skilled labour to private industry, and, after being freed, their direct participation in the colonial export economy.

### A skilled labour force

Convicts played a key role in the labour market, and, in contrast to their traditional portrayal as dregs of society, were generally skilled.<sup>3</sup> Over 95 per cent of convicts who arrived between 1817 and 1839 had some occupational status recorded, comprising of more than a 1,000 distinct occupations, thereby bringing skills which could conceivably have been useful in New South Wales as a source of 'human capital'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, convicts filled gaps in the colonial labour market beyond 1788 and until transportation concluded. As Noel Butlin calculates, convicts and ex-convicts constituted 88 per cent of Australia's male and 55 per cent of Australia's female labour force in 1830.<sup>5</sup> Hence, this section will analyse the role of this skilled labour force in both public works and private industry.

Convicts contributed considerably to public development in Australia through supplying skilled, useful labour. At the establishment of New South Wales in 1788, the vast majority of the labour force consisted of convicts who, as David Meredith and Deborah Oxley describe, were crucial in the most labour-intensive public works such as road and harbour construction.<sup>6</sup> The coerced convict labour force was probably more cost-effective than paying a free workforce.<sup>7</sup> Key transport links which acted as crucial stimulants to the Australian economy such as the construction of the road over the Blue Mountains were completed by convict labour.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in an 1851 letter to the British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies Earl Gray, Sir William Denison—Governor of Van Diemen's Land—noted that 'the convicts are more eagerly sought after than ever' due to the demand for labour outstripping the local available workforce, which had been depleted by the Gold Rush.<sup>9</sup> The commencement of transportation to Western Australia in 1850 was, in large part, due to a desire to utilise the cheap and subsidised convict workforce to develop infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> Hence, convicts played a key role in public development in Australia, acting as a cheap subsidised source of labour for government to utilise.

Convicts, 'leased' out to business owners, acted as a source of cheap, subsidised labour in private enterprises. Business owners did not have to pay convict workers a wage, instead only supplying food, clothing, and board. This quasi-subsidy was pillar of the colonial economy's development, the origin of which rested in a desire to harshen the regulation of the penal colony. British judge John Thomas Bigge was commissioned by the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, to report on the state of New South Wales. Following the publication of Bigge's report in 1822, convict labour was shifted from the public to private sector to reinstate transportation to the colony as 'an object of real terror'.<sup>11</sup> This shift had two beneficial economic impacts. Firstly, as pioneer pastoralist Matthew Marsh noted in an 1824 letter

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Nicholas, 'Reinterpreting the Convict Labour Market', *Asia-Pacific Economic History Review* 30, no. 2 (1990): 50–51, [doi.org/10.1111/aebr.302004](https://doi.org/10.1111/aebr.302004).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas, 'Reinterpreting the Convict Labour Market', 52.

<sup>5</sup> Noel Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy: Australia 1810–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40, [doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511552328](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511552328).

<sup>6</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 110.

<sup>7</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 110.

<sup>8</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 113.

<sup>9</sup> William Denison to Henry Grey, 21 August 1851, 'Further Correspondence on the Convict Discipline and Transportation 30 April 1852', House of Commons Sessional Papers vol. 41, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Harling, 'The Trouble with Convicts: From Transportation to Penal Servitude', *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 1 (2014): 98, [doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2013.213](https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2013.213).

<sup>11</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 100.

to Lord Bathurst, employing convicts under ‘systematic control’ relieved ‘the Government, and the taxpayer, of the considerable expense of £24.14.0 per convict per annum’.<sup>12</sup> Colonial governments were therefore relieved of the financial burden of maintaining and funding a large convict labour force.

Secondly, and arguably more importantly, this reassignment of convicts provided private enterprise with a ready, subsidised labour force.<sup>13</sup> Such labour was often in high demand. In an 1833 letter, Edward Parry, first Commissioner of the Australian Agricultural Company (‘AACo’), petitioned Edward Smith-Stanley, the Imperial Colonial Secretary, for the company to be assigned more convicts as ‘it [was] most difficult and expensive to obtain’ free labour.<sup>14</sup> As Phillip Harling explains, ‘labor hungry settlers’ extensively utilised convicts, such that convicts were essential to the growth of the pastoral economy in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s land.<sup>15</sup> The value of the output produced by convicts far exceeded labour costs and any other indirect costs to their employer.<sup>16</sup> As Henry Dumaresq, second Commissioner of the AACo, noted in an 1836 despatch to the company’s Court of Directors, the assignment of 62 convicts to their Port Stephens establishment had enabled him to ‘effect several important repairs to the roads and bridges between Stroud and the Booral Wharf’.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, an 1832 account of AACo’s Port Stephens establishment evidences this—500,000 acres of land, 32,000 sheep and 3,000 cattle were tended to by 410 convict servants and a comparatively small contingent of 60 free workers.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, by 1827, 72 per cent of convicts worked for private enterprises, and this number only slowly declined, falling to 66 per cent in 1835.<sup>19</sup> Convicts who were specially skilled were also particularly useful for private employers in developing their businesses. In an 1836 letter to the Imperial Colonial Secretary Charles Grant, Dumaresq expressed a desire for several new assigned convicts to support the AACo’s Newcastle establishment. He requested convicts skilled in a variety of occupations including ‘one weaver, one glover and cutter ... one seaman ... [and] one silk dyer’, demonstrating some part of the breadth of skills brought to the colony and, more pertinently, to private enterprise by convicts.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, convicts assigned to private masters acted as a ‘powerful combination of free and state enterprise’ which significantly influenced Australia’s economic development.<sup>21</sup>

## Direct contributions to export markets

Beyond the simple provision of labour, ex-convicts known as emancipists further directly participated in Australia’s economy by developing postcolonial export markets. This direct participation formed a significant contribution to Australia, developing the colony’s wealth and securing its advancement. Several significant emancipists emerged in the sealing, shipping, and mercantile industries, especially in the Pacific. At least 15 emancipists were engaged in sealing or Pacific ventures, running eight vessels of more than 50 tons and four vessels greater than 100 tons.<sup>22</sup> Trade in the Pacific and sealing were significant as they launched the colonial ship- and boat-building industries, increased contact with the Pacific as a new commercial frontier, and provided both direct employment—hiring seamen to work on

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<sup>12</sup> Marsh to Lord Bathurst, 9 April 1824, Mathew Henry Marsh [CO201/156, f 334], Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

<sup>13</sup> Meredith and Oxley, ‘The Convict Economy’, 100.

<sup>14</sup> Noel Butlin Archives Centre, comp., *In the Service of the Company: Letters of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company*. Vol. II. (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Harling, ‘The Trouble with Convicts’, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Ian W McLean, *Why Australia Prospered: The Shifting Sources of Economic Growth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Despatch No. 32, Dumaresq to Court, 28 Nov 1836, Henry Dumaresq [78/1/15, f 536], Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

<sup>18</sup> *In the service of the company*, vol II. [Letter 764a], 89.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Panza and Jeffrey G Williamson, ‘Australian Squatters, Convicts, and Capitalists: Dividing Up a Fast-Growing Frontier Pie’ (Discussion Paper, Centre for Economic History, The Australian National University, 2017), 9, [doi.org/10.3386/w23416](https://doi.org/10.3386/w23416).

<sup>20</sup> Dumaresq, Newcastle, to Colonial Secretary, 12 Aug 1836, Henry Dumaresq [78/1/15, f 505], Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

<sup>21</sup> Noel Butlin Archives Centre, comp., *In the Service of the Company: Letters of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company*. Vol. I. (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005), iv.

<sup>22</sup> David Roger Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers: The Traders and the Emergence of the Colony 1788–1821* (Sydney: Cassell Australia, 1968), 74.

ships—and indirect employment—in creating jobs in ship and boatyards.<sup>23</sup> Emancipists played crucial, leading roles in these industries. Indeed, James Underwood, an emancipist shipbuilder and merchant, can be designated as one of the founders of the Australian shipbuilding industry, having constructed a large shipyard in Sydney in the early years of the colony.<sup>24</sup>

In 1803, emancipist Simeon Lord partnered with free settler Robert Campbell to send 2,000 seal skins and 8 tonnes of elephant-seal oil to England, being the first colonial sealers to test the London market.<sup>25</sup> A tripartite emancipist pact also emerged in January 1805, wherein Lord, Underwood, and Henry Kable—another emancipist merchant—joined forces to create a joint sealing enterprise.<sup>26</sup> While the joint venture was brief, dissolving in 1808, it was by no means unprofitable. Between 1806 and 1809, the emancipists sold 127,040 skins across four consignments for more than £27,000.<sup>27</sup> Other trading ventures initiated by Lord include the first journey to Fiji conducted to purchase sandalwood, the export of 18,000 seal skins to China in 1806, and journeys to Tahiti to collect pork.<sup>28</sup> While demand for sealing had soured by the 1820s, the industry remained a crucial part in the nascent economy due to its wider, indirect effects on related industries including shipbuilding.<sup>29</sup> The export capital generated by emancipist-driven industries acted as a key step in the development of the Australian economy's ability to wean itself off British subsidy. The success of the emancipists' economic engagement is reinforced by the economic advancement of the emancipists themselves. As Laura Panza and Geoffrey Williamson describe, by 1851 emancipists had moved up the income ranks and had disappeared from the bottom of income distribution.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, emancipists were especially crucial to Australia's economic development through their direct contribution to Australia's export enterprises.

## Reinterpreting 'contributions'

This essay has focused on what would be regarded as 'traditional', direct contributions to Australia's economic development. These convicts worked, traded, and participated in the nascent economy. However, to stop here in reviewing convicts' contributions would be reductive, missing significant parts of Australia's economic story which occur in the 'silences' of economic data and the historical sources. A contribution is not as simple as a measurable impact on gross domestic product or economic growth more generally, and ought to be considered through a broader lens. This section will explore marginalised stories, acknowledging the limitations of the sources and historiography used to construct accounts of Australia's economic history.

## Convict women at the periphery

Convict women have traditionally been vilified and undervalued by both contemporary sources and historians. The creation of the 'degenerate convict woman' narrative stems from perspectives evident in historical sources. In an 1810 letter, Governor Lachlan Macquarie declared that 'female convicts are as great a drawback as males are useful'.<sup>31</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by an 1837 British Parliament Select Committee on Transportation, which reported that female convicts were 'with

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<sup>23</sup> David Roger Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier: The New South Wales Sealing Industry 1800–1821', *The Journal of Pacific History* 2 (1967): 75, [doi.org/10.1080/00223346708572102](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223346708572102).

<sup>24</sup> Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier', 62.

<sup>25</sup> Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier', 68.

<sup>26</sup> Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier', 63.

<sup>27</sup> David Roger Hainsworth, 'Underwood, James (1771–1844)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National Centre of Biography, [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/underwood-james-2751](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/underwood-james-2751) (published first in hardcopy 1967, accessed online 15 April 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier', 63–65.

<sup>29</sup> Hainsworth, 'Exploiting the Pacific Frontier', 74–75.

<sup>30</sup> Panza and Williamson, 'Australian Squatters', 12–13.

<sup>31</sup> Lachlan Macquarie to Robert Stewart Viscount Castlereagh, 8 March 1810, in Frederick Watson, comp., *Historical records of Australia. Series 1, Volume 7* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1916), 221.

scarcely an exception, drunken and abandoned prostitutes'.<sup>32</sup> However, as Michael Sturma notes, the label 'prostitute' was an ambiguous one, and could apply to any unmarried woman who cohabited with a man. Yet, this historiographical consideration did not prevent latter day historians from creating a 'damned whore' narrative about female convicts.<sup>33</sup> While narratives regarding the sexual degeneracy of convict women have faded in recent years, nevertheless a positive emphasis on the effect of the overwhelmingly male workforce of the early colonies remains in the works of historians such as Ian McLean. McLean emphasises that the initial prosperity of New South Wales stemmed largely from the high workforce participation rate among the population—the convicts were overwhelmingly young, healthy, and, significantly, male.<sup>34</sup> This view implicitly discounts the role of women in the early economy.

The lack of focus on the economic contribution of convict women principally stems from traditional notions of direct participation as described above. In fact, women played a distinctly positive role in the early economy. As Portia Robinson reveals, most women transported to Australia had a skill of trade, similar to the skills brought by their male counterparts.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Deborah Oxley's analysis of penal records identifies over 9,513 skills brought to the colony.<sup>36</sup> Convict women were also largely literate—75 per cent could read or write, a higher proportion than in Britain.<sup>37</sup> Yet, these women largely worked in historically undervalued and underappreciated sectors such as in household service or the unpaid, non-market sector.<sup>38</sup> Working at the periphery of the 'economy' as it is generally understood, women made clothes, cared for children, and acted as managers of a household.<sup>39</sup> Women therefore significantly underpinned living standards in Australia, a fact which is often ignored in traditional economic analysis.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to McLean's emphasis on workforce participation rates, the fact that women comprised such a small proportion—only 15 per cent—of convicts transported may have damaged the economy's development.<sup>41</sup> Family formation was restricted, leading to a reliance on imported adult labour and the recurring trouble of labour shortages. Moreover, the domestic market was constrained by the smaller, slower growing population, and Australia generally suffered from inferior rates of human capital.<sup>42</sup> Hence, female convicts played a crucial role in Australia's economic development. While traditionally undervalued both by contemporary sources and in modern historiography, women were a crucial element in propping up Australia's living standards and domestic market.

## Deconstructing the Indigenous economy

In considering the role of both male and female convicts in the early colonial economy, it is also important to recognise the negative impacts these contributions have had from a different perspective. Indeed, the convict-penal system of Australia arguably 'contributed' to the economic dispossession of Indigenous Australians. This was a significant, though negative, 'indirect' contribution which deconstructed the extant Indigenous economy. Upon arrival in Australia, the ready-made, skilled, and coerced convict workforce were preferred over employing Indigenous workers on ordinary, free-labour terms.<sup>43</sup> This abundance of convicts meant that the colonisers were under little pressure to peacefully

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<sup>32</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom. *Report from the Select Committee on Transportation, 1837–38*, in *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 22 (669), ix. Quoted in Michael Sturma, 'Eye of the Beholder: The Stereotype of Women Convicts, 1788–1852', *Labour History* 34 (1978): 5, [doi.org/10.2307/27508305](https://doi.org/10.2307/27508305).

<sup>33</sup> Sturma, 'Eye of the Beholder', 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> McLean, *Why Australia Prospered*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Portia Robinson, *The Women of Botany Bay: A Reinterpretation of the Role of Women in the Origins of Australian Society* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1988), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Deborah Oxley, 'Packing Her (Economic) Bags: Convict Women Workers', *Australian Historical Studies* 26, no. 102 (1994): 63, [doi.org/10.1080/10314619408595950](https://doi.org/10.1080/10314619408595950).

<sup>37</sup> Oxley, 'Packing Her (Economic) Bags', 66.

<sup>38</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 116.

<sup>39</sup> Oxley, 'Packing Her (Economic) Bags', 73.

<sup>40</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 116.

<sup>41</sup> Sturma. 'Eye of the Beholder', 3.

<sup>42</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 117.

<sup>43</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 120.

interact with the Indigenous land owners.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as Ann McGrath emphasises, labour market levels often acted as determinant of anti-Aboriginal violence, hence, connections can be drawn between the inflow of convict labour and the severity of the frontier wars.<sup>45</sup> Had no such convict labour force existed, it can reasonably be surmised that the colonisers would have had greater impetus to form more harmonious or, at least, formalised relationships with Indigenous people. Without engaging too much in the counterfactual, the story of Indigenous dispossession may have taken a very different form in such a case. Therefore, the rejection of Indigenous labour in favour of convicts coupled with the dispossession of the land created Indigenous communities which were not integrated into the economy, marginalised, and vulnerable to massacre.<sup>46</sup>

Emancipation and land grants, which formed a pillar of the convict system, relied upon the withdrawal of resources—namely land—from Indigenous people, another key stage in their economic and territorial dispossession. Ex-convicts 'of good conduct and disposition to industry' were entitled, initially, to 30 acres, with additional grants of 20 acres provided if married, and 10 acres for each child.<sup>47</sup> As Butlin notes, resource competition was, alongside disease and massacre, a significant factor in Indigenous productivity being gradually overwhelmed.<sup>48</sup> More broadly, these land grants played a key role in the imperial project, 'clear[ing] the way' for development and, indeed, creating a set of 'interests in lands and resources through grants, leases and other transactions' which pitted the landed ex-convicts against Indigenous people.<sup>49</sup> The Myall Creek Massacre demonstrates the potency of these competing resource interests between convicts and Aboriginal people, and is one of the few well-documented massacres of the Indigenous populace. On 10 June 1838, 11 stockmen, all of whom were convicts assigned to work on the station or ticket-of-leave men—that is, convicts free to work and earn a wage in private business—set out and murdered around 28 Indigenous people of the Wirraayaraay clan. As Mark Tedeschi explains, the convicts and ticket-of-leave men were 'intent on avenging the Indigenous challenge to white pastoral supremacy'.<sup>50</sup> Alongside disease, this resource competition and massacre, in which convicts played key roles, led to sharp decreases in the Indigenous population, which further impacted the Indigenous economy as, in Boyd Hunter's estimation, 'the larger the loss of population, the greater the loss of economies of scale'.<sup>51</sup> Ann McGrath posits that 'when the imported convicts were freed, the Indigenous people became their captives'.<sup>52</sup> McGrath's assessment is literally accurate in reference to land grants and frontier violence, and is also figuratively accurate regarding the continued economic dispossession of Australia's traditional owners throughout our nation's history. Hence, convicts also significantly influenced Australia's economic development by negatively contributing to the economic dispossession of Indigenous Australians.

## Conclusion

The economic development of Australia cannot be wholly understood without analysis and understanding of the key role that convicts played in creating, and subsequently sustaining, the colonial economy. Public development relied heavily on convict labour, unwillingly forced into penal servitude, to construct the key elements of infrastructure, such as roads and harbours, which animated the colonial economy. A reliance on convict employment was also evident in private enterprise, supporting the

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<sup>44</sup> Heather Goodall, 'New South Wales', in *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, ed. Ann McGrath (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1995), 64.

<sup>45</sup> Ann McGrath, 'A National Story', in McGrath, *Contested Ground*, 23, [doi.org/10.4324/9781003115267-1](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115267-1).

<sup>46</sup> Meredith and Oxley, 'The Convict Economy', 120.

<sup>47</sup> Dallas Rogers et al., 'Mapping the Frontiers of Private Property in New South Wales, Australia', *Geographical Research* (2023): 4, [doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12581](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12581).

<sup>48</sup> Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*, 217–19.

<sup>49</sup> Richie Howitt, 'Frontiers, Borders, Edges: Liminal Challenges to the Hegemony of Exclusion', *Australian Geographical Studies* 39, no. 2 (2001): 235, [doi.org/10.1111/1467-8470.00142](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8470.00142).

<sup>50</sup> Mark Tedeschi, 'The Myall Creek Massacre Re-Examined', *Inside History*, June 2014, [tracesmagazine.com.au/2014/06/the-myall-creek-massacre-re-examined/](https://tracesmagazine.com.au/2014/06/the-myall-creek-massacre-re-examined/) (accessed 6 May 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Boyd Hunter, 'The Aboriginal Legacy', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Australia* ed. Simon Ville and Glenn Withers (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2014), 89, [doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.008](https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.008).

<sup>52</sup> McGrath, 'A National Story', 3.

economy by providing a cheap, subsidised, and skilled workforce to consistently labour for hungry business owners. Moreover, even once their shackles were loosened, ex-convict emancipists were crucial in launching Australia's export industries as well as the domestic economy. In appreciating the significance of convicts, this essay argues that the definition of 'contribution' be reappraised with an emphasis on less measurable, indirect contributions which have nevertheless considerably shaped Australia's economic development. Hence, the role of female convicts also needs to be recognised. While historiography has traditionally seen them vilified, women made significant contributions, especially in the non-market sector at the periphery of the recognised economy. Likewise, convicts contributed to the economic dispossession of Aboriginal Australians, both indirectly as an exclusive labour force and directly through resource competition and frontier violence. Ultimately, below the decks of much of Australian history is a teeming crew of convicts who, despite their chains, have nevertheless steered the economy throughout the course of its development.

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