

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



My original intention in writing *The Curer of Souls* was to write a work of non-fiction, but there were too many gaps in the primary sources to tell the story; too much that was left unsaid.

In the ten years I lived in Tasmania I embarked on many walks through its impenetrable forests and mountains; visited the 'Tench's' hangman's apparatus in Hobart; lived at the Port Arthur penal settlement as Writer in Community for the Australia Council; walked the windswept, craggy promontory of Point Puer, which pre-dated the Parkhurst boys' prison on the Isle of Wight by four years; and visited the desolate seclusion of Sarah Island on the west coast. I was seeking words that would describe the melancholy of the place as I restlessly searched for meaning in its past. Tasmania seems to me to be an island where the recording of the past is secondary to expunging it: after Port Arthur was closed as a penal settlement, letters were written in the colonial press asking that it be razed to the ground. More recently, Walter Mikac, whose wife and children

were killed during the 1996 Port Arthur massacre and whose story I co-wrote, was asked immediately after the massacre to pull the crosses out of the ground that he had erected in his family's memory.

Fiction can map silences, reflect voices marginalised by the more traditional historical telling and explore issues that might otherwise be taboo. Fiction can also reconfigure the archives and reshape the lived experiences of actual characters within the hybrid possibilities offered by a contemporary lens.

I drew the characters of Lady Frankland, Charles O'Mara Hawkins and Louis Lemprière from the diaries of Lady Jane Franklin, Charles O'Hara Booth and Thomas Lemprière. Reading about their daily existence heightened my imagination and helped me to bridge the gap between the past and the present. I practised their mannerisms, speech and viewpoints, their prejudices and desires in my sentences in the way actors might immerse themselves in a particular character.

In the finished work primary sources have merged into fictional accounts; bona fide characters sit alongside fictional ones. I, as the author, cannot always say where the real begins and the imagined ends, but the genesis of this book began in seeking facts in the same way that I researched my other books.

I discovered Thomas Lemprière's diary in 1995 at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, followed closely by the published diary of Charles O'Hara Booth edited by Dora Heard, and the photocopied versions of Lady Franklin's diaries, which were housed at the Archives of Tasmania in Hobart. Later, I travelled to England to the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge to view the originals.

All three diarists knew each other, but they offered widely different perspectives of the isolated outpost that was colonial

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Van Diemen's Land in the 1830s. They provided me with a chance to tell individual accounts of history. I enjoyed the fact that they were private documents recording public history and therefore provided a refreshingly different view to the traditional histories of the colony.

Thomas Lemprière was the author of *Penal Settlements*, first published in part in the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science* (Hobart Town 1842–46). He was born in Hamburg, Germany, into a family from the Channel Islands and, like his fictional construct Louis, was descended from the island's wealthy inhabitants, including judges and jurats. In 1822 he immigrated to Van Diemen's Land. Destitute by bankruptcy, he became commissariat at the three penal settlements in the colony: Maria Island (1826), Macquarie Harbour (1827), and Port Arthur (1833–48). Lemprière defined himself as a dilettante and his interests encompassed meteorology, painting and natural history.

Charles O'Hara Booth, who provides the basis of the fictional character O'Mara Hawkins, oversaw the Port Arthur penal settlement during the period of its greatest development between 1833 and 1844. Booth had the characteristics of a mad inventor. He built Australia's first passenger railway drawn by human power, which ran from Eaglehawk Neck to the penal settlement. Booth also established telegraphic communication to Eaglehawk Neck. In 1838 he became lost in the bush in the Forestier's Peninsula and was almost dead by the time he was rescued. He never properly recovered from the ordeal.

My depiction of Lady Frankland is drawn mainly from Lady Jane Franklin's Van Diemen's Land diaries and letters, which form part of the collection of 168 journals and 2000 letters she penned until shortly before her death in 1875. The Franklins founded the Tasmanian Natural History Society (the first

Royal Society to be set up outside the United Kingdom). Lady Franklin built a Grecian temple named Ancanthe on Hobart's outskirts as a cultural museum to exhibit a collection of the colony's natural history. Ancanthe still stands today in Lenah Valley. She was accused of meddling in governmental affairs in the colony, and often advised her husband. She also adopted an Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, who was left behind when the Franklins returned to England in 1844.

Diaries may dupe the reader into believing they are true confessions, but how many of us write the truth in our diaries (although perhaps we believe we are telling the truth, or our version of it). Apart from the perceived insincerity of this form, I struggled with the fact that all three diaries were tampered with after their authors' deaths. Some of Lemprière's papers were burnt late in the last century; Lady Franklin's diaries were scattered across the globe and have pages torn out, sometimes a hundred at a time. Many were copied by Sophy Cracroft – Sir John Franklin's niece, and companion to Lady Franklin for almost forty years – who selected some for publication and had illegible letters copied, often inaccurately. These copies were then corrected and edited. Booth's diaries were also copied and errors and deliberate omissions were made by an official in London, according to Dora Heard.

In the novel I have created a fictional unrealised affair between Lemprière and Lady Frankland. Reading Lady Franklin's diaries and letters, I found myself questioning the words, 'My dearest love', a mode the Franklins used when they addressed each other in correspondence. So many of their letters seemed impersonal, dealing with the colony: the cost of bushels; the estimate questions in the Executive Council and the advantage of supplying barley and peas as a contract

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price. Did Jane Franklin's heart and mind stray during her many self-imposed solitary journeys in and out of the colony, even if she remained physically faithful? And would there be evidence if she had strayed? Her husband was clearly not her intellectual equal. Scott Cookman, in *Ice Blink*, his book on Franklin's last voyage to the Arctic, writes: 'Polite society could not, in fact, imagine why she married him in the first place or why she remained so devoutly committed to him.' There have been many questions about her devotion to her husband after he disappeared and here I present my interpretation of her apparent loyalty.

The real Lemprière and Jane met on more than one occasion, due to Lemprière's keen interest in the Tasmanian Natural History Society initiated by the Franklins. I felt Lemprière would have been Jane's intellectual equal. On 29 August 1838 he notes that he called on Lady Franklin 'to see whether she would go round the workshops [at the Port Arthur penal settlement]. Too wet [but she] gave me some rare seeds'. Lemprière did a preliminary pencil sketch of Sir John Franklin in 1838 and coloured a sketch of Cape Raoul in 1837 for Lady Franklin, for which he received 'a pretty note' in thanks. The scene of Lemprière and Lady Franklin being handcuffed in the store-room is based on an episode from Lemprière's diaries.

Sir John Franklin's most negative characteristic was that he was dull. The fictional Sir John Frankland is a more Machiavellian character. If Sir John Franklin was guilty of anything, it was ineptitude. William Gates, a Canadian patriot transported to Van Diemen's Land, wrote that when Franklin made a speech before them he '... made more blundering work of his business than a dullard'. There is no doubt that the real Sir John was more humane than his fictional counterpart.

His fictional character is a composite of Sir John Franklin and Lieutenant Governor-General George Arthur. It was Arthur who introduced the Linnaeus-like classification of convicts and who developed such an evangelistic vision for the island jail, decreeing that Port Arthur should be 'a place worse than death'. It is Arthur's words I have used in Sir John's letter to the Home Secretary about how essential classification was in bringing about the end of transportation. Nor was the Model Prison introduced during Franklin's regime, although the concept was developed in Philadelphia in the United States in the late 1830s during the time Franklin was governor, so he may well have been aware of it. The building, modelled on Pentonville jail in England, was, in fact, begun in 1848 and completed in 1852.

As both commandant and magistrate, Charles O'Hara Booth had absolute control over the prisoners and could order punishments summarily without recourse to a court of law. He was responsible for inventing some of the most brutal punishments inflicted at the settlement. This more vindictive side contributed to my creation of his fictional counterpart, though I have no evidence for his homosexual tendencies. But he did express his abhorrence for the crime it seemed to me to a point of obsession in his diaries, where he would refer to 'unnatural crimes' (homosexuality was not invented as a word at this time).

Both Lydia Franklin and Giles Bentham are fictional creations. Lydia occurred to me as I held one of Lady Franklin's diaries at the Scott Polar Research Institute and imagined Sophia Cracroft working on Lady Franklin's words after her death. She is loosely based on a composite of Sir John Franklin's daughter, Eleanor, and Sophy Cracroft. Sophy Cracroft became one of Lady Franklin's would-be biographers.

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I discovered only while completing the final draft of the novel that Jeremy Bentham was particularly fond of his nephew George, who became a famous botanist, and to whom he gave his inheritance, but I have no knowledge as to how he felt about any great-nephew or whether one ever existed. Jeremy Bentham never had children of his own. The details about the treatment of Jeremy Bentham's body after death is factual, however, as is his preoccupation with ghosts.

Other changes I have made include the time and location of Thomas Lemprière's death. The real Lemprière died at sea en route to Europe from Hong Kong, probably from dysentery, but some ten years after his fictional namesake. Although Thomas Lemprière sometimes performed the role of convict chaplain, an occupation commonly described as 'the curer of souls', I have no proof that he heard confessions or that he travelled to England to tell the authorities of a 'game' involving suicide among the prisoners. The real Lemprière was a deeply humane man, however, and often wrote about the difficulties he encountered living in a place such as Port Arthur. He was also deeply devoted to his wife, Charlotte, with whom he had twelve children.

I can thank Dr Stephan Petrow for drawing to my attention a letter from Chief Police Magistrate Matthew Forster to Governor Arthur, which discusses the 'drawing of straws' at Port Arthur. Marcus Clarke, who visited the penal settlement in the 1870s, where the original film *For the Term of His Natural Life* was made, also notes a discussion about straw-drawing with an old timer who was still captive there. Suicide pacts are documented by Robert Hughes in *The Fatal Shore* as taking place on Norfolk Island. There were many 'motiveless murders' documented in the settlement's records. After years of research

into the inhumane conditions at Port Arthur, I did not find it hard to believe that convicts would choose an option such as a suicide pact.

I have not been able to prove that the murder of Thomas Boardman involved such a pact. However, the account of the murder was based on actual inquest papers from 1842 and there has been speculation it was homo-erotic. Boardman did linger for two days at the foot of a gigantic gum tree 'clotted with gore and fly-blown', according to the playwright David Burn, who visited Port Arthur shortly after the murder and described the murder as 'motiveless'. Boardman did identify his assassin before he died, Belfield was hanged for the offence and orders were given that his body was to be handed over to Dr Bedford at the Colonial Hospital for dissection. It is also true that Bedford liked hanging prisoners in lots so he could get to his breakfast on time. The account of Belfield's hanging is partially recreated from an actual account of a hanging reported in the *Hobart Courier*.

The characters of Boardman and Belfield are entirely invented. Their criminal records are the only way to glean evidence about their lives. I have used primary source material such as F. C. Hooper's *Prison Boys of Port Arthur*, and I also had access to a database study conducted by local historian Irene Schaeffer and Dr Robin MacLachlan, who was then at Mitchell College of Advanced Education in Bathurst.

The scene involving the stoning of Bundock was based on an account in the Brand papers from 1842 when 'Frederick Augustus Adolphus Bundock, a convict overseer, who was disliked, was set upon with bricks'. Although Bundock did not die from his wounds, in July 1843 another overseer named McGuire died from a wound inflicted by two boys, who were



sent to different stations on the peninsula. Two other boys also killed an overseer's cat and for this I drew upon an account by Robert Darnton of the 'Great Cat Massacre' in the rue Saint-Severin in Paris in the late 1730s, which involved printing apprentices torturing and ritually killing cats. Dr Hamish Maxwell-Stewart made this known to me.

The existence of paedophilia at Point Puer is the resounding silence in the traditional historical documents, although *le vice anglais* as an act between two males was known of and was reported in British Parliamentary Papers in 1846. One of Booth's diary entries does detail that 'a certain very revolting offence' was a 'frequent occurrence at Point Puer'. This occurrence was apparently not proved, but Booth was concerned enough to write that in the future he would appoint 'free, rather than convict overseers'.

Peter MacFie, a historian at the Port Arthur penal settlement in the 1980s, wrote that although the sexual practices of the boys were rarely reported, 'It seems likely that . . . sex was yet another commodity traded on the black economy. There can be little doubt, however, that many sexual encounters were far from consensual.'

The Select Committee on Transportation was headed by Sir William Molesworth, but it sat in 1837, five years earlier than in the novel. It was during these hearings that officials such as the surgeon John Barnes, who had been posted to Macquarie Harbour, gave graphic evidence of the brutality involving the convicts. The findings of this commission resulted in transportation to the colonies eventually being abandoned and such a practice being likened to slavery.

The tale of the convicts escaping Macquarie Harbour and engaging in cannibalism is true, as is the account told to Lady

Franklin of the surviving member of the escape party, Alexander Pierce, who was eventually hanged after a second escape where he also ate his fellow escapee.

The real Snakey Wellard was born in the parsonage at Port Arthur in 1900. He was a popular man with a much happier disposition than his fictional counterpart. Snakey drove coaches around Port Arthur. The general store next to the penitentiary, which included relics of the convict days, was actually run by William Radcliffe.

As to the Darwinian references, Charles Darwin celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday in Hobart Town in 1836 while Arthur was governor. There is a story that his monkey is buried in the grounds of Secheron House in Battery Point. Darwin left Van Diemen's Land on the *Beagle* carrying fossils from Eaglehawk Neck and other parts of the colony, although I have no evidence that Thomas Lemprière or Lady Franklin collected for him. Darwin was one of the many luminaries to visit Hobart Town around this time, a list that included Joseph Dalton Hooker (later director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew) James Ross and Francis Crozier, and the ornithologist John Gould. The Tasmanian Society met regularly and did indeed conduct an experiment that involved examining the globules of a monotreme's blood to see if it was related to a reptile or a bird. The real Sir James Clark Ross died in 1962 and, although he was a friend of the Franklins and helped Lady Franklin search for her husband, his character in the book is fictional.

In 1859, while correcting the proofs of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin read the introductory essay to Joseph Hooker's *Florae Tasmaniae*, a book on the collection of Hooker's plants from his earlier journeys to Antarctica, Tasmania and New Zealand.

He was greatly influenced by the work and remarked that he expected it would convert botanists from the doctrine of immutable creation. It was through Hooker's collection and the comparisons that he made with plants all over the world that Darwin was able to speculate about why so many botanical species had so much in common despite being oceans apart.

*The Expressions of Emotion in Man and Animals* by Darwin about ape ancestry, sexual selection and human expression was published in 1872, seven years after the date in the novel.

After ten years of research and writing, I have written a story that presents a possible world based on the actual. As Aristotle once said in *Poetics*, it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what *may* have happened. I hope in imagining this world and pursuing this dialogue with the past I have illuminated some of the shadows of Van Diemen's Land. Ultimately, however, it will be the reader who determines how this book is read.

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I am indebted to a more contemporary work – *Possession* by A. S. Byatt – which remains my favourite novel and gave me the courage to continue writing. And finally, my thanks to the diarists, whose legacy of richly rewarding words made this book possible.