

Richard Tuffin, David Roe, Sylvana Szydzik, E. Jeanne Harris, and Ashley Matic, *Recovering Convict Lives: A Historical Archaeology of the Port Arthur Penitentiary* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2021), 300pp. Paperback. A\$40.00. ISBN: 978-1-7433-2782-1.

The authors of *Recovering Convict Lives*, which is based upon archaeological excavations at Port Arthur, the former penal station on the Tasman Peninsula located about 40 kilometres from Hobart as the crow flies, describe their book as a work of historical archaeology. The authors seek to '[meld] records created by the administrators and—more rarely—the unfree, with the very physicality of the places and spaces they created' (p. 2), and by doing so to illuminate life, work, and punishment at Port Arthur. It is an endeavour in which they have more than succeeded.

Chapter 1 of *Recovering Convict Lives* provides an excellent summary, thoroughly informed by archival research and secondary literature, of the British settlement on the Tasman Peninsula. The reader is presented with a brief account of the establishment and operation of the Port Arthur penal station, and the chapter is especially useful in illuminating its wider role in the Van Diemonian convict system, as well as changes wrought upon the station by shifts in colonial and imperial penal policy, most notably during the advent of the probation system in the mid-1840s. The brief discussion of the winding down of the penal station and its post-convict history as the township of Carnarvon is especially interesting, and the remarkable Figure 1.12 which accompanies this section, a photograph of Port Arthur in 1871 in which buildings crowd the hill of the main settlement, is a testament to just how extensive the penal station became.

Chapter 2 turns to the penitentiary building and its precinct in which the excavations were carried out, providing a narrative to the shifting use of the building and its surrounds in response to architectural and policy changes. A point particularly well-made by the authors, important for the following chapter, is that the construction of a penitentiary in the shell of what was formerly a mill and granary is emblematic of Port Arthur more generally, where tensions between punishment and profit were a constant concern.

If Chapter 2 provides detailed context to the physical space of the Port Arthur penitentiary, Chapter 3 turns to examine the lives of the inhabitants of that space by means of examining around 11,000 excavated objects dating from the convict period, ranging from pieces of glass to buttons, from tokens of various types to pipe bowls and stems. Through this prism the authors discuss topics ranging from prison clothing and rations, convict labour and its place in the wider colonial economy, life in confinement, recreation, and little acts of resistance against the penal regime. In so doing the authors note what they describe as the 'archaeology of the unexplainable' (p. 163), and that what we can glean from these objects, without supporting material, has its limits: are, for instance, tobacco pipes excavated from locations in the penitentiary where smoking was forbidden an indicator of surreptitious resistance to the regime, or an indulgence granted to skilled workers? This chapter is a superb insight into convict material culture and, without wanting to create further work for the authors, similar excavations at other convict sites would surely produce equally fascinating results for comparative work. Chapter 4, in which the authors present a detailed, illustrated summary of the excavation work, is a testament to their collective skill.

The authors and Sydney University Press should also be thanked for their excellent selection and use of imagery, which richly illustrate the descriptions and arguments made in the texts. The colour plates at the centre of the book are especially evocative, as is the striking choice of cover image—a worn and beaten pair of convict-made boots, an ideal example of the stories which the artefacts discussed in the book can help to tell.

Anyone who has visited Port Arthur will have been struck by the natural beauty of a landscape onto which a penal station was grafted. A walk around and among the ruins of the penitentiary building is a striking experience but it can be difficult to imagine the lives of those who were once confined within those crumbling walls. *Recovering Convict Lives* is an invaluable accompaniment to what now remains, and a window into what once was.

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