

Isles of Unknowing

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Cassandra Pybus and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart
*American Citizens, British Slaves:
 Yankee Political Prisoners in an Australian
 Penal Colony, 1839–1850*
 MUP, \$34.95pb, 284pp, 0 522 85027 8

IN 1969 INDONESIA exiled one of its greatest writers to a penal colony on the island of Baru. Pramoeodya Ananta Toer was transported as a political prisoner. No one informed him then or later of the charges against him. One day the commander inspected the prisoners' quarters. Pram (as he is fondly known by many) writes: 'At the meeting's close he presented me with a gold Pilot fountain pen, a bottle of ink and a thick legal-size writing tablet ... I had permission to write. And, indeed, an accompanying letter signed by the major granted me restoration of the right to write.'

One of the pleasures of reading *American Citizens, British Slaves* is its invitation to think about writing. It asks us to consider the need of prisoners to maintain, and later restore, normal relations with one's self and the world by putting words on paper. It also asks us to consider the site of writing inhabited by authorities: the bureaucratic world that made men objects of paperwork: pages shuffled, copied and, sometimes wantonly, destroyed. In Van Diemen's Land in the 1840s, that site was as much one of corruption and personal humiliation as were the probation stations of the penal system. The reports and archives tell the tale. So does the superb writing of Pybus and Maxwell-Stewart.

In 1839 and 1840 three vessels landed along the Derwent River and at Newtown, near Hobart. Ninety-two Americans were disembarked, interrogated and dispatched to prison stations. What had begun as idealistic, disorganised and wacky armed forays into Canada's southern borderlands by self-styled Patriots had ended in failure. Bungles abounded. At the battles of the Windmill, Short Hills and Windsor, everything had gone predictably wrong. The Canadians were not looking for deliverance from Her Majesty's government. They were uninterested in rallying to the assistance of the young men who stumbled to the reaches of the Windmill or the woods near Short Hills. The bungling took the disheartened but ideologically unscarred republicans to prisons in Quebec and Toronto. From there they were transported either directly to Van Diemen's Land or to England, and thence to the island they described as the place to which God banished Cain. The land of Nod.

Bungling also marked the bureaucratic side of the Americans' sentencing and deportation. Often the deception and incompetency of Canadian and British officials amounted to the banality of evil. An act that had not yet received royal assent was knowingly used to condemn the men. The transportation of the seventy-nine men sent directly from Canada to Tasmania was also illegal. Colonial governors didn't have the authority to exile prisoners to another colony. Nor did Tasmanian officials have the legal right to accept the men onto the island. Meanwhile, the US government did nothing. The prisoners knew only some of this. They blamed the man who was now a lieutenant-governor in Canada and who had earlier held the same office in Tasmania. Colonel George Arthur's actions, wrote one Patriot, 'seemed like those of a starving tiger ... and his reproaches, the growlings of the infuriated animal'.

In the early 1840s Van Diemen's Land was a geography of punishment. The nine prisoners who landed in 1839 found themselves caught within the 'assignment' system. They were among convicts distributed to farmers and tradespeople or reserved for the government's own road-building and land-clearing projects. This arrangement provided settlers with free labour. The resulting paperwork provided administrators with a panoptic view of the island's punishment terrain, comparable to a US official in the 1840s getting his hands on the statistics on slaves across the states below the Mason-Dixon Line. And the Yankees were quick to make comparisons with the American slave system.

By 1840 the Home Office had re-mapped the island with another set of distributed surveillance points. The Americans now worked at 'probation stations' (and, far less often, penal

stations such as Port Arthur). They were places of violence that are made even more incomprehensible today because of their names: Lovely Banks, Green Ponds.

Docility during probation led to a ticket-of-leave and then a pardon. In 1844, thirty-five Patriots received pardons. When one Yankee wrote asking why the others had been refused, he was told it was 'none of your business'. The entire convict administration was in disarray and cruelly arbitrary. One prisoner's petition for pardon was possibly ignored because another young man with the same name had been pardoned in England. Another waited twenty-two years for his free pardon. Today writs for unlawful imprisonment would undoubtedly be successful in the courts.

In all of this, the Americans generally fared better than ordinary convicts. They were valued for their skills as agriculturalists, artisans and tradesmen. Some could keep accounts or serve as teachers. Many could write. For a few, the 'right to write' was clearly a salvation. The determination to tell their story afterwards became a driving intent. Between 1843 and 1850 seven full-length narratives appeared in American publications. Alongside these were newspaper articles drawn on interviews with other ex-convicts. Together they were a kind of literary class action against the penal servitude they had wrongfully endured.

The authors turn to extracts from these narratives throughout their work — much to our pleasure as readers. The writing echoes the 'great oratory and high principle' of mid-nineteenth-century America that Don Watson draws our attention to in *Rabbit Syndrome*. Here is a prose at home with the biblical and pastoral, at ease with characters from Dickens and quick to be critical of the 'half finished sentences ... and excessively poor and tautological' language of an officious administrator. One ex-convict later wrote of his thoughts as he made an (unsuccessful) escape across open land. 'I am free!' he'd exclaimed. And 'the huge rocks and trees of the "prison isle", as if inspired with that freedom which they forever lost when Britain planted her bloody flag ... upon their shores, caught the soul-stirring sounds and echoed forth "I am free! free! free!"'

Pybus and Maxwell-Stewart situate such prose with their customary sensitivity. As they put it, the moving recollections imprison the heinous colonial administration in the same way as the convicts' features 'had been recorded for posterity in the records of the Convict Department'.

Michel de Certeau reminds us that readers are travellers: 'nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write.' Perhaps in our reading of *American Citizens, British Slaves*, the authors are inciting such poaching. Perhaps they are reminding us that narratives of the imprisoned will one day refuse the barbed wire of silence, will escape being isled in unknowing. In his 1846 autobiography, one of the American ex-convicts demanded of his readers, 'Wilt thou look upon the dark picture of Van Diemen's Land and learn wisdom?' What would he make of Manus Island? Nauru?