$29.95pb. ISBN 0 7022 3362 5


In *Women on the Rocks,* Kristin Williamson has created a novel from scraps of historical fact concerning two female convicts: Mary Jones, who arrived in Sydney in 1820, and Maria Wilkinson, alias Jane New, who was sent to Hobart Town in 1824. Using these two women as the focus of her narrative, she has woven what is known about them together with other snippets of information into a plausible fiction.

Williamson has the two women meeting as servants in a country house in Kent. Mary is younger, honest and naïve, while Maria is worldly and unscrupulous. Maria’s schemes land Mary in trouble, and she is transported at the age of fourteen, while Maria manages to evade the law for a little longer.

Mary Jones is the narrator of the novel, while Maria/Jane provides the colour and romance, eloping to London with a dissolute gentleman, escaping the death sentence in Sydney for theft, and eventually thriving on the wild frontiers of settler New Zealand. Mary stays tamely in Sydney and sets up a dressmaking business, hearing news from her wayward friend from time to time.

This novel works well as a picture of Sydney in the 1820s and 1830s. Mary and her friend both live more successful lives in the fluid social conditions there than would have been possible had they stayed in England. Williamson has done her research not only into the facts of these characters’ lives, but into the legal status of women and social conditions in the colony. Women, of course, had restricted legal rights, and this affected the lives of people like Mary
and her friends, but the relative equality of the colony, where hard work and ingenuity meant more than social position, offered many more opportunities for both women and men to improve their lot in life.

But as a work of imaginative fiction, *Women on the Rocks* is not so successful. The present tense is used throughout, which provides opportunities for dramatic irony when the unsuspecting Mary’s fortunes change suddenly. The chapters are short, and have lively descriptive headings in the nineteenth century style. However, Mary is a rather dull narrator, credulous and not particularly penetrating. Her style is pedestrian and full of clichés. There are some implausible narrative devices to overcome the problem of the illiterate Jane’s correspondence with Mary during their prolonged periods apart. And even the main characters tend towards the stereotypical, while little attempt is made to give any of the minor figures much individuality. The outlines of these lives are sketched but not really animated or filled out.

So while *Women on the Rocks* is informative and entertaining up to a point, it has none of the absorbing readability of the nineteenth century novels it seeks to emulate.