Convict words: Language in early colonial Australia

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“In learning the language, one learns the culture and the social system which are conceptualised in the language. Every kind of social relationship, every belief, every technological process—in fact everything in the social life of a people—is expressed in words as well as in action, and when one has fully understood the meaning of all the words of their language in all their situations of reference one has finished one’s study of the society.” (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Social Anthropology)

This review is not written primarily for an audience whose main interest is Australia, its history, and its linguistic peculiarities. Rather, it is written for those who are interested in the documentation of how fast and vast changes in a society are reflected in its vocabulary, and how different factions in a society may choose different terms to refer to the same concepts. This study of vocabulary can tell us much about the society that uses it.

In slight contrast, much of the intended audience for the book itself is an audience who focuses on Australia, though clearly the author also hoped for a wider academic audience. As a disclaimer, the reviewer has never been to Australia, but rather is a sociolinguist.

This is not merely a dictionary of words related to convicts and related issues. Instead, it is a dictionary of words that spread into broader public usage pertaining to convicts and the convict system in Australia (convicts were transported from Britain to Australia between 1788 and 1868). Their broader usage is demonstrated by having each entry exemplified in at least one contemporary text, usually a paragraph in length. The great majority of these texts are from newspapers, books, and government documents of the time, showing that the words had gained popular currency, not restricted to use by convicts. Only a small number of the texts were from memoirs of ex-prisoners, these examples being less helpful in validating the wider usage of the term since the writers may have introduced little-known slang or argot terms to give an insider’s flavor to their writings.

What follows is an attempt to divide my remarks under two headings, “Lexicography” and “Sociolinguistics,” but it becomes instantly clear that this distinction breaks down, highlighting the unusual nature of this book.
Lexicography

A clear explanation of which words were selected for inclusion in this dictionary is not found in the introductory material. Rather, it is found on p. 86, where the author explains her criteria: the words had to be “well attested in Australian records” and “significant in the development of Australian English.”

Some entries seem redundant, too obvious, variations and derived forms that are transparent: “convict ship,” “convict labourer,” “convict shepherd,” “convict-made,” “work in chains,” etc. Similarly, having read the entry for “double convict,” there is little linguistic need for separate entries for “double convicted” and “double conviction.” (Of course, the meanings of some derived forms are not so transparent, e.g. “felonise,” so separate entries in such cases are entirely appropriate.)

But then one is struck by the entry “convict woman”; the surface meaning is obvious, but the explanation and the illustrative text give a painful look at the plight of these women. Such entries are motivated by the fact that a clear purpose of the book includes informing the readers about the conditions and practices of the era, rather than merely defining terms they might come across in reading documents of the time.

As a matter of clarifying ambiguity, it is helpful to know, for instance, that “convict police” referred to a convicted person who guarded other convicts, not a member of the broader population hired to guard convicts.

Some entries are included because the words took on slightly different meanings in the convict era. For example, the entry for “emigrant” tells us that this term was important in the way that an “emigrant” was crucially distinct from a person who was brought to Australia as a convict. Other words that acquired distinct uses in Australia, include “cove,” from “boss” to “owner of sheep station”; and “government” when used adjectivally for “convict,” as in “government labourer” and “government man.”

Some of the entries that seem obvious enough are included because of their importance in the life of that time, such as “flog,” “flogging,” “guard house,” “irons.” Apparently, these words are included because of their social significance in the era, not because of a need for definition.

Laugesen competently deals with phrasal constructions, such as an entry “hand” for the phrasal “on one’s hand,” “on the hands of government,” etc.

One of the contributions of this book is documenting how phrases that are now part of international English usage are derived from the convict era in Australia. “Hard labor” (as part of a legal sentence) is now common place, but its use for prisoners is first recorded for Australia in 1803, preceding the Oxford English Dictionary’s (OED) first attestation in 1853. Similarly, “life” sentence was recorded in Australia 100 years before it is recorded elsewhere (as attested in the OED), and “lifer” is also of Australian origin, as well as “probation” in the legal sense. Laugesen also shows that “chain gang” (a chained work crew) was attested in Australia as early as 1822, while the earliest OED attestation is in 1834. These early attestations from Australia
strongly indicate that these terms originated in the Australian context and then spread in the English speaking world.

There are a number of omissions, words that are found in the illustrative paragraphs but which seem to deserve their own entries: “state prisoners” (p. 110), “taint” (p. 155 etc.), “civil condition” (p. 124), “currency” and “sterling” (p. 126). Also, “class” is used in an example as a verb (p. 46), “classed” is used in an example (p. 110) and also “classify” (p. 157); while there is a noun entry “class” (convicts were separated into three “classes”), there is no comparable verbal entry about this process of separating people into classes.

**Sociolinguistics**

This collection of vocabulary, “convict words,” represents the vocabulary use of three broad groups of people: Government, Colonists, Convicts, each with its own interests, viewpoints, and own priorities. It is not always clear among which of these groups a word originated, but these words became widely adopted. The flow of vocabulary between the convicts and the broader population was natural since so many of the convicts worked outside of any jails, many even living with colonists, serving as hired workers. Also, after their sentences expired, convicts became part of the general population, adding their vocabulary practices to broader society.

The many explanations and contemporary citations help the reader to understand some of the political and social struggles and changes through the history of the time, especially the editorials and letters to editors, from both Australian and British publications. These show the reader some of the complexities of social status and changing social categories in the convict era.

For example, the entry for “birthstain” explains the outrage of subsequent generations (with a convict heritage) to the Governor of New South Wales in 1899 referring to them having a “birthstain.” Also, the discussion of “free” shows that those who were released from penal servitude considered themselves “free,” but some people who had come voluntarily as colonists wanted to reserve the term “free” for themselves, preferring to use the term “freed” for those who had been released. The entry for “free” (and various phrasal combinations) fills two pages, as the word was used in different ways to distinguish those who had never been convicts from those who had been convicts and had later been released after finishing their sentences.

Also, some writers claimed the economic necessity of convict labor for the colony, while others argued the opposite. Some called for stricter discipline and security for the convicts, others called for gentler treatment, documenting examples of brutality. Both sides used many of the same words, but on some points, they chose distinctive vocabulary to emphasize their point or frame the debate on their terms, such as the “antitransportationists” invoking the concept of slavery when discussing the harsh treatment of convicts.

For many entries, the definition includes a discussion of their pejorative flavor. “Convict” became very pejorative, more preferred terms included “crown servant,” “government servant,” “government laborer,” etc. And through the years, even these terms changed their degrees of acceptability. Another pair of coreferential entries where this is distinguished is “convict police” and “felon police,” the latter “always pejorative.”
The word “bad,” in the speech of prisoners, came to mean a prisoner who cooperated too much with the jailers, with “good” also being used ironically. In a similar vein “legitimacy” was seen as a negative term, referring to a person who had been sent to Australia for “legitimate” (legal) reasons.

Since this is not a dictionary of the argot of transported convicts, it does not include the sort of less-known, but inevitable, terms that the convict population must have used for their jailers and supervisors, for sexual matters, for various types of crimes, etc. Because this is a dictionary whose goal is to document the language used by broader society, those who seek this sort of information should look elsewhere.

The only significant disappointment to this reviewer is that the book does not tell us how long these words have persisted, either in general Australian English or in the speech of today’s Australian prison system.

**Conclusion**

The book gives clear documentation of how a new social situation gave rise to attendant new vocabulary, as well. The resulting words were used by all levels of society, even those who had (or preferred) little contact with those most directly involved in it.

As I finished the book, I was left with a clearer understanding of not just the words and phrases of the era, but a much richer understanding of the era, as seen through its words. Also, I am reminded again of how societies are reflected in their vocabulary, and vice versa.