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Babette Smith, *Defiant Voices: How Australia's Female Convicts Challenged Authority*

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Babette Smith, *Defiant Voices: How Australia's Female Convicts Challenged Authority* (Canberra: National Library of Australia Publishing, 2021), 288pp. Paperback. A$49.99. ISBN: 978-0-6422-7959-0.

Changing perspectives on the place of women in Australian society over the past century have continually altered the way we view women who arrived as convicts during the colonial period. Babette Smith, in her 1988 monograph *A Cargo of Women: Susannah Watson and the Convicts of the Princess Royal,* was among the first to apply feminist approaches to the study of the convict era, moving on from earlier understandings of convict women as corrupt, and then as victims, to emphasise their agency. Smith's latest monograph, and the last before the immense loss caused by her death in November 2021, *Defiant Voices: How Australia's Female Convicts Challenged Authority* (2021), expands on this past work within a highly accessible book that will be appealing not only to academic, but also public audiences.

Defiant Voices is an aesthetically pleasing volume, from its striking cover to the hundreds of images appearing throughout. The book is separated into ten broad chapters that cover facets of the convict woman experience, as well as the various destinations to which convicts were transported. Also included are many case studies illustrating the broad experiences of convict women, most of whom arrived and settled in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. These are well-chosen, illustrating the different ways convict women responded to their circumstances, both in the United Kingdom and after arriving in Australia, and actively worked to alter their lifestyles and fortunes, even while serving often long sentences for a variety of crimes.

Throughout *Defiant Voices*, Smith contrasts letters and other personal documents written by convict women and popular views of convicts to emphasise the reality of experience, which differed greatly and was often less harsh than traditionally believed. She insists that 'individual character' (p. 242) was just as important as the motivations of the state in determining a convict woman's fortunes, emphasising their agency. She balances this by continually referring to the existence of convict women in a world that men controlled, a fact that many of these women evidently did not accept.

Notable within Smith's analysis of convict women's experiences is the emphasis on noise as a type of 'vocal rebellion' (p. 206), particularly within female factories set up in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. This was evidently an effective tactic, judging by the widespread attempts to silence convict women by evangelical reformers from Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who arrived in New South Wales in 1810, to Elizabeth Fry, of the British Ladies Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, which was formed in 1821. Reports in *Defiant Voices* about the sounds of rioting convict women, and the frequency with which these women used their voices and other instruments to show their disapproval demonstrates that popular historical memory, in which they have remained silent and compliant, has done them a disservice. Moreover, it is clear that Smith wants to combat this mistaken assumption by compelling us to hear exactly 'how loudly the voices of women convicts ring out from history's pages' (p. 251).

Smith also contradicts traditional views of convict women as static, or calmly accepting their lot, by providing numerous examples of self-initiated mobility – even for those who were confined to female factories from the early nineteenth century. Women continually attempted to escape their assignments, including the bold

example of the journey by Mary Bryant and company in a longboat to Timor, or Charlotte Badger and Catherine Hagerty's seizure of the brig *Venus* in Van Diemen's Land in 1806. Women rebelled by removing themselves from female factories or the private homes of their masters without authorisation, sometimes returning, but sometimes not. They also agitated within institutions and homes for safer or more liveable conditions, many living in 'perpetual disobedience' (p. 245) by attempting to shape their circumstances to fit their needs.

There is a clear sense in *Defiant Voices* that not only women's words, but also their names, activities, and thoughts are important – both in themselves, and to our understanding of the establishment and development of the Australian colonies. Smith claims that convict women 'played a part in creating a land where the People won' (p. 253), suggesting that it was not only male arrivals that contributed to the bold, egalitarian traditions emerging from the early colonies. As Smith writes, 'taking a female perspective shifts the emphasis' (p. 65), and this interesting and lively book presents a feminist reading of a group who have long been viewed within Australian popular understandings as invisible, mute, and compliant.

Defiant Voices: How Australia's Female Convicts Challenged Authority is well-researched and well-evidenced, yet is extremely readable. It is visually appealing, including well-chosen images to illustrate and reinforce Smith's characterisation of the convicts she evidently knows so well, and will appeal to both academic audiences as well as the general public interested in exploring an alternative convict story.

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