**Islands of Incarceration and Empire Building in Colonial Australia**

**Katherine Roscoe[[1]](#footnote-2)**

This chapter examines the key roles played by Australia’s offshore prison islands in the British Empire. It begins with the arrival of the 'First' Fleet to Botany Bay in 1788, and ends in 1868, when the last Antipodean colony, Western Australia, stopped accepting convicts. It builds on the volume’s positioning of islands as integral to the imperial project but centres the specific role played by prison labourers. Paradoxically, islands embodied both isolation and connection in the western imagination, prison islands especially so. The British government strategically deployed isolation, by exiling populations resistant to frontier expansion to islands, and connection, by exploiting convict labour on islands to tap into imperial networks of communication and commerce. The Australian colonies were Britain’s most remote imperial possessions, with sailing ships journeying several months to reach its shores. The positionality of islands at the cusp of Australia and the ocean, enabled them to act in multiple overlapping roles as prisons, trading outposts, Aboriginal ‘reserves’, hubs of infrastructure and natural laboratories.

The island continent of Australia was first colonized by the British in 1788 using convicts as its primary labour force. Transported men and women, primarily from Britain and Ireland, were free to earn their living after receiving their ticket-of-leave in the colony and, through land grants, were incentivized to marry. Britain denied Indigenous claims to territorial sovereignty on the basis of *terra nullius (*nobody’s land), though the term was not popularized until the late 1800s.[[2]](#footnote-3) This view was justified by stadial theory, in which farming was regarded as a necessary stage in human development.[[3]](#footnote-4) Emerich de Vattel’s *Law of Nations* (1758) expanded on this idea, claimingthat since cultivation underpinned the development of property rights and law, then hunter-gatherers could not claim territorial sovereignty.[[4]](#footnote-5) Convinced of their racial superiority, Europeans failed to recognize that Aboriginal people did, in fact, practise land management, including farming, irrigating, harvesting, and controlled burning.[[5]](#footnote-6) Instead the settlers, with the assistance of state actors, dispossessed land from large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. As the settler frontier advanced, Indigenous people were subjected to physical and sexual violence, kidnapping, disease, and starvation.

The nation now known as Australia was administered from London by the Colonial Office as separate colonies. New South Wales received around 83,000 convicts from Britain and Ireland between 1788 and 1850. Australia’s largest island, Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania), was a penal colony from 1814 to 1853, housing around 67,000 convicts from Britain and Ireland and 5000 transported from other parts of the empire.[[6]](#footnote-7) In the Pacific, Norfolk Island was run as a dependency of New South Wales (until its transfer to Van Diemen’s Land in 1844). It had two periods of settlement, as a convict settlement from 1788–1814, and a site of secondary punishment from 1825–55.[[7]](#footnote-8) Western Australia was established as a free colony in 1829, but after using small numbers of Aboriginal prisoners to build infrastructure (1842–55), they accepted nearly 10,000 European convicts from the metropole between 1850 and 1868.[[8]](#footnote-9) By the time convict transportation to Australia ended in 1868, five out of six Australian colonies were self-governing and able to pass legislation without British parliamentary approval.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The British government widely used islands in the Indian and Atlantic oceans for exile of deposed monarchs and anti-colonial leaders, and as penal colonies for non-elite political rebels and ‘common’ criminals from across the Empire.[[10]](#footnote-11) Uma Kothari and Rorden Wilkinson have described the western imaginary of islands as ‘barren and remote [which] led them to be conceived of as ideal places for the incarceration of prisoners and political detainees’.[[11]](#footnote-12) The use of Australia’s offshore islands to imprison its colonial populations, including both Aboriginal people and European convicts, fits into these wider imperial strategies of control. Colonial officials regularly described Australian islands as natural prisons. In 1824, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Bathurst, instructed that Norfolk Island be occupied ‘upon the principle of a great Hulk or Penitentiary’ for ‘the worst description of Convicts’, rather than punishing them in the ‘midst of a thriving and prosperous Colony’.[[12]](#footnote-13) This island imaginary even extended to harbour islands, like Cockatoo Island, which Governor George Gipps described as the ‘place of greatest security not actually a prison’.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Unlike most of Britain’s island penal colonies in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, Australia’s offshore prison islands were defined in juxtaposition to the continental Antipodean landmass. As Grace Karskens has argued, in officials’ imaginations the vast wilderness of the bush represented ‘nefarious geographies’ of absconding convicts and hostile Indigenous people who resisted colonial authority.[[14]](#footnote-15) In this context, the colonial government conceptualized offshore islands as sites of security and control, ideal for imprisoning these groups.[[15]](#footnote-16) This chapter excludes Van Diemen’s Land from the analysis because as Australia’s largest island it comprised a colony itself and had its own insular and peninsular sites of colonial punishment. Instead, this chapter focuses on smaller islands which were spatially distinct from, but managed as part of, Australia’s colonies.

Islands encapsulate the contradictory geographies of isolation and connection. In Elaine Stratford’s words islands acted as ‘relative spaces: bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonized’.[[16]](#footnote-17) Prison islands embodied this geography even more fully as isolation was central to their ideological function although, in practice, they could only operate through connection. Carceral islands needed to be accessible by ships to receive supplies and to operate the prison industries that offset running costs. The role of penal labour is an important counterpoint to other kinds of unfree workers, including indentured and enslaved labourers, who shaped the economies of imperial islands discussed elsewhere in the volume.

Between 1788 and 1813, Australia only received naval or British East India Company (EIC) vessels in their ports. The speed of journey of these sailing ship convict transports was little changed from the First Fleet, taking several months to reach the eastern coast of Australia from England or Ireland.[[17]](#footnote-18) From the 1830s, convict vessels were repurposed for immigrants arriving under the government-assisted scheme.[[18]](#footnote-19) After the abolition of the EIC’s monopoly in 1813, international private vessels were allowed into Australian ports for the first time. After the First Opium War forced open Chinese ports in 1842, Sydney became an important port in triangular voyages from Europe or America to Australia, then on to China, before returning home.[[19]](#footnote-20) Most of these vessels were sailing ships or auxiliary steamers (both steam- and sail-power) which ran West to East through the Southern Ocean to reach Australia, taking advantage of the strong westerlies between the latitudes of 40° and 50°.[[20]](#footnote-21) After several months’ voyage, vessels encountered coastal islands as a welcome sign of arrival to Australia. These islands often housed a convict-built lighthouse, pilot boat station, breakwater or dry dock to aid ships’ entry into port and safe journey onwards.

This chapter’s key argument is that Australia’s offshore islands played a distinctive role in colonial governance. Australia was a penal- and settler- colony, so displacement to islands was used to govern Indigenous people who resisted frontier expansion as well as to punish recidivist convicts who did not rehabilitate into colonial society. Once on islands, prison labour was turned to account for the imperial project. Convicts claimed territory and gathered resources at imperial frontiers in a bid to extend Britain’s strategic presence in the Pacific and Indian Ocean arenas. Closer to the shore, convicts built maritime infrastructures to connect colonial port-cities to Britain. Convicts also helped natural-scientists who were attracted to the unique maritime ecologies of offshore islands to collect specimens and develop scientific knowledge that travelled through imperial circuits. It was through the efforts of Aboriginal and European prisoners that these islands were connected to maritime networks of commerce and correspondence.

# **Strategic Sites and Imperial Rivalry**

In the two decades after Britain colonized Australia (1788–1829), when much of the continental landmass remained uncolonized, islands remote from Sydney were occupied as geopolitically strategic sites to extend Britain’s naval and commercial influence overseas. Lauren Benton has argued that in the late eighteenth century, both the Spanish and British empires ‘forced settlers, sometimes to strategically located islands’ which were used as overlapping ‘sites of military garrisons, protected commercial nodes, agricultural stations and places of natural confinement’.[[21]](#footnote-22) In this way, small groups of convicts and soldiers were sent from Sydney to Norfolk Island, 1500 kilometres eastwards in the Pacific, between 1788 and 1815, and to Melville Island (known Yermalnear by the indigenous Tiwi Islanders) over 3000 kilometres northwards, between 1824 and 1829. These convict-settlers claimed valuable territory for Britain in contested oceanic arenas and cultivated valuable resources to shore up Britain’s naval and commercial shipping interests.

John Call, adviser to Prime Minister William Pitt, proposed in 1784 that Britain colonize the Pacific region, suggesting that the islands of New Caledonia and Norfolk Island would be two ‘useful auxiliaries’ to a colony at New South Wales.[[22]](#footnote-23) In 1787, the King instructed the first governor of New South Wales, Captain Arthur Phillip, to colonize Norfolk Island as ‘a spot which may hereafter become useful’.[[23]](#footnote-24) Norfolk Island’s utility was as a strategic site to tap into the China trade, linked by the South Equatorial current to the heart of the EIC’s trading grounds.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Norfolk Island also offered important naval resources needed for Britain’s war with Napoleonic France (1803–15). After the American War of Independence ended in 1783, Britain faced the permanent loss of timber supplies.[[25]](#footnote-26) Not only was the total tonnage of warships on the rise, from 120,000 in 1760 to 231,000 tons in 1800, the number of EIC ships had also doubled in the same period.[[26]](#footnote-27) By May 1788, Captain Phillip reported to London that he ‘apprehend[ed] His Majesty’s Ships in the East Indies may be supplied from this island with masts and yards which will render it a very valuable acquisition’.[[27]](#footnote-28) Hemp and flax were used to make rope and canvas for ships. In the 1790s, Britain imported over 95 per cent of its hemp from Russia, but access to the resource was precarious.[[28]](#footnote-29) Norfolk Island had large flax plants which, Captain Phillip reported to the Colonial Office, could be cultivated by convicts who were, after all, on a remote island from which they would ‘very seldom be able to escape’.[[29]](#footnote-30)

The *Supply* sailed from Port Jackson on 15 February 1788, carrying twenty-three people (including nine male and six female convicts) to colonize Norfolk Island.[[30]](#footnote-31) Male convicts performed the manual labour of cutting timber and clearing land that, in Captain Phillip’s words, ‘render’d the island a resource’.[[31]](#footnote-32) As more convicts were shipped from Sydney to the island, Commander Ross encouraged men and women to live in family units and farm their own plots.[[32]](#footnote-33) By 1791, the population had grown to 472 adults and 62 children, with a fairly even gender divide.[[33]](#footnote-34) The island lacked an accessible landing place which, according to Governor Phillip, was the one feature that prevented ‘the island [from] being … one of the finest in the world’.[[34]](#footnote-35) The wreck of the supply ship *Sirius* in 1790 brought the island to the brink of starvation. The settlement failed to sustain itself through farming, becoming a drain on New South Wales resources. Despite their initially promising appearance, the island’s naval supplies proved to be of inferior quality. The tall pines were hard and knotty at the top, so were too short to serve as masts in large vessels.[[35]](#footnote-36) It was also difficult to separate flax from the ‘woody parts’ to make rigging in large quantities.[[36]](#footnote-37) The size of the establishment was slowly reduced from 1805, until its eventual abandonment in 1815. By this time, the island had also lost its strategic value. The cessation of hostilities after the Napoleonic wars meant ‘sovereign treaties, free seas and emerging mantra of free trade’ became dominant ideologies for European powers in the Pacific for the most of the nineteenth century.[[37]](#footnote-38) This long peace was made possible, in large part, by their collective denial of Indigenous sovereignty in the Pacific arena.

This was the case for Tiwi Islanders on Melville Island (Yermalnear) when it was occupied as a British trading outpost for trepang (sea-cucumber) in 1824.[[38]](#footnote-39) Six years earlier, in 1818, Captain Phillip Parker King had reported large numbers of Makassar (Sulawesi) prows visiting Australia’s northern coast to harvest trepang for sale to Chinese markets. After the capture of Dutch colonies in 1811, private British traders profited from the intra-Asian trade previously dominated by the Dutch VOC.[[39]](#footnote-40) After Napoleon’s defeat, the 1814 Treaty of Paris stipulated Britain return all captured Dutch territories (except the Cape). This left British traders subject to trading restrictions, and under threat of a Dutch monopoly.[[40]](#footnote-41) It is not surprising, then, that a trader called William Barnes first proposed establishing the trepang fishery on Australia’s northern coast in July 1823, or that it was supported by the Oriental and China Association, a collective of private traders.[[41]](#footnote-42) Their chairman, George Larpent, wrote to Earl Bathurst at the Colonial Office in December 1823, claiming that ‘the greatest benefit of the commerce’ would arise by establishing a trading outpost there, which would also place ‘our flourishing possessions in that quarter of the Globe in greater security’.[[42]](#footnote-43) From a security perspective, the British Colonial Office feared access to China being cut off in the event of war with the Netherlands. While negotiations over South East Asian territories with the Dutch continued, Britain made an opportunistic claim on Australia’s second largest island off the northern coast. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 ratified their control over the northern and southern entrances to the Straits of Malacca, securing British vessels’ eastern passage to China.[[43]](#footnote-44)

On 25 August 1824, the HMS *Tamar* set sail in convoy with *Lady Nelson* and *Countess Harcourt* to colonize either Melville or Bathurst Island off Australia’s northern coast. Under Captain James John Gordon Bremer’s command, these ships carried forty-five convicts (including three ticket-of-leave holders), fifty soldiers and thirty royal marines.[[44]](#footnote-45) The government were eager to attract skilled workers, offering convict ‘mechanics’ still serving their sentence a ticket-of-leave after completing six months’ labour on the islands.[[45]](#footnote-46) Convicts completed most of the work of colonization, clearing ground and cutting timber to build Fort Dundas. Captain Bremer had chosen the site because it was suitably deep for a naval dry dock, but it was a badly chosen location for a trading post.[[46]](#footnote-47) Situated far down the shallow, rocky and treacherous Apsley Strait, it was almost impossible to navigate safely during the monsoon season. As a result, supply ships from New South Wales were regularly wrecked and ‘no traders of any nation whatever’ visited the settlement from 1824 until its abandonment in 1829.[[47]](#footnote-48) The convicts were relocated to Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, 160 kilometres east.[[48]](#footnote-49)

The intentions of the British government are more important than the ultimate failure of Norfolk Island and Melville Island as colonial outposts. The Colonial Office envisioned these islands as strategic sites, helping to establish naval and commercial dominance over rival European powers in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Convict labour was used to claim these islands as British possessions and cultivate their natural resources. However, islands were only useful to the imperial project if they were connected to shipping routes. The inaccessibility of the islands rendered them a drain on the resources of, rather than useful auxiliaries to, the mainland colony of New South Wales.

# **Displacement of Aboriginal People to Islands**

Indigenous people in Australia and other parts of the British Empire were dispossessed from their lands by colonizers, and forcibly relocated to islands. These spaces physically segregated Indigenous people from natural resources and territories that European colonizers wanted to exploit. The British government framed these islands as sites of protection from frontier violence, but policies of displacement actually ‘protected’ settlers and their property. Whether Indigenous people were convicted or coerced to live on islands, surrounding waters were an effective barrier to escape. Many British scientists believed Aboriginal Australians to be an inferior ‘hunter-gatherer’ race who were behind Caucasians in the hierarchy of human development. Islands were ideal spaces to enforce sedentariness on Indigenous people, encouraging farming and living indoors, twin-pillars of European ‘civilization’.

From 1824 to 1832, the Van Diemen’s Land colonial government and settlers waged a war against Aboriginal Tasmanian men, women, and children.[[49]](#footnote-50) In January 1828, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur wrote to Viscount Goderich at the Colonial Office suggesting that the ‘only remedy’ to continued frontier conflict was to ‘remove’ the Aboriginal Tasmanians ‘to some Island in the Straits’.[[50]](#footnote-51) In 1829, George Augustus Robinson was appointed to run an institution for the Nuenonne people at Bruny Island, near Hobart.[[51]](#footnote-52) This became the model for a larger scheme. From 1830, George Augustus Robinson led a ‘conciliatory’ mission to convince or coerce Aboriginal Tasmanian communities to move to islands or face continued violence on the frontier.[[52]](#footnote-53) Several islands in the Bass Strait were trailed before a long-term settlement was established on Flinders Island (1833–47).[[53]](#footnote-54) In February 1830, Robinson set off on an expedition to Port Davey with Nuennone mediators to convince other Aboriginal people to leave their homeland for Swan Island.[[54]](#footnote-55) In February 1831, Governor George Arthur formed an ‘Aborigines Committee’ (made up of six colonists) to advise on European-Aboriginal hostilities. It supported Robinson’s plan for ‘the voluntary removal of the entire black population’ to Gun Carriage Island and then, from September, to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait.[[55]](#footnote-56) The sole dissenting voice was chief justice, John Lewis Pedder, who objected to the ‘expatriation’ of entire communities, rather than hostile individuals.[[56]](#footnote-57) Robinson argued that ‘if the Natives were placed on an island in Basses’ Strait [sic] they would not feel themselves imprisoned there … nor would they wish to return to the main land, or regret their inability to hunt and roam about’.[[57]](#footnote-58) Being ‘stationary’, Robinson claimed, would offer ‘a better chance … for their civilization’ and they could be taught ‘the art of cultivating the soil’.[[58]](#footnote-59) Since stadial theory posited that ‘roaming’ was inferior to settled ways of living (based around farming), the British government considered the bounded island an ideal ‘laboratory for civilization’.[[59]](#footnote-60) Furthermore, islands offered limited opportunities for hunting and roaming to bolster their daily rations without further cost to the government.

The British government relocated Indigenous people to islands in other parts of their empire as well. Around 1200 formerly-enslaved ‘Liberated Africans’ were relocated to McCarthy Island in the River Gambia.[[60]](#footnote-61) From 1833 to 1838, Wesleyan missionaries established a ‘model farm and village’ on the island for Fulani herders hoping they would ‘abandon their nomadic ways’.[[61]](#footnote-62) In 1836, the Odawa and Ojibway people signed a treaty with Sir Francis Bond Head, ceding their territory in exchange for relocation to Manitoulin Island in the Great Lakes (Canada).[[62]](#footnote-63) The commissary general, Randolph Routh, described Manitoulin island as a ‘desirable asylum’ where their wandering impulses could be ‘restrain[ed]’ enabling a ‘natural progress’ towards civilisation.[[63]](#footnote-64) These schemes justified island imprisonment as an opportunity for ‘civilization’, reflecting evangelical humanitarian reform that shaped colonial governance in the 1830s. The 1836–37 British Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines, chaired by abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton, advocated for ‘protection’ of Indigenous people from settler violence by removing them to reserves and missions where they could be ‘civilized’ and taught Christianity.[[64]](#footnote-65)

By January 1832, Robinson had convinced the Big River people to leave for Flinders Island, effectively ending the Tasmanian War. Between December 1833 and August 1834, captured what he believed to be the last remaining Indigenous Tasmanians on the west coast, declaring ‘The work is done, the great evil is removed’.[[65]](#footnote-66) It is hard to gauge the total death toll of Aboriginal Tasmanians who died during the war—not only as a direct result of conflict, but from famine and exposure to disease—but only around 200 survived to be relocated to Flinders Island.[[66]](#footnote-67) Between 1832 and 1847, a further 132 Aboriginal Tasmanians died on the island.[[67]](#footnote-68) This high mortality rate did not challenge Britain’s view of Flinders Island as a humanitarian model. Instead, it confirmed prevalent ideas that Indigenous people could not adapt to European ways of life and were ‘doomed’ to extinction.[[68]](#footnote-69) This ideology was not incompatible with humanitarianism. It demanded a duty of care over Indigenous people in the short term, but upheld the natural inferiority of Indigenous people, thus reaffirming Britain’s superior claim to Indigenous lands in the long-term.[[69]](#footnote-70)

The British first colonized the area around the Swan River in Western Australia in 1829.[[70]](#footnote-71) The following year, the colony’s Judge Advocate, George Fletcher Moore, wrote that he feared violent conflict unless the Nyoongar community were ‘removed wholesale to some island’.[[71]](#footnote-72) During Moore’s tenure, Carnac Island (Ngooloormayup), off the coast of Fremantle, began to be used as a ‘place of confinement’ for Nyoongar resistance leaders, including Yagan and Midigoroo, from 1832.[[72]](#footnote-73) In 1832, after just a month, the prisoners escaped to the mainland on an unattended dinghy.[[73]](#footnote-74)

Western Australia introduced its own scheme of island imprisonment modelled on the 1835–37 Select Committee on Aborigines’ recommendations. Governor John Hutt introduced a scheme of ‘protection through punishment’. By enabling the prosecution of Aboriginal people under summary laws, it would prevent settlers from enacting vigilante justice.[[74]](#footnote-75) This was not an ‘act of coercion’, Hutt stressed in an 1839 letter to the Colonial Office, but ‘extend[ed] the protecting hand of Government’.[[75]](#footnote-76) Hutt also proposed establishing a prison for Aboriginal men on Rottnest Island, sixteen kilometres off the Western Australian coast. This would ‘relieve them from close confinement … [which was] found to operate most prejudicially to their health’, perhaps an acknowledgement of Flinders Island’s mortality rates.[[76]](#footnote-77) The 1841 Act that established the prison stipulated that the inmates be ‘instructed in useful knowledge, and gradually trained in the habits of civilized life’ by farming and constructing buildings.[[77]](#footnote-78) In Western Australia, conviction­ ­– rather than conciliation – was the mechanism for removing Aboriginal people from contested frontiers to islands, but was both were framed as a humanitarian endeavours.

From 1839 until the 1890s, the arrival of Aboriginal prisoners to Rottnest Island could be mapped against the progression of the frontier.[[78]](#footnote-79) The majority of Rottnest’s inmates were convicted for livestock theft, rather than for overt resistance, resulting from competition over limited natural resources. Over the course of the century, racially-targeted legislation was introduced enabling magistrates in rural districts (usually landowners themselves) to sentence Aboriginal people for up to three years’ imprisonment on limited evidence.[[79]](#footnote-80) Aboriginal people were also disproportionately prosecuted for violence committed against Europeans, compared to the other way around.[[80]](#footnote-81)

Island displacement was a flexible tool of colonial governance, used in many British colonies, to control Indigenous population and protect convict-settlers by reducing Indigenous resistance at the frontier. Once on islands, Indigenous people were forcibly subjected to ‘civilizing’ regimes, reaffirming the idea that European ways of life were inherently superior. When Aboriginal people on Flinders Island died in droves, this only proved Aboriginal people’s racial inferiority. Island displacement not only physically freed up land for colonization, it also sustained the imperial project ideologically.

# **Convict Labour and Maritime Infrastructure**

In the 1830s, the first lighthouses were built on Australia’s coasts and islands.[[81]](#footnote-82) Without lighthouses, ships arriving from Britain would be wrecked, causing damage to property, loss of life, and uncertain communications between the metropole and its colonies. In a parliamentary report in 1850, Civil Engineer Anthony Gordon complained that colonial lighthouse construction was not centrally funded by the Treasury in London, despite being ‘absolutely essential for the colonial system’.[[82]](#footnote-83) The role of European convicts and Aboriginal prisoners in building these lighthouses has rarely been recognized.[[83]](#footnote-84)

In Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) the colonial government relied on convicts as the labour-force for building and manning lighthouses along its coasts and islands in the 1830s and ’40s. In 1828, a Pilot and Lighthouse Sub-Committee recommended Bruny Island (Lunnawannalonna) as the site ‘which will afford the greatest benefit to the trade frequenting the port at Hobart Town’, the colonial capital.[[84]](#footnote-85) Construction on the lighthouse did not begin until British convict transport *George III* was wrecked in the treacherous D’Entrecasteaux Channel, with a loss of 300 men in January 1835. That month convicts began building the thirteen-metre tall lighthouse which took three years to complete.[[85]](#footnote-86) Four convicts remained stationed on the island assisting the lighthouse keeper in his duties. In November 1839, the *Tasmanian Weekly Dispatch* complained that convicted, rather than ‘free men’, had been entrusted with ‘such important matters … necessary to ensure the safety of our ships and of human life’.[[86]](#footnote-87) The newspaper complained that a ‘naval man’, like Lieutenant-Governor John Franklin, should have realized that to prevent convicts from escaping access to boats would have to be strictly controlled, impeding speedy assistance in the event of a shipwreck.

Aboriginal prisoners built the first lighthouse in Western Australia on Rottnest Island (Wadjemup) between 1842 and 1846. Its construction was prompted by the wrecking of the British schooner *Transit* off Rottnest’s north end while sailing into Fremantle from the Cape of Good Hope. In 1840, Hutt commissioned Captain Wickham of HMS *Beagle* to survey the waters around Rottnest Island to map the ‘many obstructions’ preventing safe entry into the colony’s ‘principal seaport’, and to select a site for a new lighthouse on Rottnest Island.[[87]](#footnote-88) The hydrographer on the mission, Lieutenant John Lort Stokes, described the survey of the waters around Rottnest as ‘of great importance to the interests of shipping’.[[88]](#footnote-89)

Over the next five years, groups of thirty Aboriginal prisoners carted limestone from Thompson Bay to the top of the steep Bathurst Hill, to build the lighthouse. The construction project was meant to teach Aboriginal people ‘habits of industry’, who the British considered indolent.[[89]](#footnote-90) In 1840, Protector of Aborigines, Charles Symmons, described the lighthouse as a ‘proud memorial of the capabilities of the Australian savage when called forth and duly directed’.[[90]](#footnote-91) In April 1843, Lieutenant Stokes returned to Rottnest, viewing the lighthouse with ‘great interest as the work of the aborigines imprisoned on the island’.[[91]](#footnote-92) He described the building having been ‘erected by the hands of a people which seemed destined to perish from the face of the earth’, reflecting contemporary beliefs that Aboriginal people were ‘doomed’ to extinction.[[92]](#footnote-93) Although the racialisation of Indigenous Australians made their work on the lighthouse more visible to colonial commentators, it was predicated on their ultimate erasure as people.

The colonial government had secondarily transported convicts to islands in Sydney Harbour and Norfolk Island on an *ad hoc* basis from 1788.[[93]](#footnote-94) In the 1820s, island incarceration became further codified in the Australia convict system as part of a staged system of punishment.[[94]](#footnote-95) The colonial government in Van Diemen’s Land built penal stations at Sarah Island (1822–32), Port Arthur (1825–77), and Maria Island (1825–32). Convicts were concentrated together in penal-industrial complexes. Convicts on Sarah Island, in the east, constructed over seventy-nine ships, including nineteen large vessels. At peninsular Port Arthur, convicts built more than 155 vessels, including some of the largest in the Australian colonies.[[95]](#footnote-96)

The New South Wales government favoured ‘urban’ islands for the secondary punishment of convicts. Convicts built and manned large-scale maritime infrastructures, including lighthouses, breakwaters, and dry docks which made colonial cities and their harbours accessible to international vessels. Between 1839 and 1846, convicts built a breakwater connecting Nobby’s Island to Newcastle, 150 kilometres north of Sydney, to enable sailing ships to enter port safely. In Sydney Harbour, convicts built an arms magazine on Goat Island (Me-Mel, 1833–39) to secure the entrance to the port. On Cockatoo Island, in Sydney Harbour, between 1847 and 1857, prisoners constructed a dry dock to outfit Royal Navy ships. Governor George Gipps listed the advantages of the island as a prison – it was ‘under the very eye of authority’ –­ and as a dry dock – it was ‘surrounded by deep water’ and had ‘excellent building stone’.[[96]](#footnote-97) In 1845, Gipps wrote again to the Colonial Office citing the ‘advantages which would accrue to this Colony and to the Empire at large, were a Dry Dock to be constructed at Sydney for Men of War’.[[97]](#footnote-98) It was designed as the largest dry dock in the British Empire, outside of Portsmouth, for large vessels to undertake repairs in the southern hemisphere rather than returning to England.[[98]](#footnote-99)

Since convict transportation to New South Wales had ceased in 1840, the government turned to the colony’s last remaining convicts as a cheap, flexible labour force, who could be held securely on the island’s constrained limits. The building project ran up against major delays, and its initial budget of £400 for fifteen months’ work by a hundred men was quickly exceeded.[[99]](#footnote-100) Convict ‘guttering crews’ had to break through a layer of hard shale in order to quarry the dock into the island’s base. Further delays were caused by the need to import engineers and equipment from Britain, as local skilled labourers refused to work alongside convicts.[[100]](#footnote-101) The productivity of convict labour was improved by the introduction of ‘task work’ in 1851, by which convicts could earn up to ‘half a day in time’ and three pence a day for exceeding daily targets.[[101]](#footnote-102) In 1852, the dimensions of the dry dock were extended in order to accommodate larger steamships. By 30 September 1857, the dock was ready to use for the first time, receiving the colonial steam dredge, the *Hercules*.[[102]](#footnote-103) Convicts remained stationed on the island, manning the dockyard and building twelve workshops and an engine house to complete repairs.[[103]](#footnote-104) In 1869, the prisoners were removed from the island, which was handed over to the Royal Navy. Convict labour proved receptive to changing demands of imperial shipping in the transition to steam power.[[104]](#footnote-105)

# **Islands as Natural Laboratories**

Western scientific epistemologies were shaped by expanding imperial frontiers, particularly in the Pacific Ocean arena. Tropical islands had long been imagined as Edenic paradises, but imperial expansion meant that bountiful, tropical islands became coveted possessions.[[105]](#footnote-106) Tropical islands were conceived of as natural ‘laboratories’ where Europeans could study new kinds of flora, fauna, and the Indigenous peoples.[[106]](#footnote-107) As Richard Grove argued, islands provided ‘global analogues’ of the wider world which were ‘manageable in terms of size’.[[107]](#footnote-108) The edenic imagination extended to Australia itself, which the British conceived as an inversion of European wildlife, but its offshore islands were more manageable sites of exploration.[[108]](#footnote-109) Burgeoning interest in marine biology and zoology, including nesting seabirds, continued to draw scientists’ attention to Australia’s islands throughout the nineteenth century.[[109]](#footnote-110)

Indigenous people imparted their knowledge of their country, helping Europeans learn about Australia’s plant and animal life, and guiding Europeans through the bush. Some Europeans learnt ‘bush-skills’ from Aboriginal people, using them to survive outside of government control or offering their services for hire.[[110]](#footnote-111) Australia’s offshore islands mirrored these patterns on the mainland: Aboriginal and European prisoners worked as botanists and guides to scientists who visited their islands. Scientific knowledge that prisoners helped co-produce, often unacknowledged, travelled through imperial circuits to metropolitan and colonial ‘hubs’ of scientific knowledge.

Convict-botanist John Richardson was sent to tropical Melville Island to assess the flora and fauna of the newly colonized northern region of Australia. Melville Island was first colonized in 1824. The following year, in 1825, the Colonial Botanist in Sydney, Charles Fraser, sent Richardson to Melville Island with a large selection of plants and cuttings of vegetables, fruits, herbs, grasses, and cacti from Sydney’s Botanical Gardens.[[111]](#footnote-112) As a testament to the value the colonial government placed on Richardson’s skills, he received a salary of £25 despite serving a second sentence of transportation for returning to England.[[112]](#footnote-113) The colonial government was interested in the effect of tropical climate on Melville Island, which differed from Australia’s temperate eastern colonies.[[113]](#footnote-114) As well as collecting plant specimens from the island for study, Richardson attempted to grow seeds and cuttings from the Botanical Gardens at Sydney and from Timor, which he collected during a supply run.[[114]](#footnote-115) In this way, Melville Island acted both as a site of ecological ‘discovery’ and as a ‘laboratory’ to see how exogenous plants would thrive there. Two plants have been named after Richardson, *Hibiscus richardsonii* and *Alyxia richardsonii.*[[115]](#footnote-116)

Between 1833 and 1838, Quaker missionaries James Backhouse and George Washington Walker toured the Australian colonies ‘under concern’, performing ‘religious interviews’ with convicts and Aboriginal people.[[116]](#footnote-117) In 1835, they visited Norfolk Island, a penal station for secondarily transported convicts. In his narrative of his visit,Backhouse contrasted the island’s natural beauty with the moral corruption of its convict population. Invoking the ‘paradise-prison trope’, Backhouse described how ‘this island, beautiful by nature, and comparable to the Garden of Eden, is rendered … a moral wilderness’ by a relatively lenient system of penal discipline that was not focused on religious redemption.[[117]](#footnote-118) For Backhouse, who had strong links to the anti-transportation lobby and testified to Select Committee on Aborigines, Norfolk Island was a ‘global analogue’ of the failings of the entire Australia convict system.

Backhouse was also a naturalist who sent a ‘valuable herbarium’ of plants collected in Australia to Kew Gardens in London, Britain’s hub of scientific imperialism.[[118]](#footnote-119) Backhouse and Walker were guided by convicts on several bush walks around the island. One convict, William Percival, showed them two ‘very fine’ tree-ferns (*Alsophila excelsa* and *Cyathe medularis*) on the south side of Mount Pitt.[[119]](#footnote-120) A convicted bushranger captured an ‘Orange-faced, Green Parrot’ for them.[[120]](#footnote-121) Backhouse also observed how the convicts adapted to and interacted with the island environment on a daily basis. Backhouse described convicts using a long-leafed cabbage to ‘wrap their bread in these leaves and bake it in the ashes’ and how they cooked a species of black nightshade, which was not lethal like its English counterpart.[[121]](#footnote-122) In this open prison, convicts had learnt how to use the natural environment to bolster their rations and as a psychological escape from their confinement.

In Western Australia, Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island (Wadjemup) helped visiting scientists to collect natural specimens. In 1839, the botanists James Drummond, Ludwig Preiss and John Gilbert collected specimens from Rottnest, which were among the 15,000 species dispatched to William Hooker at Kew Gardens in May 1842.[[122]](#footnote-123) From correspondence with Gilbert, John Gould described ‘Rottnest and the other islands near Swan River’ in *The Birds of Australia* as ‘great stronghold[s]’ of Rock Grass-Parakeets.[[123]](#footnote-124) Gilbert could not examine any eggs since the birds nested in sea-facing cliffs, so he relied on the ‘testimony of natives’ who were imprisoned there.[[124]](#footnote-125) In 1890, ornithologist James Campbell visited the island on behalf of the Royal Society of Victoria, and was assisted by a Yamatji prisoner, Nunkey, who retrieved mutton bird eggs for him to study.[[125]](#footnote-126)

In 1854, William Henry Harvey spent six weeks living in the prison buildings on Rottnest Island examining many types of algae formerly ‘undescribed’ by scientists.[[126]](#footnote-127) Harvey was a professor of botany at the Royal Dublin Society from 1848, and had benefited from the patronage of father-and-son directors of Kew Gardens, William and Joseph Dalton Hooker.[[127]](#footnote-128) Harvey’s case is illustrative of the overlap between colonial administration and scientific curiosity, with Harvey’s term as treasurer of the Cape Colony (1836–41) establishing his expertise in overseas algae species. Harvey kept up a network of colonial administrators to send him dried specimens and plates of algae, included George Clifton, a resident magistrate at Fremantle and William Ayshford Sanford, colonial secretary of Western Australia.[[128]](#footnote-129) He also corresponded with Charles Moore, director of the Botanic Gardens at Sydney, and Dr Ferdinand Mueller, at Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens.[[129]](#footnote-130) Harvey’s role as professor of botany at the Royal Dublin Society mirrored the proliferation of centres of knowledge within the Australian colonies.[[130]](#footnote-131)

In the 1860s, expeditions into the Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley opened up dry pastoral ground for grazing in the northern districts of Western Australia.[[131]](#footnote-132) At the same time, the governor approved a scheme that paroled Aboriginal prisoners from Rottnest Island to act as assistants to police stations and guides to survey teams and telegraph parties in Kimberley and east of Eucla.[[132]](#footnote-133) A Rottnest prisoner, Dougal, guided A. C. Gregory’s 1858 expedition into the Gascoyne, and accompanied Walter Padbury to establish a settlement at Pilbarra in 1863. Two years later, in 1865, Dougal also guided Maitland Brown on a ‘punitive expedition’ to Legrange, where up to 20 Karajarri were massacred in revenge for the death of three Europeans.[[133]](#footnote-134) Paroled Aboriginal prisoners from Rottnest became facilitators of European expansion of the frontier northwards and eastwards, where Aboriginal people were subjected to violence and state control (including by paroled prisoners working as ‘native policemen’). In turn, new prisoners flooded into Rottnest from newly colonized northern districts from the 1860s.

Europeans relied on Indigenous guides to survey and survive in Australian wilderness and to act as mediators with any ‘hostile’ groups.[[134]](#footnote-135) Rottnest Island was an ideal recruitment ground, because it concentrated Indigenous people from remote districts in one central location and the prisoners had prior experience working for Europeans. Complex power-dynamics shaped the relationship between Indigenous intermediaries and the European members of the expedition.[[135]](#footnote-136) As Aboriginal convict guides, coercion certainly played a role in their decision to act as guides, as did the social and geographical mobility that these roles offered in stark contrast to continued island confinement. Rottnest Island’s prisoners encapsulate the entanglement between Indigenous people as facilitators and victims of frontier development, as individuals helped construct imperial knowledge that exploited, overlay, and ultimately replaced Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

# **Conclusion**

In the period 1788–1869, offshore islands were systematically used for the governance of colonial populations and development of imperial resources. In the first four decades after colonization in 1788, remote oceanic islands were colonized by small groups of convicts as geopolitically strategic islands. Convicts harvested valuable natural resources to bolster Britain’s commercial and naval dominance over rival European powers. Though oceanic islands acted as imperial frontiers themselves, the removal of Aboriginal people from the terrestrial frontier to offshore islands enabled the colonization of parts of the mainland in the 1830s and 1840s. Displacement of Indigenous people to islands freed up land for European colonization in Van Diemen’s Land, Western Australia, Canada and the Caribbean. These islands were framed by the British government as ‘humanitarian’ spaces where Aboriginal people were protected from frontier violence and ‘civilized’ by living in sedentary, rather than nomadic, ways. Western conceptualizations of islands as isolated and segregated enabled them to serve both punitive and protective functions in the management of colonial populations.

Though ideologies of isolation may have drawn colonial officials to imprison European and Indigenous people on islands, in practice convicts connected their island prisons to imperial networks. The colonial government exploited islands’ and peninsulas’ porousness to the sea by using convict workers to build ships, lighthouses, and dockyards. Considering the lengthy journeys sailing vessels took to reach Australia from Britain, these infrastructures helped ensure British vessels arrived in port safely and could be repaired before returning home. Islands were also sites of scientific knowledge production that linked to metropolitan and colonial scientific societies. European and especially Indigenous prisoners used their knowledge of natural geography to gather botanical specimens and guide scientists in surveying Australia’s land– and seascapes. In the age of sail, islands were only useful to empire—even as sites of imprisonment—if they linked up to shipping routes that connected Britain to the rest of its empire.

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