

Review of Janet McCalman's *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victoria*

Janet McCalman. *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victoria*. Melbourne University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780522877533. 352 pp. Paperback \$39.99, eBook \$25.99.

In *Vandemonians* (2021), Janet McCalman brings together the shocking and the quotidian to explore the lives of ex- Van Diemen's Land convicts who lived in nineteenth-century Victoria. The renowned social historian, best known for *Struggletown* (1984), shows that Victoria, presumably free of the 'convict stain' which haunted other colonies, was actually home to thousands of former Tasmanian prisoners who led rich and varied lives that were often marred by violence and poverty.

McCalman draws on big data, accumulated from the *Ships' Project* (conducted mostly at the University of Tasmania), and fine grain archival work to render the lives of Tasmanian emancipists in wide ranging and specific detail. A 'cradle to the grave' approach is applied to the vast archive, tracing her subjects from birth to death and delineating broad patterns. Life courses methods are popular in recent criminal historiography, employed by Barry Godfrey et al. in *Young Criminal Lives* (2017) and Emma D. Watkins in *Life Courses of Young Convicts Transported to Van Diemen's Land* (2020). Despite its extensive scope and findings, McCalman does not get lost in the data. She brings nuance to the messiness and silences of lives past, highlighting the struggles of everyday life and the desperation of survival.

The introduction opens on the story of Ellen Miles, a lifelong criminal first convicted at age eleven. Admittedly an outlier, her life of theft, brawling, drunkenness and eventual demise appears throughout the book. McCalman's choice of a female touchstone elucidates the gendered nature of convict experience, with constant reminders as to the additional struggles and violence faced by convict women. The data shows that in the decade after being released women died at a faster rate than men. Ellen, who lived well into her 80s, bucked this trend.

McCalman explores the lives of Vandemonians prior to crime and conviction, charting their voyage to the VDL penal system and experiences under sentence. The true strength of the book is her analysis of life after emancipation. The second half of the book uses the frames of gender and family history to explore both the gendered and intergenerational implications of the penal system and the lives of Vandemonians in Victoria.

The Gold Rushes run through several chapters to show the opportunities it afforded, mostly male, Vandemonians. The implications of gold rush fervour in Melbourne are explored in chapter four, whilst chapter six looks to Vandemonian gold diggers and their fortunes. Chapter seven delves into the lives of ex-convicts who moved beyond the city, focussing on the goldrush town of Kyneton and several men who settled in town or established farms.

Chapter five centres on Romeo Lane, off the top end of Bourke Street in the Melbourne CBD, once the haunt of Vandemonian prostitutes and their offspring. In fascinating and harrowing detail, McCalman outlines the violence faced by women and girls here, devoting a section to young girls who were prostituted by their mothers and other women. Whilst perhaps not indicative of a large group of Victorian girls' experiences, the chapter highlights the reverberating hardship and poverty experienced by generations of Vandemonians and the gendered violence experienced by women.

Chapter eight foregrounds the strength of McCalman's method. It examines intergenerational implications of the penal system. Success of a Vandemonian is measured by whether they married, had children and created a lineage. As McCalman states at the beginning of this chapter 'creating a lineage means more than reproduction. It necessitates a household that can nourish and protect children so that they in turn can produce their own offspring' (page 185). Such a claim shows that demographic and genealogical data can give an indication of a family's material circumstances and highlights the importance of the family unit in the colonies.

Ultimately the author concludes that ex-convicts from VDL were less likely to 'succeed'—to create family and lineage—in Victoria than other population groups. She claims that a lack of familial networks was the deciding factor in the Vandemonian's failure to assimilate.

Vandemonians makes important interventions of value of social historians of crime, the family and gender. McCalman's attention to the lifecycle exemplifies the significance of age categories in history. Often historians see adulthood as the penultimate state of human being, overlooking children and the elderly in their quest for agentive action. In examining all life stages, and drawing on big and small data, *Vandemonians* is history both attuned to the big picture and sensitive to the nuances of everyday life.

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