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Irish Convicts Abandoned on Cape Breton's Shore, 1788 by Charles A. Burke On the afternoon of December 11, 1788, a ship landed Irish convicts on a desolate, uninhabited beach in eastern Cape Breton. The captain's mission was simple enough. Without food, proper clothing, or local assistance, he hoped most would perish in hours. Circumstances proved otherwise, however, and by August 1789, a soldier in the 42nd Regiment wrote from Sydney: I must not forget to tell you that the Master of a vessel from Dublin not thinking there were rascals enough upon the Island, thought proper to land 60 male and 18 female convicts upon the coast and left them to pick out their road the best way they could[.] [T]he consequence was that seven of them died immediately from the severity of the weather.... Two of them have since been hanged for robbery; two more under sentence of death for murder, seven in Prison to take their trials before the court...and the remainder are travelling about the country at large to improve the morals of the people[.] One is comforted however from the reflection that the danger of their being corrupted is not great. ' The survivors of this ill-fated voyage were the last convicts Britain allowed to remain in her North American colonies. Their arrival that December afternoon ended a century old transportation system that by 1775 had become a major ingredient of English criminal law.' Convicts represented a quarter of all British emigrants to America during the eighteenth century (36,000 English, 13,000 Irish, 700 Scottish'). After African slaves, they made up the largest group of forced immigrants to North America." Although Britain transported most convicts for non-capital crimes, many had committed serious offenses. Non-capital charges ranged from possession of stolen goods to bigamy, assault with intent to rob, manslaughter, and the most frequent charge, grand larceny.' In Ireland, vagrancy was associated with petty crime, begging, and prostitution, and they banished vagrants in great numbers.' Through transportation and banishment, they saved hundreds of felons from the galleys. By 1773, many considered transportation the "most humane and effectual Punishment [in Britain]."" Irish convicts in cages between decks, en route to Australia. We don't know whether the Providence had cages, but we do know those convicts were in chains, below deck, and penned. The average convict was indigent and without opportunity long before banishment. The typical transport was a young, unskilled male, from the lower socioeconomic class. Although most were "driven to crime out of economic hardship, many had also committed reasonably serious offenses, in some cases [repeatedly]."* The courts often laid easily proven charges against habitual criminals as an expedient method to ensure quick transport. After young men, women were the second staple of the convict trade. Although generally called prostitutes, it is certain that they transported no women for the crime because it was never a transportable offence. The courts banished feeble male convicts for theft, usually of a petty sort, with crimes of violence figuring low. When the American colonies refused entry to British ships in 1775, they limited Britain's ability to transport convicts and triggered a crisis in the criminal justice system. Britain



enacted the Hulks Act in 1776 • a measure designed to house convicts aboard abandoned warships moored in the Thames and at Plymouth and Ports? mouth. Despite this, the convict population in Provincial jails swelled by 73% in the decade after 1776.' The decade witnesses a soaring crime rate as well, with increased dependence on cap? ital punishment. In 1782, the courts executed nearly 100 felons in London and Middlesex, and the upsurge in hangings 1 throughout England con- ' vined public officials of the need to renew convict transportation. ' After much debate. Parlia? ment enacted a new trans? portation act in 1784. They could not agree on a destina? tion for felons however, op? posing plans to ship convicts in 1785 to Africa and to Canada and the West Indies in 1786. They settled finally on New South Wales, Aus? tralia, in 1786. Meanwhile, the Irish Act of 1786 author? ized the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to transport convicts to any of his Majesty's plan? tations or settlements in America or to any place outside Europe.'? The Irish Parliament voted to send convicts to Botany Bay, Australia, in 1790. The government selected Botany Bay for several reasons • each more significant than as a dumping site for convicts. First, 'CC /iu('oU " Electric Ltd • ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING • MAINTENANCE • REPAIRS • FIRE ALARMS' • BURGLAR ALARMS • P.A. SYSTEMS • TELEPHONE & DATA WIRING 151 Dorchester Street SYDNEY 562-6570 Anywhere in Cape Breton island 13