

**Babette Smith. *Australia's Birthstain: the Startling Legacy of the Convict Era.* Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008, 400pp.**

**ISBN: 9781741146042**

**AU\$49.95**

<http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?book=9781741146042&page=94>

When Lord Beauchamp arrived in Australia to take up his Governorship of New South Wales, he intended a compliment when he said, 'Greetings! Your Birthstain you have turned to good!' However, he was met with outrage for so bluntly addressing the 'unmentionable subject' (3). This is the starting point for an exploration of a fascinating aspect of Australian historiography.

Overcoming silence may well be the *raison d'être* of social history, and Babette Smith identifies a pervasive amnesia surrounding Australia's convict past. This is, though, an uneven silence: it dominates mostly the private realm, within family history and genealogy. Its corollary in the public realm is a deep distortion of the nature of the convicts as individuals and the antipodean penal system of which they found themselves a part. This is the opposite of silence, perhaps a hysterical overreaction. These twin themes have been touched on previously: Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* is a notable example. The main originality of Smith's study, however, lies in the effect on families and their histories: this intergenerational amnesia is a neglected area. For this reason, her book will have a strong appeal to readers interested in ancestry, cultural memory and identity.

*Australia's Birthstain* is a lucid narrative history: it sets out to explore the reasons for the pervasive amnesia about convict ancestry. It is certainly written for the general reader and is highly accessible. The prose is very readable with a useful index and interesting illustrations (despite the anonymity of some of the convicts portrayed) although it occasionally has recourse to mass-media-style sentence fragments, which can be distracting and annoying. It also has a distinctive, broadly chronological structure, progressing through the stages of the transportation system with Smith playing the role of the historian-detective, plodding through potential reasons for the 'Birthstain' cover-up until she finally alights on the revelatory explanation. The reader is intrigued, having been convinced of the importance of the issue to the national psyche.

While this book is clearly a popular history, it is thoroughly researched. Smith makes effective use of both primary and secondary sources, but it is her primary research, based on the records relating to five boatloads of convicts chosen 'virtually at random' (6), and spread through the transportation era, on which the argument rests and finds its strength. This is particularly the case in the early parts of the book, when Smith is at pains to demonstrate the diversity of the convict population. The reader becomes convinced of the fallacy of stereotyping convicts, and this helps to humanise the historical actors. This is particularly true of the Berkley poachers, whose story is told with narrative panache.

Such a methodology is based on Smith's conviction that Australian history is composed of individual people and interpersonal relations rather than grand events, and for the most part the connection between the micro and macro levels of the argument is effective. Sometimes, though, it can be wearying to read through large passages of fragmented life narratives (especially in Chapter 3, 'An Amazing Cast of Characters') and one looks forward to the synthesis into a larger argument. Smith is perhaps not as consummate a storyteller as some of

her predecessors, but she makes up for it in her singular vision and the force of her arguments.

The main argument of this book is definitely persuasive. Spoiler warnings aside, its final conclusion is that it is not the nature of the convicts' crimes that accounts for the pervasive shame surrounding the memories of them, nor their crimes once they arrived within the colony, nor even the alleged brutality of the 'System' so maligned by nineteenth-century commentators and preserved in popular memory. In fact, Smith's analysis of the 1837 Molesworth Committee and the rise of the moral enlightenment movement in tandem with the Anti-Transportation movement (embodied by clerics like John West and William Ullathorne) is the basis for an effective thesis that the main reason for the rejection of Australia's convict origins lies in the association of convicts with 'unnatural crime': 'Underlying all the liberal and logical reasoning, all the moral justification and the outpouring of compassion for the "sinners", the real impetus for the anti-transportation movement was surely homophobia' (236). This homophobia was an attitude that permeated all levels of Australian society at the time, one that travelled back to Britain to infect opinions there of the Australian colonies, and continued to 'stain' the perceptions of Australians regarding their familial origins until very recently.

While the broad outlines of Smith's argument are convincing, some of the details are not so strong. This is evident in the 'homophobia' quote above: the presence of the qualifier 'surely' suggests some weakness in the argument. The ample evidence of corporal (and capital) punishment, even if only in the secondary settlements, undermines Smith's argument that the colonies operated more on 'de facto' consent than brute force (302). Indeed, brutality might not have been much in evidence in the 'core' colonies, but the threat of being sent to Port Arthur or Norfolk Island served a disciplinary purpose. In her desire to drive home a specific argument with primary evidence, Smith overlooks the system's twin drivers of punishment and deterrence.

At other points these chinks are more like fissures: Smith notes that in 1811 an investigation into sodomy on the *Captivity* hulk in Britain did not result in every Briton being labelled as 'depraved' (243). This line of argument seems to follow the manner of 'I know you are but what am I?' When linking rejection of the 'stain' to the radical nationalist movement resulting in Federation, Smith notes that Henry Parkes referred to a 'higher loyalty' than that of an earthly monarch, and suggests that Mark McKenna may be wrong in identifying this 'higher loyalty' as English Constitutionalism. 'In fact he may well have been referring to a "higher loyalty" to God, bearing in mind the biblical injunction against "unnatural crime"' (331). Without drawing in further evidence, such a link between radical nationalism and the homophobia of the anti-transportation movement sounds more like blunt sophistry than a well-substantiated argument.

Despite the effectiveness of this book's argument regarding the legacy of the convict era, it is in some of these broader claims about Australian culture and society since its foundation that Smith's argument tends to falter. In particular, the claim that class was of negligible influence in early Australian society cannot go without comment. Smith cites John Hirst and L. L. Robson on the lack of a colonial ruling class and mentions Australia's egalitarian ethos, extrapolating this to claim that '[t]he fact is that there was no "Us" and "Them" ... they were one and the same ... the absence of class was one of the defining features of the transportation era' (337). While it may pick up on one of the key differences between Australia and other

British colonies, this claim is too strong to be accepted whole, especially by those familiar with the strict marginalisation of the Irish (who Smith co-opts) from mainstream society. Just because the Irish could be found on both sides of the convict/gaoler divide does not mean that the divide did not exist. Indeed, the social mobility of ex-convicts who became ‘emancipists’ and wealthy landowners is testament to the presence of these very divisions: they may have been permeable, but they did exist.

A glaring omission for readers of Australian literature is the lack of much discussion of the representations of convicts and transportation in popular culture. It may be asking too much of a historian to address literary representation, but as Smith is explicitly concerned with popular imaginings of the convicts, such attentions would not be out of place. There is a glancing reference to Clarke’s *His Natural Life* and its distortions, but nothing more. Smith might have noted Robson’s analysis of the historical inaccuracies of this novel, mentioned Laurie Hergenhan’s critical monograph on convict fiction, or bestowed some attention on novels by Thomas Keneally, Hal Porter and Patrick White, among many others. This would lend strength to her arguments about popular representations of the convict period. A reading of a novel such as Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* might have also given insight into more recent (and controversial) revisions of the convict past and its role in family history and genealogy.

Nonetheless, these weaknesses of *Australia’s Birthstain* detract only marginally from its overall strengths. Smith has succeeded in bringing the convicts as individuals back into the national story, and does recognise their agency and control over their own fates. This undermines one of the most pervasive myths about transportation: that the convicts were merely subject to the cruel tyrannies of a ‘System’ that ground them into dust. She also offers an excellent account of how homophobia constructed the pervasive tropes of ‘stain’, ‘pollution’ and ‘contamination’, which have dominated Australian historiography since the mid-nineteenth century. Despite some problems with the inferences drawn from these arguments, this book is valuable in enabling family historians and genealogists to reclaim their origins and dispose of the destructive habits of mind inherited from a less enlightened age.

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