When the European powers began exporting convicts to other continents, they did so to create a deterrent and to establish new settlements across the world. Clare Anderson traces the history of punitive passages.

All the world’s a PRISON

Standing on the rocks of Kourou, looking out over the muddy red-brown waters that lap the shores of Guyane, or French Guiana, it is just about possible to make out the contours of three islands: Île Saint-Joseph, Île Royale and Île du Diable. The imperial history of this small archipelago began when Guyane became an outpost of the French empire in the 1760s and sick colonists sought refuge in the more salubrious climes of what they called the Îles du Salut: the Salvation Islands. After 1852, Guyane grew famous and eventually notorious as a place of convict transportation. As the penal colony expanded, its offshore islands became part of a constellation of convict locations scattered along its coast and rivers, facing outwards over the sea and across the borders with Brazil and Suriname. Today, Guyane is best known as the place in which the French military officer Alfred Dreyfus was imprisoned and from which Henri Charrière (played by Steve McQueen in the 1974 film Papillon) escaped. With penal transportation to the colony lasting for just over a century, Dreyfus and Charrière were just two among tens of thousands of convicts. It was not until 1953, following convict desertion on a massive scale and humanitarian concern about the fate of ex-convicts who, under French law, were not allowed to leave Guyane, that the last remaining convicts were liberated and the penal colony was closed.

France had first sent convicts to Guyane following the coup d’état of 1797. However, coinciding with an epidemic outbreak of what we now know was yellow fever, almost all of them died. The few who survived were repatriated to
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New South Wales between 1787 and 1840, but about the same number as those sent from British India to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal between 1858 and 1942. The Guyane convicts came not just from France, but also from its imperial possessions: Algeria, La Réunion, the Antilles (Guadeloupe and Martinique), Madagascar and French Indochina.

Most of the convicts were ordinary criminal offenders, though political prisoners such as Dreyfus were also sent. Included in their number were just a few hundred women, some of whom were volunteers from metropolitan prisons. The convict population was, though, overwhelmingly male. Slavery had been abolished in the French empire in 1848 and, to a large extent, convicts presented a solution to the inevitable labour crisis that followed. The first convicts to arrive were put to work clearing the dense forests for cultivation and in building works. They gradually moved, by 1857, from the initial settlement on the Îles du Salut to the mainland settlement of Maroni. A network of convict sites across the colony expanded and shrank over time according to their relative success and failure.
Convicts were employed in diverse forms of labour: not just land clearance and infrastructural development, but at various times in the tannery, lime kilns and workshops for the manufacture of shoes, boots and clothes. They cultivated coffee, sugar cane, betel nut and cotton and worked in logging wood in the timber camps. Mortality rates during the first decades were appalling. In the 1880s the average life expectancy of a convict was calculated at seven years, six months and seven days. For European convicts it was even worse: just five years, five months and three days.

With transportation criticised in Paris as little more than a death sentence, after 1867 all European convicts were shipped to a new, apparently less deadly penal colony in the Pacific: New Caledonia. Until transportation to the Pacific was suspended in 1896, Guyane received only convicts from the colonies. After that date, transportation from metropolitan France to Latin America was resumed.

The penal history of French Guiana is part of a global story. Around the world, transportation was underpinned by sometimes incompatible ambitions: to create a deterrent; to employ convict labour in opening up frontiers, colonies and borderlands; and to populate newly colonised locations with what in Guyane were called transportés-colons (transportation-colonists). Political repression and forced labour combined to change the face of nations, empires and colonies and to produce long-term impacts on economy, society and identity. Convicts took various, interconnected routes to penal sites across the world, which were closely associated with other forms of punishment (including imprisonment in jails and hulks), as well as indentured labour, military impressment, enslavement and the incarceration of indigenous people. Across a range of sites around the world, convict transportation and penal colonies left significant demographic, cultural and other legacies that are still evident today.

Among European powers, it was Portugal that first used convicts for the purpose of imperial expansion. It enrolled felons into its army and navy to conquer the North African presidio (fort) of Ceuta in 1415, in return for a pardon. It later transported convicts from Portugal to locations including Goa, São Tomé, Brazil, Mozambique and Angola, with considerable circulations between the colonies. During the great age of imperial expansion that began around the year 1700, the Spanish, Dutch and British also transported convicts overseas from Europe, as well as between their imperial possessions in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans. The Spanish shipped convicts to and around forts in the Americas, Cuba and the Philippines. Dutch flows (from the 17th century) spanned the Indian Ocean, with convicts transported between Java (in modern Indonesia) and the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa). Convicts were sent from Britain and Ireland to the Americas, including Virginia, Barbados and Jamaica. These destinations were not penal colonies; rather convicts were sold into indentured servitude and shipped alongside other such workers. Following the closing of the American colonies to convicts at the end of the War of Independence, the British experimented with convict transportation to West Africa (which proved a disaster) and, ultimately (and successfully), to New South Wales, Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), Norfolk Island

and Western Australia. The 167,000 or so convicts shipped to the Australian colonies included a significant minority of courts martialed soldiers and imperial subjects convicted in the West Indian and other colonies, including the Cape Colony, Hong Kong and Mauritius.

Transportation was not exclusive to European empires. Into the early 20th century, imperial Russia shipped convicts to its far eastern territories, including Siberia and Sakhalin Island. Meiji-era Japan sent convicts to the northern island of Hokkaido between 1881 and 1907. Qing China, which lasted from 1644 to 1912, used convict transportation overland to open up its westernmost frontiers, including, after its conquest in the late 1750s, Xinjiang. After gaining independence from the Iberian powers in the early 19th century, the new nation states of Latin America set up offshore penal colonies, too, including Ushuaia in Argentinian Patagonia, Brazil’s Fernando de Noronha and Mexico’s Islas Marias.

The number of convicts transported by the European powers was at least 680,000, an estimate likely to rise as the complex research necessary to piece together often fragmented archival material progresses. It does not include the 600,000 or so prisoners and military offenders conscripted into the convict forces of the French Empire between 1832 and 1972. Nor does it incorporate the 900,000 or so convicts shipped by imperial Russia, the (at least) 10,000 convicts transported to Hokkaido, the tens of thousands of Chinese convicts or the as yet unknown numbers of Latin American transportees. If we include the explicitly political transportations, deportations and resettlements of the 20th-century Soviet gulags and China’s laogai, the scale of convict transportation rises into the tens of millions: the full extent will probably never be known. From whichever vantage point we look, the geographical reach and numerical scale of global penal transportation was vast.

One key pattern of the period is that during the early modern age convicts were often impressed into the army, indentured in labour contracts or forced into ‘voluntary’ banishment. They could work alongside soldiers and slaves at near-identical labour and in near-identical conditions. In the Spanish presidios, for example, they were shipped with and employed alongside soldiers and slaves in the building of military fortifications. Convicts also worked with slaves and indentured labourers on Britain’s American plantations. From approximately the end of the 18th century, coinciding with the development of new Enlightenment ideas about ideal forms of punishment and confinement, discrete, often isolated, penal colonies emerged, which could be sites of radical experiments in the treatment and rehabilitation of convicts. Though work remained important to convicts’ so-called moral reform, sometimes these colonies were places of penal innovation, too. In the Andaman Islands, for example, a radiating cellular jail was constructed in 1906, in which convicts would undergo an initially harsh incarceration before progressing to other penal stages served outside its walls.

Political repression was always a feature of penal transportation, with some convicts transported for protest or rebellion. Many political convicts were educated and literate and wrote memoirs of their experiences. It is for that reason, perhaps, that they are best known. Some of the machine breakers and rural rebels convicted during England’s Swing Riots, when agricultural workers vandalised new machinery, were, for example, shipped as convicts to the Australian colonies in the early 1830s. The British transported dozens of Irish rebels to the convict hulks of Bermuda in the 1840s and to Western Australia following the rebellion of 1867. The Andaman Islands penal colony in the Bay of Bengal was initially established as a site for the transportation of thousands of mutineers convicted.
in the aftermath of the Great Uprising of 1857. Though the larger majority of convicts subsequently sent to the islands were ordinary criminal offenders, they continued to receive political convicts. These included so-called ‘fanatics,’ or Wahabis, in the 1860s and 1870s, Mapilahs from Kerala following the Malabar Rebellion in the 1920s and Indian nationalists, such as V.D. Savarkar, who were incarcerated in the cellular jail.

IF PENAL TRANSPORTATION was closely connected to military impressment, enslavement and indenture, as well as political repression of various kinds, it was also linked to other kinds of punishment. It was the usual less severe alternative to capital sentences, of death on the gallows or guillotine, and its enhanced use during the period from the late 1700s can in part be explained by a decline in execution rates in many contexts. It was usually seen as more severe than imprisonment and, in places such as France, where prisoners could be sent to the penal colonies after repeat offences, it was used as a particular deterrent against crime. Beyond its penal ambitions, it was also related to the desire to expand the frontiers of empires and nations. This was the case for French Guiana, as well as New Caledonia. Across the British Empire, convicts were used to colonise the Antipodes after 1787, to build Bermuda’s naval dockyard in the Atlantic Ocean (1824-63) and to undertake military works on the rock of Gibraltar (1842-75). Fearing Russian invasion and wanting enhanced overland communication, at the turn of the 20th-century, the Japanese government transferred convicts from Kushiro to Abashiri, where they built a new road connecting the town to central Hokkaido.

The global dimensions of transportation are evident across penal systems, too, including through the ongoing mobility of convicts following their initial transportation via onward shipment or relocation. Across empires, convicts were not just sent outwards to the colonies, but between and around imperial possessions. In early modern times, this included extensive convict movement between the Spanish presidios in the Americas and the Philippines. Entirely separate regional circuits could develop in some contexts. The English East India Company, for example, shipped convicts from its Indian possessions to penal settlements in Mauritius and Aden, as well as Penang, Malacca, Singapore and Burma. After Britain’s possessions in India were transferred to Crown control following the Great Uprising of 1857, the government of India established a new
In many cases, as in Guyane, the imperial powers desired permanent settlement in their possessions, following an initial period of land clearance and development. Across the various settlements, convicts were put to work in cutting down trees, draining marshes and building basic infrastructure: roads, railways, bridges and bunds. They were otherwise employed in occupations that could promote self-sufficiency and economic productivity: growing food and raising livestock, timber extraction and in some places experimental agricultural production or resource extraction. Examples of the latter included convict work on tobacco and coffee plantations, in the breeding of silkworms and manufacture of silk and in coal, sulphur and tin mines. Often, convicts were either encouraged to stay on after completing their sentence, perhaps through land grants or the gifting of seeds or agricultural equipment. In many places, convicts were denied the legal right of return or, where they had it, the cost of repatriation was not paid, so they could not go back to their place of birth or pre-transportation settlement. In practice, then, in places such as Australia, the Bay of Bengal, Japan and New Caledonia, convict transportation constituted a means of permanent colonisation. This was to the detriment of indigenous peoples in sites as diverse as Van Diemen’s Land, Hokkaido and the Andamans, which were utterly devastated by the foreign occupation of their land.

The profound impact of transportation on indigenous people, and ongoing controversies about their displacement, is one of its key legacies. Given its scale and reach, it is not surprising that penal transportation has left others – demographic, social and cultural – all over the world. It has been argued that, in some locations, the association between convicts and outdoor labour left local and migrant populations unwilling to take employment doing manual work. This was the case in both 19th-century Burma (the penal settlements closed in 1963) and in post-Second World War Guyane. Today, there are many thousands of genealogists in modern Britain, Ireland and Australia, for example, researching and constructing convict family trees. In the Andamans, the ‘local born’ descendants of convicts live quite differently from their mainland ancestors and are differentiated in the population categories of the modern Indian state. There are also descendants of convicts living in Guyane today, including in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, where the huge Camp de la Transportation is being developed as a museum and archive. In heritage sites and museums elsewhere visitors can learn about convict life in places such as Hyde Park Barracks (Sydney), Port Arthur (Tasmania), Abashiri and Tsukigata (Hokkaido) and the Cellular Jail National Memorial (Andamans). They can ride the train to ‘the end of the world’ in Ushuaia, Argentina. History, of course, is constantly subject to a process of making and remaking. As with the case of Guyane, what is remembered and forgotten about its complex history of convict transportation – as also its relationship to imperial repression, indigenous people, slavery and free migration – has had profound implications for local identities today.

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Further Reading


