

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM  
AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 9 DECEMBER 2014 AT 8 PM.**

Present: The President, Caroline Homer, in the chair and about 90 members and guests.

Minutes: The minutes of the November meeting were read, and approved as a true record.

Business: The President referred to a letter from the National Trust apropos the 2095 Heritage Festival, the recent splendid excursion to Port Arthur, and the Marita Bardenhagen Awards to THRAPP members Lorraine Dooley and Nic Heygarth.

Speaker: The President introduced Chris Leppard-Quinn as having pursued doctoral research on Tasmanian women convicts, among her concerns the administrative use of pertinent records. Her subject tonight was 'Sex Sells: The Anachronism of Colonial Prostitution'.

Dr Leppard-Quinn began by remarking that attitudes to prostitution and sexuality were more relaxed in the earlier nineteenth century than towards its close, and that historians have tended to read back the later situation onto the whole period. This paper concentrated on the process of convict assignment and the policing of sexual behaviour. For the period 1822-42 1779 persons identified as prostitutes had been transported to Van Diemen's Land, and she had studied a sample of sixteen shiploads. For this paper she had found perceptive insights in the work of Stephen Nicholas who had stressed that convicts had greatest importance in their role as workers; various feminist historians had argued similarly as to women convicts. She herself had found no great difference in patterns of assignment as between erstwhile prostitutes and others. There was some tendency for elite houses to receive fewer ex-prostitutes, but a more significant determinant in assignment was the skilling of the woman concerned. Thus the fact that a higher proportion of ex-prostitutes went to lower-class employers was less the result of their erstwhile prostitution than that their lack of domestic skills. There was virtually no evidence of discrimination against ex-prostitutes as such: indeed the fact of their ex-prostitution was largely unknown to agents of government.

Dr Leppard-Quinn next turned her attention to women's experience in assignment. Ex-prostitutes did tend to have more charges brought against them by employers, but again this pattern derived not from that part of their past but rather their deficiency in domestic skills; that they were younger and possibly of more assertive behaviour might have played a further part in this. Even where 'ladies' applied for assigned women there was no attempt by bureaucrats to 'protect' them from ex-prostitutes. By far the most common charge brought by employers was 'insolence', that term covering a wide range of alleged misbehaviour. Absconding, and appropriation of employers' clothing, were further frequent offences. Ex-prostitutes *were* more likely than others to have charges of sexual misconduct brought against them, although the culpability in bureaucrat eyes was to become pregnant rather than sexual engagement as such. While tensions between employers and their assigned servants received most bureaucratic notice, it would seem that happier relations could prevail. Perhaps this situation increased as did the number of ex-convicts becoming employers, even to some of them seeking old shipboard mates as their servants.

In her concluding remarks, Dr Leppard-Quinn again remarked on the comparatively relaxed attitudes to sexual matters in the earlier nineteenth century, the anti-transportationists playing a decisive role in obscuring and changing this situation. At one point, however, ex-prostitutes do seem to have suffered long-term disadvantage. In their post-convict life, many returned to that occupation, their experience in assignment having failed to imbue them with alternative skills.

The President thanked the speaker, and made some appropriate end-of-year remarks before inviting all to a celebratory glass.