

L. L. Robson: The Historical Basis of For the Term of His Natural Life

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MARCUS CLARKE'S *For the Term of His Natural Life* is unusual in being a work of fiction which cites detailed sources in the manner of an objective enquiry. It is the aim of this analysis to study these sources in their historical context, to examine the novelist's use and adaptation of them, to estimate what licence he has taken with his data and to compare Clarke's account of the convict system with the reality. It is important to bear in mind that Clarke was a novelist not an historian, but since his novel is responsible for some popular opinions concerning the transportation of prisoners to Australia, it is just that his references be traced and appraised.

How Clarke hit upon the subject of convictism for his novel is uncertain, though he had a number of precedents. Brian Elliott holds that 'he had no intention originally of writing a pamphlet against the system' and 'he was merely interested in writing a novel and saw that this subject afforded excellent scope for his talents'.¹ Clarke, however, states that his novel had a social purpose:

*Some of the events narrated are doubtless tragic and terrible; but I hold it needful to my purpose to record them, for they are events which have actually occurred, and which, if the blunders which produce them be repeated, must infallibly occur again.*²

Did he then feel compelled to justify his story after the writing of it? I think this might be the case, and I suspect that the idea of the novel may date from the time when he gathered his *Old Tales from a Young Country*, 'dug out by me at odd times during a period of threeyears'.³ If nothing else had brought the convict system under his notice, I think that his reading at the Melbourne Public Library had included almanacks and the like concerning Van Diemen's Land, together with reports of committees into the convict system, and that the shocking highlights of transportation recorded there suggested to him a sensation novel on that theme.

Be that as it may, he wrote what is probably the most popular of the nineteenth-century Australian novels, and a book which still lives when other contemporary novels are neglected. The original version, a serial in the *Australian Journal* (1870-72), was subsequently revised and shortened and it is the modified novel which is the subject of this enquiry. The revised version did not omit much of interest to the historian concerned with the convict system, though an exception is a conversation between convicts on the transport vessel and includes a good deal of thieves' cant or 'kiddy' language.⁴ How Clarke knew this 'flash' language I do not know, but it is probably significant that in his *Dictionary of Slang* Partridge traces most of the expressions back to J. C. Hotten's *The Slang Dictionary*, published first in 1859.⁵ Clarke does not seem to have used the dictionary of cant in J. H. Vaux's *Memoirs*,⁶ which is about the life of a pickpocket twice transported to New South Wales.

The conversation on the transport concerns a robbery, accomplished by using an umbrella to catch falling wood and plaster when the thieves break into a room through the ceiling. This was an old dodge which Henry Mayhew mentions in his *London Labour and London Poor*.⁷ He also records much thieves' cant, but there is no evidence that Clarke derived his material from Mayhew.

One other passage largely omitted from the revised novel is Chapter 2 of Book III. This is 'Hobart Town in 1830', a potted history derived in part from two almanacks published in Hobart Town in 1833: one by Henry Melville⁸ and the other by James Ross.⁹ From one Clarke recorded details of the classes of convicts,

their rations and emancipation, and from the other the case of the convict James Williams. The novelist acknowledges in the text 'an almanac published at Hobart Town in 1833'. He must also have used other such material for this factual chapter.

His Natural Life is in four books: 'At Sea, 1827'; 'Macquarie Harbour, 1833'; 'Port Arthur, 1838'; and 'Norfolk Island, 1846'. The convict hero of the novel, Rufus Dawes, together with Maurice Frere, a brutal superintendent of convicts, his wife Sylvia, John Rex, a convict, Rex's wife, Sarah, and the Rev. North are the principal characters. Most of them appear with Dawes at the three penal settlements and on the voyage out to Van Diemen's Land.

The island colony had been settled by Europeans in 1803 and during fifty years approximately 55,000 men and 25,000 women were shipped directly to Van Diemen's Land. Up to 1840, nearly all convicts were assigned and for any breaches of the regulations charged by their masters before magistrates. Punishments varied greatly and only the persistent or serious offenders were re-transported to a place of secondary punishment such as Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur or Norfolk Island. Therefore Clarke at once informs the historian by his Table of Contents that Dawes is to be placed among the dregs of the convict system and not in the typical situation of an assigned servant. Thus although the author seizes upon his material where it suits his purpose to entertain the reader, historically speaking we must conclude that the novel cannot help but be a misleading account of convict colonization. The reader must therefore not take Clarke too seriously as an historian; he was concerned with the dramatic highlights of transportation, not with a dispassionate history of it.

The first opportunity there is to test Clarke, against his own sources, occurs in chapters 1, 4, 5 and 7. These chapters of Book I refer to the voyage out and he cites four authorities for a journey which was undergone by all convicts: the enquiry into the affairs of New South Wales made by Commissioner J. T. Bigge¹⁰ for the British government at the end of Macquarie's governorship around 1820; the narrative of Thomas Reid,¹¹ a surgeon-superintendent on convict ships; the account of the colonies written by the Quaker James Backhouse;¹² and the report laid before the House of Commons by the Molesworth committee¹³ which found so strongly against transportation in 1837-8. None of these works, nor any of Clarke's sources for that matter, is valueless. The first and last-mentioned were followed by far-reaching governmental action and though both Reid and Backhouse were perhaps over-earnest observers, Backhouse was a perceptive one who travelled up and down the country and spoke to convicts as well as their masters. Clarke cites him a number of times. Reid was on board two convict ships as surgeon-superintendent in charge of the convicts.

Though the novelist does not appear to have drawn much material from his four sources, his description of the convict ship is fairly accurate. He correctly describes the various types of men transported and gives no romantic picture of their origins. Reid and another observer¹⁴ not cited by Clarke noticed that their charges were certainly not village Hampdens transported for stealing a loaf of bread to feed starving children, flung across the world by a callous ruling-class and now sleeping on the shores of Botany Bay. In truth, it is almost certain that two-thirds or thereabouts of all convict men sent out to Australia had been punished by public justice at least once previously.¹⁵ There is no foundation for the belief that convicts were largely poachers and men convicted for stealing handkerchiefs in a moment of weakness or devilment.

Clarke is also accurate in having about 180 men on his vessel the *Malabar*. There is, however (and it is important for the historian to emphasise this point) little evidence of overcrowding of convicts. It did sometimes occur, especially in the eighteenth-century, but was unusual. The notorious voyage of the Second Fleet, when 267 persons out of 1,026 perished,¹⁶ is not at all typical. One of Clarke's own sources contradicts him, for Bigge's *Report*, which the novelist cites as a blanket reference, noted that 'as the voyage is now conducted, it produces no greater degree of bodily inconvenience to ordinary men than many are exposed to who are not in a state of punishment, and certainly it is not found to be productive of injury to their constitutions'.¹⁷ Mortality among convicts was low, 1.8 per cent of men dying in transit during the whole transportation era to eastern Australia, but there had been overcrowding, and Clarke the novelist employs this fact to add atmosphere to his picture of the *Malabar* becalmed in the low latitudes.

Clarke's sources do not make it clear where he found his data for a description of the outbreak of typhus or where he gathered the material for his account of the hospital. However, the source cited concerning the

mutiny is clear enough: Lieut.-Colonel Breton stated to the 1837 committee on transportation that on every ship sent to Australia there was always formed a plan for taking the vessel.¹⁸ There might have been, but a successful mutiny on a male convict ship never occurred and few were attempted. Probably Clarke invented his mutiny, though similar incidents occurred on the *Albemarle* in 1791 and the *Chapman* in 1817.¹⁹ He does not give sources for either of these attempted seizures but no doubt stories of desperate mutinies were current when he was writing and Clarke was too good a novelist to ignore them.

It is during the voyage out then, that the author begins subjecting his main character to experiences which befell scarcely any, and probably none, of the convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land, for not only is there mutiny on board his convict ship but typhoid as well. Though there certainly were ships on which the 'gaol fever' broke out, this was also unusual, and is another instance of Clarke over-stating his case historically yet at the same time showing his reader what *could* happen to convicts.

When Dawes arrives at the Derwent he is despatched to Macquarie Harbour because it is mistakenly held that he was active in fomenting the mutiny. This settlement was established in 1821 as a place of severe punishment for secondary offenders of both Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales, and according to one of the novelist's references there was an average of approximately 350 men confined there, 100 engaged in ship-building and the balance set to procure Huon pine for the work.²⁰ By 1829 at least 12,000 men had been sent to Van Diemen's Land as prisoners (9,000 of them in the period 1820-29),²¹ so few men were likely to be sent to Macquarie Harbour, though it is difficult to determine the precise turnover of prisoners.

The first three chapters of Book II of the novel concern Macquarie Harbour and Clarke gives a number of references for his descriptions. Most of these are from James Ross's *Van Diemen's Land Anniversary...* and Clarke follows Ross closely in his descriptions of a settlement which the novelist had not seen. For instance, Ross writes:

*From the great moisture of the climate and the numerous streams constantly flowing from the thickly wooded country round finding their way in many parts through masses of decayed vegetable matter impregnated with the juices and strong acids of the different trees and plants, the waters of Macquarie Harbour are not only of an ugly dark colour but are destructive to the life of the inhabitants of the deep, so that in seasons when the weather drives the fish up into the harbour they may be seen floating dead upon the surface or washed upon the beach.*²²

Clarke has re-written this as follows:

*The turbulent stream is the colour of indigo, and, being fed by numerous rivulets, which ooze through masses of decaying vegetable matter, is of so poisonous a nature that it is not only undrinkable, but absolutely kills the fish, which in stormy weather are driven in from the sea.*²³

Other examples showing a similarly close adherence to Ross's facts are the description of the employment and diet of the prisoners, an account of timber-getting, and a description of the settlement's burial ground.²⁴

The journal of Backhouse was also used by the novelist and he quotes almost exactly figures concerning incidence of death at the Macquarie Harbour settlement: 'Out of 85 deaths that occurred here in eleven years, 27 were drowned, 8 killed accidentally, chiefly by the falling of trees, 3 were shot by the military and 12 murdered by their comrades.'²⁵ Clarke has the identical words but with the spectacular alteration of 11 years to one year.²⁶ This could have been a misprint in the original version which was never corrected because the novelist is so accurate everywhere else in presenting such details.

Another reference cited by Clarke for his Macquarie Harbour setting is an article by T. G. Lempriere and this source yields the reference to Grummet Island where, in the novel, Dawes is cruelly confined. Usually called 'the small island', this was about half a mile from Sarah's Island, the main one, and was used to imprison 30 or 40 of the most desperate prisoners.²⁷ What Clarke has done here is to use Grummet Island

for the confinement of one man at a time—Dawes in this case—and he has combined the reference to the island with another source.²⁸ This is a further example of the author of *His Natural Life* freely adapting historical material to the story of how Dawes, a sensitive and intelligent man, sinks under the weight of all that was most brutalizing in convict discipline.

Agonizing description is piled on agonizing description, for Clarke also uses the 1837 report on transportation to add to his picture. This is part of the evidence offered by John Barnes, surgeon at the Macquarie Harbour establishment, (which Clarke significantly persists in referring to as Hell's Gates, though this was the name of the settlement's entrance only). Barnes also mentions 'the small island' and speaks of the demoralizing effect of flogging administered with a special 'thief's cat' used on the prisoners.²⁹ An appendix to the report is also cited and this is a return of absconders and their fates, typified by such entries as 'absconded into the woods' and 'shot by the military'.³⁰

Clarke also refers his readers to fact in chapters 4 and 8 of Book II. These deal with the surrender of a convict named Gabbett and the discovery by Dawes of a dismembered corpse in the bush. Dawes has absconded from the settlement when it was being broken up in favour of Port Arthur. The one reference is to a passage which recounts one of the most horrible incidents in the novel: the convict who turned cannibal and subsisted upon his fellow runaways. Chapter 27 of the novel has the same reference and it will be convenient to examine them together.

The title of the relevant entry in the appendix is 'Documents relative to the absconding of Pierce and Cox from Macquarie Harbour'. The convict Pierce was apprehended on a beach with half a pound of human flesh upon his person and 'so horror-struck was he at his inhuman conduct that he did not know what he was about when brought back to the settlement'. Pierce stated in his deposition that 'Bob Greenhill was the first who introduced it, and said he had seen the like done before, and that it eat much like a little pork'. Pierce was hanged.³¹

The novelist has freely employed these well-known depositions with famous success in his account of the escapees from Port Arthur, whither he transfers the incident. In a ghastly scene the absconders kill and eat each other till only two remain, the weaker possessing an axe. They watch each other, afraid to sleep, till Gabbett despatches his companion.³²

This, then, is another example of Clarke's ability to work the outstanding horrors of the convict system into his novel. The reader can be confident that similar events will be recorded in the story of the brutalization and suffering of Rufus Dawes. Thus at Macquarie Harbour, Dawes recovers some of his dignity as a man only to be plunged again into suffering.

This episode involves the story of the *Osprey* brig which is to take the last of Macquarie Harbour's unhappy prisoners away. However, they capture the vessel, leave five persons behind and sail away to South America. After the ship leaves, the marooned party on shore is joined by Dawes who staggers out of the bush where he has been wandering since his escape from Grummet Island. Dawes succeeds in building a coracle and sails the party to their rescue but his further degradation.

These incidents are based very closely indeed on two happenings of which Clarke had read. One was the seizure of the *Cyprus* in 1829 at Recherche Bay and the other was the cutting out of the *Frederick* in similar circumstances, but at Macquarie Harbour itself.

There are a number of accounts of the *Frederick's* capture and Clarke gives his references for them and follows them almost exactly. For instance, in the novel five convicts named Lesly, Cheshire, Russen, Fair and Barker take a leading part in the mutiny organised by John Rex.³³ According to Clarke's sources, five men (with the identical names except for John Rex and except that Russen becomes Russell) were also involved in the seizure of the *Frederick*. Clarke took this material from the *Hobart Town Almanack*,³⁴ and the accounts there are so close to the novelist's that whole sentences of the narrative of the runaways have been transferred to the novel.

For instance, one allegedly true account of the affair includes the following:

*'Deluded men', Mr Hoy then said, 'I will now declare before my God upon the Bible, that upon condition of your giving up the brig, I will not mention it when I return to headquarters, but will give all good characters.'*³⁵

Clarke has made this

*'Deluded men!' he cried, 'do you know what you are about to do? You will never escape. Give up the brig, and I will declare, before my God, upon the Bible, that I will say nothing, but give all good characters.'*³⁶

The novelist has also used the *Cyprus* incident in which some of the marooned convicts who did not join forces with the mutineers made a coracle and sailed for help.³⁷ Clarke has transferred his attention, then, from the *Frederick*. No doubt he found the true story of the manufacture of the coracle from meagre resources irresistible, as have other writers. It is interesting to note that he was, at this point in the novel, presented with two fine pieces of material.

The rest of the scene at Macquarie Harbour and at sea seems of the novelist's own invention except the description of how Dawes ingeniously captured goats and used them to make the coracle. His account of the setting of the 'springer' snares is so convincing as to suggest that either he had made them himself or had watched someone else do so. However, a footnote to the original version of the story states that the method was well known to travellers in the Arabian desert,³⁸ and it is certainly possible that the novelist is once again using second-hand descriptions of the catching of the goats and the construction of the coracle. Clarke gives no hint in his sources apart from the reference to the Arabians.

The fate of mutineers of the *Frederick* and *Cyprus* must have been known to Clarke from his reading and he uses the adventures of the men on the former vessel at a later point in the book. This is included in the form of a narrative written by the rascally John Rex, and follows almost word for word throughout chapter 10 an account taken from an *Almanack* for 1838, complete with the heading beginning 'A Narrative of the sufferings and adventures of certain of the ten convicts who piratically seized the brig *Frederick [Osprey]*. ...'³⁹ To illustrate Clarke's use of this material here are two passages, the first from the *Almanack* and the second from the novel:

*Orders having arrived from headquarters of the Colonial Government for the breaking up of the penal establishment at Macquarie Harbour the Commandant (Major Baylee, 63rd regt.) and most of the prisoners, embarked on board a colonial vessel and set sail for Hobart Town, leaving a brig that had been built at Macquarie Harbour to be brought around after them, and placing Mr Taw, who had acted as pilot at the settlement in command of her, also three soldiers and a corporal.*⁴⁰

*When orders arrived from headquarters to break up the penal settlement of Macquarie Harbour, the Commandant (Major Vickers, -th Regiment) and most of the prisoners embarked on board a colonial vessel, leaving behind them a brig that had been built at Macquarie Harbour, to be brought round after them, and placing Captain Maurice Frere in command, left aboard her Mr Bates, who had acted as pilot at the settlement, four soldiers, and ten prisoners, as a crew to work the vessel.*⁴¹

Another example of how the writer drew into his narrative information from secondary sources is in chapter 9 which concerns a letter written home by John Rex. There is no evidence in Clarke's sources of convicts attempting to transmit such messages (though they may well have done so), but the novelist gives a reference to this letter because he has used, almost verbatim, a contrite letter home from a Norfolk Island prisoner in 1835. This letter is cited in Backhouse's book.

Chapter 15 of the novel is entitled 'One Hundred Lashes' and is based not on happenings at Port Arthur where the chapter is set, but at Sydney, for Clarke's authority is the unlikeable Slade who observed to the 1837 committee that fifty lashes under his superintendence were equal to 1,000 under any other man's. He further disclosed that beneath his watchful eye the flogger did his job properly and he never witnessed a case

where the flagellator did not break the skin of his victim's back in four lashes. Slade had also, in an outburst of enthusiasm, altered the cat-o-nine-tails: 'I ordered them to have a handle about two feet long. I had five lashes put to them of whip cord, and on each of these I had about six or seven knots.' And when the flogger faltered, 'I adopted the system, as has been the practice in H.M. Army, of having the scourger brought to account for his relaxation of duty'.

Slade did not say how he did this, but Clarke hazards a guess: he has the scourger flogged by another party when he does not give satisfaction. Slade admitted that when he set up these practices there was a great outcry in Sydney that he was 'a bloodhound and a rascal'. Sydney opinion was not squeamish. Slade was the son of Gen. Sir John Slade and had been an officer in the British Army for nine years, where he undoubtedly had experience of flogging. He went to New South Wales in 1832 in charge of the Prisoners' Barracks at Sydney.⁴²

Clarke's object in presenting his horrifying description of flagellation is two-fold: to bring home to the reader the barbarities of which the convict system was capable and to introduce a further step in the degradation of Dawes in the atmosphere of penal discipline carried to excesses. To justify his description of the hundred lashes being inflicted, the novelist cites also a number of returns of corporal punishment inflicted by benches of magistrates in 1833 in New South Wales. They are shocking documents. A sample is that of a prisoner sentenced to twenty-five lashes for absconding and then giving a false account of himself: 'This man was never flogged before; he called out at the second lash, and at each following lash repeated loud cries; he fainted at the 13th lash. He declared he would never come again.'⁴³ Slade was in charge of this punishment.

Clarke has also used an extract from Alexander Harris's *Settlers and Convicts*. This is a description of the infliction of a hundred lashes: 'The scourger's foot had worn a deep hole in the ground by the violence with which he whirled himself round on it to strike the quivering and wealed back, out of which stuck the sinews, white, ragged, and swollen. The infliction was a hundred lashes, at about half-minute time, so as to extend the punishment through nearly an hour.'⁴⁴

Thus there is abundant and sickening evidence to show that Clarke described truly the flogging process, and flagellation was relatively common in Van Diemen's Land till 1840. It was not Clarke's intention of course, to appraise the convict system objectively, but it must be pointed out that a total of one hundred lashes was rarely inflicted in the island colony, though the lack of convict records in New South Wales today does not enable us to say the same thing for the mother colony. Van Diemen's Land records for individual prisoners show convincingly that much more common was the 'Botany Bay dozen' or twenty-five lashes. But certainly some men were flogged—probably about one third of the men transported—and it was an indescribable experience. Here is what one convict recalled when he returned to England from Van Diemen's Land:

*When I was first flogged, there was inquiry among my fellow-convicts, as to 'How did D — (meaning me) stand it—did he sing?' The answer was, 'He was like a pebble'; that is, I never once said 'oh' or gave out any expression of the pain I suffered. I took my flogging like a stone. If I had sung, some of the convicts would have given me lush with a locust in it (laudanum hocussing) and when I was asleep would have given me a crack on the head that would have laid me straight. That first flogging made me ripe. I said to myself, 'I can take it like a bullock'. I could have taken the flogger's life at the same time, I felt such revenge. Flogging always gives me that feeling....'*⁴⁵

In the novel the man who is flogged is named Kirkland and the author uses him to introduce obliquely but unmistakably the subject of homosexuality, which offence, asterisked in parliamentary reports, caused such horror to commentators at the time. Kirkland was an educated prisoner and the son of a Methodist minister. A sadistic officer compels him to spend the night in a yard with other prisoners. Next morning the Rev. North hears him screaming to be let out and when he is put with the ironed gang again he wildly attempts to runaway but is caught. The other convicts refer to him as 'Miss Nancy'.⁴⁶ Kirkland is sentenced to the hundred lashes which North is unable to prevent being given. The flagellation, inflicted for a time by Dawes till he refuses to go on, kills the delicate prisoner. When Dawes disobeys orders he too is flogged till

he 'seemed to have abandoned his humanity'. Thus the novelist tellingly appals his readers by the physical description of a flogging and, as well, subjects Dawes to more agony.

Clarke had obviously read accounts of sexual perversions at Norfolk Island and he transfers these references to Port Arthur. Two of the accounts he cites were evidence to a committee of the House of Lords on the execution of criminal law. How common such practices were it is impossible to say, and to the reader of the sources these accounts have a distinct ring of rumour and hearsay about them. Nevertheless, witnesses spoke of male prisoners on Norfolk Island being 'married' to each other, of sexual aberration practised by both sexes in Van Diemen's Land, and of the existence on Norfolk Island of certain unfortunate men called 'Colonial Women'; one was named 'The White Dove' and another 'Matilda'.⁴⁷ Clarke, of course, does not have Dawes in any way connected with unnatural offences since that would have destroyed his reader's sympathy with the convict.

Yet more horrors follow. A part of the establishment at Port Arthur was set aside for boy prisoners. This was Point Puer and the novelist introduces it to the reader by noting that children were committing suicide by jumping off a high rock and drowning themselves in the sea. Frere's wife breaks down when speaking to two diminutive prisoners and when she has gone, they determine to follow the example of 'Cranky Brown', another boy: 'And so the two babies knelt on the brink of the cliff, and raising the bound hands together, looked up at the sky, and ungrammatically said, "Lord, have pity on we two fatherless children!" And then they kissed each other, and "did it"'.⁴⁸

The description of the boys' suicide is such as to scald the heart. Is it based on fact? Clarke gives no reference for the incident and I know of none, though such stories are legendary in Tasmania. It is probable that this was a story which Clarke heard and which served well to further his indictment of the convict system. And it may well be true, though the boys at Point Puer were very difficult to manage. One of Clarke's references refers in passing to the trial of three Point Puer boys ('the Head of one of them hardly rose above the Bar of the Court') who destroyed an overseer with a small stone hammer. Under cross-examination their answers were 'brutal and unfeeling'.⁴⁹ The earnest Reid felt compelled to record that 'any person acquainted with the general depravity which characterizes most of the boys who are banished after a few months confinement in prison, will not hesitate to acknowledge that they are usually more corrupt and vicious than many of the grown up'.⁵⁰ However, the Point Puer experiment was an enlightened one in its day and attempted to reform the boys and teach them a trade.

In the chapters dealing with the escape of John Rex and a party of convicts including Gabbett, Clarke leans a little on an account of the life of Martin Cash, a Van Diemen's Land bushranger,⁵¹ but the story of the escape is substantially the novelist's own invention. Cash did escape from Tasman's Peninsula under somewhat similar circumstances. The episode concerning Gabbett and cannibalism has been noticed earlier in this enquiry. Clarke's description of the Peninsula seems generally accurate. (He visited Port Arthur and the Peninsula while in Tasmania).

Dawes ends his Inferno-like circuit of the penal settlements in the final Book of the novel which is set on Norfolk Island, a place of banishment for colonial offenders as well as for desperadoes sent there directly from Britain. The particulars of the latter group show, from the indents transmitted with them, that they were almost all transported for grave offences such as assault and robbery and rape. Clarke's account of the island in the 1840s, when it was administered by the government of Van Diemen's Land, is well-documented and derived in great part from sources he cites. Typical is this extract from a report published in 1847: 'The place is evidently regarded, more particularly by the colonial convicts, as an Alsatia or sanctuary'.⁵² The novelist re-phrased this as: 'The lumber yard is a sort of Alsatia, to which the hunted prisoner retires'.⁵³ He goes further than this, however, in the incident in which Dawes, the leader of 'the Ring', sets the officials at defiance. The passages are too long for me to reproduce both, but here is the origin of Clarke's description:

On the first of my morning visits to the Lumber Yard, accompanied by —, Superintendent of English prisoners, I observed on our entry a man very deliberately smoking, standing among a crowd round the fire inside the cook-house. Mr — saw that this exhibition attracted my notice, and pointing out the circumstances to an assistant-superintendent, —, desired him to take the pipe away, for which purpose he advanced to the smoker; he was received

with a look of the most ineffable disdain, and very quietly addressed the man, who with hands in pockets, turned from him and walked away to that part of the mess shed called 'the Ring', where all the worst of the prisoners associate ... Mr — now ordered the man to be taken to gaol, no one stepped forward for a few seconds, until Mr —, acting Chief Constable, who had been standing in the rear advanced, and with admirable calmness and determination proceeded to the spot. The whole yard was now like a disturbed hive, and Mr — expressed his conviction that there would be a riot, for that the men would not suffer the offender to be taken into custody; however, after a short time had elapsed, the culprit was seen emerging from the dense crowd by which he had been surrounded, with hands in pockets, attended by, rather than in custody of, the acting Chief Constable of the island. He deliberately advanced to Mr —, who was standing close by my side, and in the most insolent manner said to him, 'What have you ordered me to gaol for?' Mr — very coolly expostulated with him, and advised him to go quietly, when he deliberately struck him two violent blows in the face and using some very opprobrious expressions fiercely rushed upon him and nearly threw him to the ground. — now seized him, and with assistance released Mr. —, constable — desiring to know if he should shoot him. The fellow now withdrew to another part of the shed, followed if not borne along by a dense crowd, — still with him. Mr. — rejoined me, and soon afterwards looking round said, 'We had better retire, Mr Stuart, I see them getting out their knives', and withdrew from the yard Some time elapsed before — and the prisoner advanced; he, however, with hands in pockets, at length made his appearance, and after passing close by me, raised his hand, seemingly to rectify the position of his straw hat, or to offer a tardy apology for salute. A more wanton, unprovoked, and flagrant outrage than that of which this man was guilty, I never witnessed The use of opprobrious language to the officers is habitual, more especially among the colonial convicts, to which a deaf ear is usually turned.⁵⁴

A comparison of the above passage with the novel will show how closely Clarke followed it in describing the hardening of Rufus Dawes.

Dawes becomes careless of whether he lives or dies, but 'the system' is still determined to break him completely. The novelist describes one of these attempts when he writes about an instrument of torture. This is an iron frame to which Dawes is tied in such a way that his head projects over one end. 'If he allowed his head to hang, the blood rushed to his brain, and suffocated him, while the effort to keep it raised strained every muscle to agony pitch.'⁵⁵ The hero of the novel is confined to this device for nine hours.

Whether such torture was used on Norfolk Island is unknown for certain, though Martin Cash describes it and supplied Clarke with his description.⁵⁶ However, the novelist's general account of Norfolk Island is accurate and nearly all of chapter 3 of Book IV is derived from official documents. C. J. Forbes, citing a convict, gave a famous piece of evidence in 1837 which no doubt Clarke read: 'Let a man be what he will when he comes here, he is soon as bad as the rest; a man's heart is taken from him, and there is given to him the heart of a beast.'⁵⁷

Accounts of men murdering their companions because they were weary of life in such a place have been handed down, but it is noteworthy that when Forbes was pressed on this point, he could cite no specific cases but 'had a recollection in my mind of two or three men cutting the heads of their fellow prisoners with a hoe while at work, with a certainty of being detected and with a certainty of being executed.'⁵⁸ And the evidence of Ullathorne, cited in the appendix to the novel, also gave Clarke material on which to work:

As I mentioned the names of those men who were to die, they one after another, as their names were pronounced, dropped on their knees and thanked God that they were to be delivered from that horrible place, whilst the others remained standing mute, weeping. It was the most horrible scene I have witnessed.⁵⁹

It was indeed a horrible scene and confirms the picture Clarke is presenting to his reader, by design or accident does not matter—a picture of man's inhumanity to man.

Enough source-material used by Clarke has been cited now to indicate the historical basis of the novel, whatever its purpose. I think, though I cannot prove it, that what he did was this: he dipped into the subject, became struck with the horrors perpetrated a mere forty years previously and invented the character Dawes in order to string together the episodes. Having done that, he had to reject any evidence he may have gathered concerning possible reformation of convicts and any evidence in favour of the transportation system. He therefore set his main character down in the penal settlements for the worst convicts at the height of their infamy. It is significant, for instance, that he mentions nothing of the enlightened work of the liberal Maconochie on Norfolk Island.

Clarke succeeded in interesting readers, if the popularity of the novel is any criterion, but he did not write, and did not attempt to write, a description of convict life that might be called typical, as far as there is meaning in that word. Most of his sources have been examined; an exception is the one that should have been most important—his visit to Tasmania. Elliott notes that he went to ‘write up the criminal records’ but is uncertain what this amounted to.⁶⁰ It did not amount to much, I suggest, for as Elliott remarks, there was plenty of secondary material available to him in Melbourne. Some of his sources he may have found only in Tasmania, though it is unlikely that the parliamentary reports, almanacks and newspapers were not in Melbourne and read there by Clarke. Apart from inspecting the Port Arthur and Tasman's Peninsula scene, he does not appear to have examined written records, though he undoubtedly, as he says, heard many convict stories. (The suicide of children at Point Puer was probably one of these, and Clarke himself says that he heard the story of Blind Mooney). If he had looked at the convict records in Tasmania, is it likely that he would have neglected this rich source? Perhaps he did, because one intriguing passage in the original story suggests that he had examined manuscript material. This passage describes the career of James Williams, mentioned in the ‘HobartTown, 1830’ chapter. His source, printed in 1833, did not of course take Williams' career beyond that point, but Clarke does. He remained at Macquarie Harbour until the settlement was transferred to Port Arthur, and died at that place, in 1849, at the age of forty-five.⁶¹

It was fashionable for nineteenth-century novelists to use documentary material relating to social ills in the way that Clarke did, but it is instructive to compare the reality with Clarke's general picture of the convict system. The typical convict was an urban thief, single, aged twenty-five, previously convicted at least once and transported for seven years for larceny. He was well-treated according to the standards of the day on the voyage to Australia and when he arrived was assigned to a settler. He probably had a number of masters and suffered punishment five times, mainly for such offences as being absent without leave or drunk. If he were a rebellious spirit and his master turned nasty, his transportation could become a very severe punishment, which it was meant to be. He might be flogged; but no more than approximately fifteen per cent of prisoners were ever sent to a penal settlement, and most convicts were not flogged. Usually men secured a ticket of leave within three years and this enabled them to work for themselves provided they reported regularly to the police. Upon fair behaviour (not necessarily exemplary behaviour) the prisoner would be granted a conditional pardon before full sentence was completed.

Such was the life of the run-of-the-mill prisoner. It has been shown that Rufus Dawes and his tragedy are a far cry from this. The strength of Clarke's novel is that though he strains our credulity he does not fatally jolt us from a willing suspension of disbelief, and the knowledge that the individual horrors of which he writes are documented contributes to this effect by lending an impression of historical truth to the whole story. It is beyond the scope of this enquiry to look into matters of a more exclusively literary character, such as the full significance and force of Clarke's general picture of evil and suffering. There is no doubt, however, that his use of historical material made the novel a more effective human document than it otherwise might have been.

1 Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford, 1958), ch. VIII, *passim*, p. 145.

2 Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Oxford, 1952), p. xxvii. For the sake of brevity I shall use the original and short title in future references. The first four words of the longer title were added in 1885.

3 Marcus Clarke, *Old Tales from a Young Country* (Melbourne, 1871).

4 *His Natural Life* (Sydney, 1929), pp. 107-112.

5 Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (London, 1951).

6 2 vols. (London, 1819), II.

7 3 vols. and an 'extra' vol. (London, 1864), 'extra' vol., p. 349 ff. For observations on thieves' cant at Sydney Cove in 1788-92, see Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, ed. L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney, 1961), p. 297: 'In some of our early courts of justice, an interpreter was frequently necessary to translate the deposition of a witness, and the defence of the prisoner'

8 Van Diemen's Land Almanack, p. 77.

9 'An Essay on Prison Discipline', *Van Diemen's Land Annual*, p. 37.

10 *P.P.*, *Report on N.S.W.* 1822 (448), XX. (P.P. stands for British *Parliamentary Papers*. Titles are shortened and followed by the date of the volume, the number of the Paper, the volume number and number of the page in the bound volumes, not the page number of particular papers).

11 Thomas Reid, *Two Voyages to N.S.W. and Van Diemen's Land, with a description of the present condition of that interesting colony* (London, 1822).

12 James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (London, 1843).

13 *P.P.*, *Report on Transportation 1837* (518), XIX.

14 P. M. Cunningham, *Two Years in N.S.W.*, 2 vols. (3rd ed., London, 1828), vol. 2, *passim*.

15 L. L. Robson, *The Origin and Character of the Convicts* (Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, 1963). Quantitative references throughout are from the same source.

16 Charles Bateson, *The Convict Ships* (Glasgow, 1959), p. 111.

17 *P.P.*, *Report on N.S.W.*, 1822 (448), XX, p. 551.

18 *P.P.*, *Report on Transportation, 1837* (518), XIX, Question 2,432.

19 Bateson, pp. 117-8, 184-8.

20 James Ross, *Van Diemen's Land Anniversary for 1831* (Hobart Town), pp. 262 f.

21 Bateson, Appendix VII (a).

22 Ross, *V.D.L. Anniversary for 1831*, p. 266.

23 Clarke, p. 109. Page numbers, unless otherwise stated, refer to the O.U.P. edition of the novel cited in note 2.

24 See Ross, pp. 263, 267-8, and Clarke, pp. 110-111.

25 Backhouse, pp. 49-50.

26 Clarke, p. 116.

27 *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*, vol. 2 (Launceston, 1846), p. 26, article by T. G. Lempriere.

28 This is probably the periodical *Meliora* for April, 1861, a copy of which I have not seen. See J. V. Barry, *Alexander Maconochie of Norfolk Island* (Melbourne, 1958), p. 121.

29 *P.P.*, *Report on Transportation 1837-8* (669), XXII, pp. 87-9.

30 *ibid.*, Appendix 56B, pp. 364-6.

31 *ibid.*, pp. 367-70.

32 Clarke, Book III, ch. 27, *passim*.

33 Clarke, p. 160.

34 William Gore Ellison, *Hobart Town Almanack for 1838* (Hobart Town), pp. 1-11 of 'A Narrative of the Sufferings. ...'

35 *ibid.*, p. 6.

36 Clarke, 1929 ed., p. 196.

37 *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*, vol. I, (Hobart, 1842), pp. 366-7, 371-5.

38 see p. 224 of 1929 ed.

39 Elliston, pp. 1-33.

40 *ibid.*, p. 3.

41 Clarke, p. 323.

42 *P.P., Report on Transportation 1837* (518), XIX, Q. 882-92.

43 *ibid.*, appendix 2(e), pp. 409 f.

44 This passage was from Alexander Harris, *Settlers and Convicts* (2nd. ed., Melbourne, 1954 first published 1847), pp. 12-13, cited by Mary Carpenter, *Our Convicts*, 2 vols. (London, 1864) vol. 1, p. 233.

45 Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 3, pp. 397-8.

46 Clarke, pp. 347-350. Partridge gives 'Miss Nancy' as: a catamite (low) colloquial, 19th-20th century.

47 *P.P., Report into Criminal Law 1847* (447), VII, Q. 5,085-5,130, 5,175.

48 Clarke, Book III, chapter 21, *passim*.

49 *P.P., Report into Criminal Law 1847* (447), VII, Q. 5,174.

50 Reid, p. 21.

51 James Lester Burke (ed.), *The Adventures of Martin Cash* (Hobart Town), 1870, chs. 3-4. There is some evidence that Burke's was not 'a faithful account' as he sub-titled it.

52 *P.P., Correspondence on Convict Discipline*, 1847 (785), p. 185.

53 Clarke, p. 496.

54 *P.P., Correspondence on Convict Discipline*, 1847 (785), pp. 184-5, cf. Clarke, pp. 498-9.

55 Clarke p. 562. In the 1929 edition of the novel, Clarke (p. 468) says that his description is derived from 'British Parliamentary Papers, 1847'. I have not been able to find the reference but there are a great many volumes.

56 Burke (ed.), Chapter 9.

57 *P.P., Report on Transportation 1837* (518), XIX, Q. 1, 119.

58 *ibid.*, Q. 1,342.

59 *ibid.*, 1837-8 (669), XXII, Q. 267.

60 Elliott, p. 153. There is a good deal more historical material which Clarke adapted and which cannot be treated here.

61 Clarke, 1929 ed., p. 157.

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