

Life for the Lower class in C18th

Class

During 18th century Britain there was a distinct divide between the three classes:- Upper class of the aristocracy, middle class, and the working class who were the worst off than any of the classes. The majority of the population during the Georgian period was in the working classes. They lived in the city with long hours of work, for the ones that could find work, limited freedom and an early death from the poor quality of life.

Disease

There was a lot of disease, which spread quickly due to the close proximities of people's houses in the cities, due to the increasing population. There was also limited healthcare that was unavailable to the working classes.

Disease was also quite common due to the outside sewer systems that ran down the streets of every major town and city. As toilets were not available to the working classes, buckets were used and the contents of which were thrown out of the windows and into the streets.

Food

The quality of food during 18th century Britain was of poor quality that led to diseases and death. There was also starvation within the working classes as many families could not afford to buy enough food to survive on. This led to people stealing food and therefore becoming criminals.

A lack of education

As there were no laws that made it compulsory for children to get an education, many of them went straight into work, children as young as five years old were given jobs as chimney sweeps, and earned little money or sometimes not earning any money at all. Some children nicknamed 'climbing boys' were made to starve so that they were small enough to climb inside a chimney and clean it.

Day to day life

The higher classes seemed to label the working class and blamed them for all of the crimes that happened during the era. The government didn't care very much for the poor and there was no help for them in any way, making them vulnerable to the state. Entire streets in the slums of London were inhabited by prostitutes. Many girls viewed a few years 'on the game' as a sensible way to build up a little capital to invest in a small business later, but their future was often cut short by sexually transmitted diseases. Crime became a frequency within the working class society, as for many it was the only way for people to survive, and became a way of life as there were limited jobs and in the towns and cities.



Gin Lane— issued in 1751 by William Hogarth. This illustration aimed to highlight the consumption of cheap gin at the time but also serves as a depiction of people's attitude towards the working

Crime and Punishment in Georgian Society

Context

The Georgian era (1714-1830) was a time of immense inequality, and life for the poor was extremely harsh. Life was only made worse due to the huge increase in population. The labour market was saturated with the young, causing mass unemployment. There was no official police force so those without employment turned to a life of crime.

A laughing stock

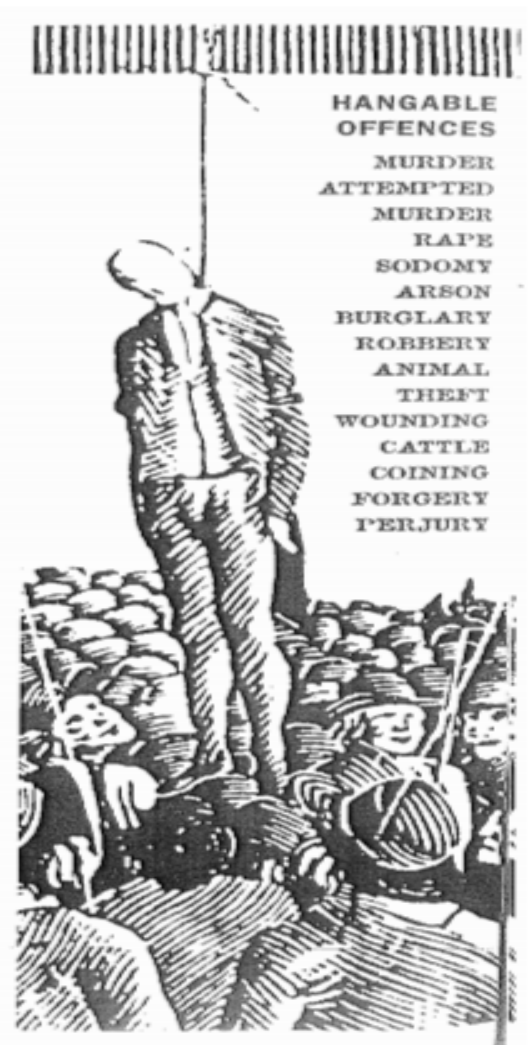
Britain's European neighbours mocked its lack of police force and the lenient judicial system whereby defendants were afforded some rights, such as being innocent until proven guilty. Because detection of crimes was woefully incompetent, and trials, although brief were fair, the Georgians needed another way to deter crime— and that was capital punishment; execution by hanging.

Crimes

It was commonly thought that there was a 'criminal class'. This was not wholly inaccurate- in 1797 a staggering one person in eight lived off crime in London- but Georgian statistics were extremely inaccurate and many people were lumped into the 'criminal class' who were merely poor or 'immoral'. Punishments for crime against property were severe, as property owners were terrified by the threat of the 'mob' or gangs. The political culture of the time was dominated by the theories of John Locke (1632-1704), who argued that people had a right to defend their property. The Georgians concocted over two hundred hanging offences, from poaching a rabbit to appearing on a high road with a sooty face; the vast majority of such offences were crimes against property.

What a spectacle

Between 1751 and 1800 there were over 1400 people hanged publicly in London. Watkin Tench argues that public hangings was the working people's 'favourite form of entertainment'. Tyburn Gallows were the central attraction. Eight times a year unfortunate felons were hanged before hungry crowds of between 3000 and 7000 people. Often the numbers soared to mobs of 40,000 people and there are records of a crowd of 100,000 for notorious criminals. It was a gory and fascinating spectacle; many took several minutes to die. In 1802 Governor Wall dangled for 15 minutes before he died. The noose had slipped behind his neck and in the end the hangman had to pull his legs. This was not unusual, a fact borne out by Thomas Barrett's death in OCG (Act 2, Scene 6.)



HOW YOU DIED - THE GORY FACTS!

The eyes red, projecting forwards and sometimes partially forced out of their cavities... a bloody froth or frothy mucus sometimes escaping from the lips and nostrils... the urine and faeces are sometimes involuntarily expelled at the moment of death.

Henry Fielding

(an Eighteenth century playwright and novelist)



A good day out for all the family...

Ketch: Remember how he danced and everyone laughed

What do the convicts in *Our Country's Good* think of hanging and the law? Find quotes to support your statements.

Sideway: This I am sure of, I shall meet with less cruelty among the most barbarous nations than I have found at home

Duckling: No way I'm doing a play with a hangman. The words would stick in my throat.

Pardon me Sir.

From 1779-1788, when the convicts in *Our Country's good* would have been sentenced, there were 1,152 capital convictions but only 51 executions. Pardons were frequently dispensed and consequently Britain's prisons were overflowing. Official transportation began in 1717 as a way of ensuring that criminals were punished without putting them to death and to ease the strain on the British prisons. Originally convicts were sent to work in American Colonies up until the American revolution and this was no longer an option. After Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia in 1770 many locations were suggested for possible transportation and Botany Bay became the new destination.

A chance of reform?

Why in act One scene Two, does Governor Phillip ask 'was it necessary to cross fifteen miles of ocean to erect another Tyburn? Because public physical punishment was a display of power of the state over the individual and there was nowhere that the State needed to assert its authority more strongly than in the penal colony. The "authorities" in Australia believe that they had to achieve order before they could offer justice, and it is not surprising that Collins warns Phillip that the "edifice will collapse without the mortar of fear" (Act One, Scene Three) Phillip tries to make the argument that people can be changed by education. Tench and Collins are of the opinion that criminality is innate and the only solution is punishment, hence their keenness to erect gallows.

Timeline of the first fleet

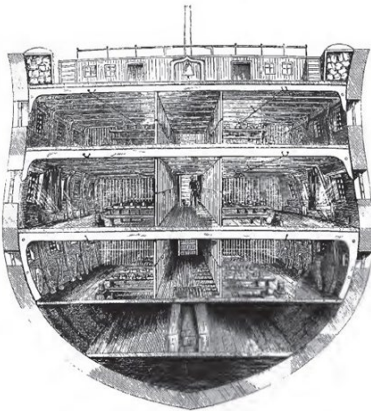




The First Fleet

All aboard

The First Fleet is the name given to the first group of eleven ships that left Great Britain on 13 May 1787 that became the first European settlement in Australia. The fleet consisted of two Royal Navy vessels, three store ships and six convict transports, carrying more than 1,000 convicts, marines and seamen. The ship sailed to Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town and to Botany Bay, which then arrived in mid-January 1788. This took a total between 250 and 252 days from the first to last arrival.



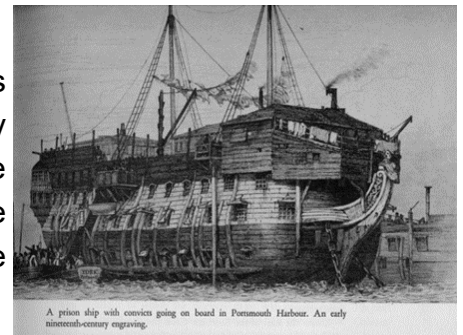
SECTIONAL VIEW OF THE INTERIOR OF THE "DEFENCE" HULK.

A place to lay your head

Convicts were taken aboard in chains and shackles. Once aboard these were unlocked. A hatch was opened and the convicts went below to the prison deck and the hatch was locked. Sometimes, however, they were kept in chains and behind bars even on board. The convict quarters had ventilators to let in light and air. The Port end would be reasonably light but the bows dark and gloomy. On some ships, in the early days, convicts were kept below most of the time. In many cases they were restrained in chains and were only allowed on deck for fresh air and exercise

Conditions on the ship

Life at sea was tough for both prisoner and officers. The journey was long and rations were very sparse. Much to the dismay of many officers, prisoners and officers were given the same rations. The conditions below deck were cramped, four transportees lying in a space seven feet by six feet, the dimensions of a modern king size bed were the norm.



A prison ship with convicts going on board in Portsmouth Harbour. An early nineteenth-century engraving.

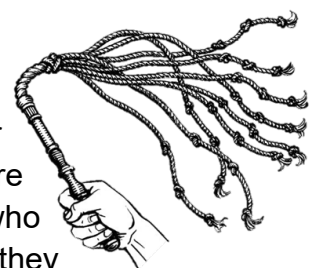


Illness and disease

Many of the **convicts were already disease ridden** and many died from typhoid and cholera in the dreadful conditions on the ships. **Those that survived were severely weakened by scurvy, dysentery and fever.** There were many cases of sea sickness and stomach upsets, and occasionally measles. However the ships were kept reasonably clean and the ships' surgeons did their jobs well enough.

Punishments

Punishments were harsh and abuse was common. Discipline was brutal, with regular use of the lash. In later days, if the convicts misbehaved they would get 'boxed' - put in a small confined space in the bows, in which a man could neither lie down nor stand. Conditions only started to improve when complaints were received from the Colonists who faced the prospect of supporting convicts who were in such poor condition on their arrival that they could not carry out the work they had been sent to do.



Aborigines

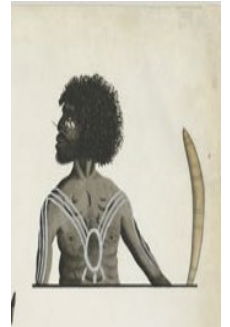
Australia discovered?

Although many believe that Australia had been discovered in 1770, it is now known that Aborigines had been living there for 30,000 years prior to the 'discovery'. At the time of the first fleet's arrival there were about 300,000 Aborigines in Australia divided between 500 tribes. Tribes did not share a common language; the people did not read or write; they had no concept of private property or money; and no discernible Kings or gods.



Origins

The word "Aborigines" translates as "the first" or "earliest known". The Aborigines came to Australia as modern human beings about 40,000-60,000 years ago. The Aboriginal Culture is one of the world's longest surviving cultures. All of Australia's Aborigines were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers, with each clan having its own territory.



Belonging

Fundamentally territorial, the Aborigines were semi-nomadic people who lived in harmony with their land and for whom tribal land signified more than the European concept of ownership could ever embrace. The territories or 'traditional lands' were defined by geographic boundaries such as rivers, lakes and mountains. All Australian Aborigines shared an intimate understanding of, and relationship with, the land. That relationship was the basis of their spiritual life and shaped the Aboriginal culture.

A way of life

The Aboriginal people had their own laws, and languages, and through storytelling, rock art and bark paintings, they passed on their history to each new generation.

Aboriginal tribes didn't usually stay in one place for long moving to watering places and setting up camp there. Their traditions included music, singing, dancing, and art.

They did paintings on dried tree bark with natural black, brown, yellow, white, and sometimes red colours. The paintings were originally used for tribal ceremonies and then destroyed shortly after the ceremonies were finished.



'Terra Nullius'

The colonists were led to believe that the land was Terra Nullius ('no one's land'), which Lt James Cook declared Australia to be in 1770 during his voyage around the coast of Australia. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Island continent was owned by over 400 different nations at the time of this claim by Cook. When the first fleet arrived in Sydney Cove it is said that Captain Philip was astounded with the theory of Cook's terra nullius, saying "Sailing up into Sydney cove we could see natives lining the shore shaking spears and yelling."



Aboriginal Life Through European Eyes

The early Europeans took a dim view of the Aboriginal way of life when first they encountered it. This excerpt is taken from the diary of Watkin Tench:

It does not appear that these poor creatures have any fixed Habitation; sometimes sleeping in a Cavern of Rock, which they make as warm as a Oven by lighting a Fire in the middle of it, they will take up their abode here, for one Night perhaps, then in another the next Night. At other times (and we believe mostly in Summer) they take up their lodgings for a Day or two in a Miserable Wigwam, which they made from Bark of a Tree. There are dispersed about the woods near the water, 2, 3, 4 together; some Oyster, Cockle and Muscle (sic) Shells lie about the Entrance of them, but not in any Quantity to indicate they make these huts their constant Habitation. We met with some that seemed entirely deserted indeed it seems pretty evident that their Habitation, whether Caverns or Wigwams, are common to all, and alternatively inhabited by different Tribes.

Disease

After the arrival of the first fleet disease struck a fatal and extensive blow to the Aboriginal people, who until that point had been isolated for thousands of years from the diseases that had raged through Europe and Asia. They had no resistance to the deadly viruses carried by the sailors and convicts such as smallpox, syphilis and influenza. In less than a year, over half the indigenous population living in the Sydney Basin had died from smallpox. The region, once alive with a vibrant mix of Aboriginal clans, now fell silent.



What effect does the appearance of the Aborigine have on the play as a whole?

"The Aborigine in the play acts like a touchstone, he reflects not just the Aborigines and their culture but the Australian land mass as a whole. "How can we befriend this crowded, hungry and disturbed dream?" (Act 2, Scene 5). My performance as the Aborigine is not based on research of Aborigines today, but is more an interpretation of the lines and the feelings embodied in the character."

Howard Saddler– Actor who played the Aborigine.

Dreamtime

In *Our Country's Good*, the Aborigine speaks only four times, but his haunting words give a native

Australian reaction to the bewildering events of 1788. 'Dreaming', central to the Aborigine's assessment of the action, is the basis of Aboriginal spirituality. Each tribe had their own version of the myth of Dreamtime.

"In the Dreamtime, in the long distant past, giant semi-human beings, behaving like men and women rose out of the featureless plains, where they had been slumbering for countless ages, and started to wander aimlessly over the countryside. As they wandered these dreamtime heroes carried out the same tasks as do the Aborigines of today. Then mysteriously, this dreamtime came to an end, and wherever these creatures had been active, mountain range, isolated hills, valley, watercourse or other natural features now marks the place." **From The Dreamtime: Australian Aboriginal Myths in Paintings by Ainslie Roberts 1964.**



"The Australian Aboriginal Code of Behaviour is based on the saying 'As it was done in Dreamtime, so it must be done today' and the landscape itself is their 'embodied history', the trees, mountains and animals of Australia are all sacred, all part of the Aboriginal 'Dreaming'. To deprive the Aborigines of their territory was to condemn them to spiritual death - a destruction of their past. Their future and their opportunities of transcendence."

From *The Fatal Shore* by Robert Hughes

· How do you imagine the Aborigines felt when the first fleet landed?

How would you portray the Aborigines initial thoughts and feelings of the first fleet landing in Act One, Scene Two as a director and a performer?

The Creation



Timberlake Wertenbaker

Timberlake Wertenbaker grew up in the Basque country, attending various schools in Europe and the USA. She studied Ancient Greek and philosophy at University, subject which would inform much of her future writing. After trying her hand at journalism she discovered a talent for playwriting. Her work was spotted by the Artistic director of the Soho Poly Theatre, Verity Bargate. She was given a commission to write a play, which led to further commission at the Royal Court Theatre. She then held the post of Writer in Residence at the Royal Court from 1984 to 1985. In her 1985 play *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, she demonstrated a propensity for writing about the eighteenth century.

Themes and Ideologies of Wertenbaker's works

Feminism and the epic- Wertenbaker has a flare for creating epic world with strong women at their core. This is demonstrated in plays such as *The Love of the Nightingale*, *Dianeira* and her version of Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

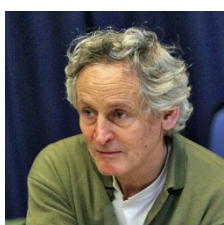
Transportation- Wertenbaker often writes about characters whose lives change when they become removed from their familiar setting. *Our Country's Good* exemplifies this as a group of convicts and officers are uprooted from England and shipped off to Australia.

Arts in society- Wertenbaker challenges the prevailing social attitude in her works. *Our Country's Good* is a crucial example of this, where a play is staged within the play and there appears a divide between the characters, who place different emphasis on the arts. OCG challenges the purposes of theatre and highlights its power as a redemptive tool for society to use at its disposal.

Wertenbaker's inspiration and theatre in the 80s

As well as the true story on which the play is based, Wertenbaker also relies heavily upon the novel *The Playmaker* by Thomas Keneally (the same author as Schindler's list). Wertenbaker was attracted to such a powerful story, which centrally questioned the importance of the arts in society and explore the restorative effect of theatre.

Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister from 1979-1990. Under her government, arts were cut and the whole industry was commercialised as corporate sponsorship dominated the funding streams. Populist blockbuster shows, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals took centre stage. Several writers took to writing controversial plays in direct response to the way the government was treating the arts. Wertenbaker was one of the many leading writers, who used this time to highlight the importance and the power of theatre and why it must remain in the hands of the people and not the corporations.



Max Stafford-Clark

Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Max co-founded Joint Stock Theatre Group in 1974 following his Artistic Directorship of The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. From 1979 to 1993 he was Artistic Director of The Royal Court Theatre. In 1993 he founded the touring company, Out of Joint. His work as a Director has overwhelmingly been with new writing, and he has commissioned and directed first productions by many leading writers, including Sue Townsend, Mark Ravenhill and Caryl Churchill. He has an honorary doctorate from Oxford Brookes University and Visiting Professorships at the Universities of Hertfordshire, Warwick and York.

The idea

In 1987 whilst in residency as the Artistic Director at the Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clarke came across Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*. Set in the nascent Australian colony, *The Playmaker* concerns the true story of an amateur production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. The novel tells the stories of several characters that sailed to Sydney in the First Fleet. At the centre of the novel is Ralph Clark— a homesick young marine officer desperate for promotion. The novel also follows the characters Harry Brewer who is tormented by visions of people he has hanged and is involved in a complex relationship with the convict Duckling. His Excellency Governor Arthur Phillip tries to govern the new colony in a humane and liberal way. A solitary figure in the novel, his conflicts with more conservative officers, including Major Robbie Ross are also explored. Stafford-Clark re-read *The Recruiting officer* and the idea to revive the classic restoration comedy in rep with an adaptation of *The Playmaker* came to him.

Our Country's Good

Stafford-Clark approached Timberlake about the project and she was very keen. She knew straight away that she wanted to write about the humanising power of theatre. As the pair discussed the project, however, Timberlake's partner John Price suddenly died and she felt unable to carry on. Stafford-Clark managed to coax her back into the process and assured her there was no pressure. In April 1988 Stafford Clark, Wertenbaker and eleven actors began a two week workshop. This was mainly a research period giving all those involved the opportunity to investigate characters, conditions of the time, relationships etc. The company did not know the play would prove to be such a success, by the end of its run it was playing to packed houses at the Royal Court. It resonated with London's theatre community, which then felt keenly under threat in Thatcher's Britain. Of course for Wertenbaker it was a personal triumph: 'The redeeming power of theatre was autobiographical. The play is autobiographical, in a very indirect way, because it saved me; I mean, it did really save me.'