

Mary Proctor: Convict, Pioneer and Settler

by Jeff Atkinson

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In the history of Australia's convict era, it is the narrative of the powerful, literate and wealthy that reigns. Mostly out of convenience, their stories and perspectives have spoken most loudly in the school curriculum. Various governors' journals and letters and the memoirs of soldiers (eg. Watkin Tench) have shaped our view of our white history. The voices of convicts have been heard from afar, and warped through the lens of chroniclers whose main role was to imprison and punish their objects of history. Thankfully, this imbalance is beginning to be addressed, most recently in the popular (and populist!) telemovie *Mary Bryant*.

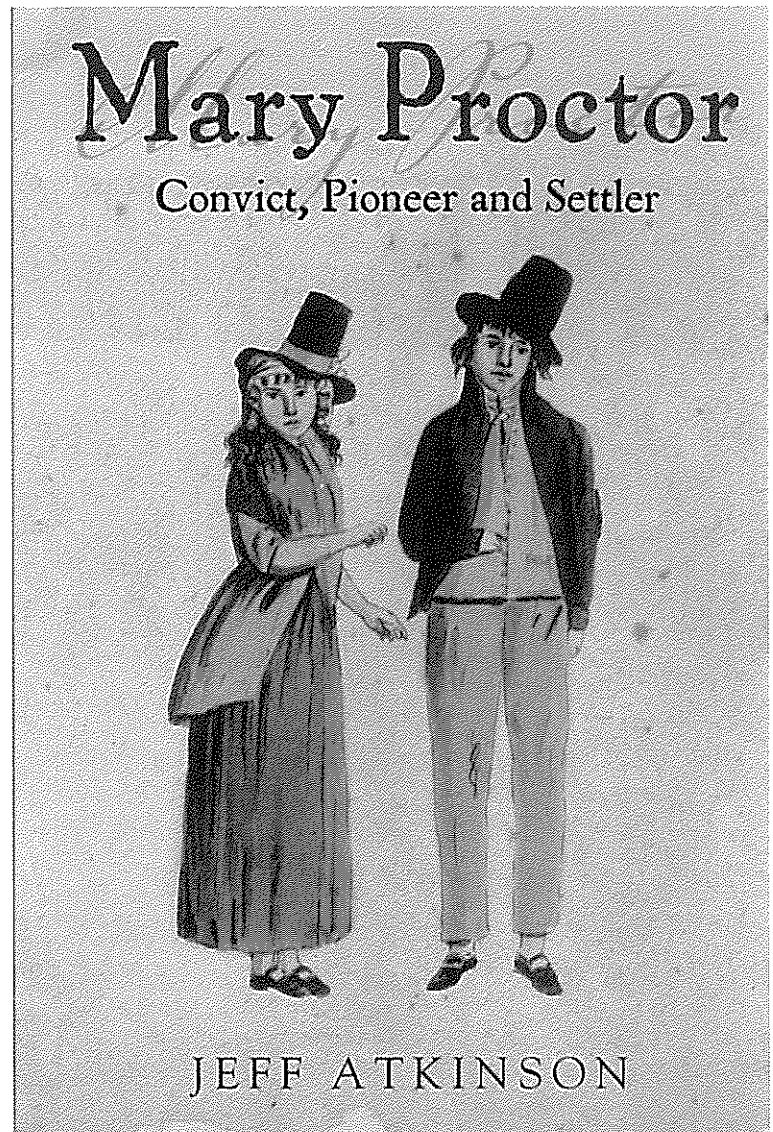
Mary Proctor adds more weight to the push to tell history 'from the grassroots'. By painstakingly researching original sources, Jeff Atkinson has told the story of Australia's settlement, focussing not on the well-documented exploits of the various governors, pioneers and leaders, but on the lives of little known people caught up in the convict system. This is an important task, as much of Australia's identity and temperament stems from that brutal period of punishment.

Mary Proctor was a minor player in the drama of Britain's penal experiment. A budding entrepreneur, she sold second-hand clothing in Nottingham before being arrested for receiving stolen clothing. Her future husband, William Fitches, is arrested for stealing. Atkinson uses the story of their arrest, sentencing and transportation to communicate the cultural and social backdrop of the convict story.

In fact, Atkinson intends *Mary Proctor's* story to be a 'route map'. Mary's journey is not told for its own sake, as a launching pad to journal the key events and realities of early Australian settlement: life in England; trial and transportation; convict life; law and order; Van Dieman's Land; emancipation; early Melbourne; and the goldfields of Victoria. His detailing of the minutiae of a convict and settler's life give the descriptions of life great authenticity. Atkinson has done history teachers a great service by including countless excerpts from ex-convicts and travellers. These provide an invaluable corrective to the pronouncements of colonial officials, which he must use to fill out the unknowns in Mary's story.

This leads us to the main weaknesses of *Mary Proctor*. First, though Atkinson wants to tell the story from the perspective of the convict, he often must rely on the records of the powerful and/or literate in order to tell the story – doctors, magistrates, journalists, governors.

Secondly, the life of Mary Proctor seems incidental to this story. As Atkinson admits, there are not enough reliable details of her life to make it compelling reading as biography. Atkinson continually has to rely on hypothesis to describe Proctor's journeys – 'she would



have...'. It is likely that...'. Atkinson has been excessively cautious in his efforts to paint an accurate portrait of early convict and settler existence:

These are real people we are talking about, not characters in a novel... They have the right to have their story told truthfully and accurately... (p.11)

Well, that is a noble aim, but it is hardly attractive as history. Atkinson seems to cling to a version of 'truth' that is factual at most. However, Atkinson makes little comment of the significance of the facts.

Thirdly, the writing tends to be overly-descriptive. For example, Atkinson spends about 40 pages describing how Mary Proctor and her (future) husband William Fitches came to be transported from England – village life, changes in industry, criminal justice system. While this is important as backdrop, it needed to be more succinct, especially in a book of under 200 pages.

Despite its cautious and over-descriptive flavour, *Mary Proctor* will be of immense value to history teachers, particularly because of Atkinson's sourcing of original letters, journals and memoirs, particularly those authored by convicts and settlers. Although thin at times, Mary Proctor's story provides a narrative anchor to events and themes that could have been dry on their own.

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