

Chapter 26 Viewpoint Activity



Australia’s colonial beginnings as a penal colony make it almost unique among nations (textbook pages 669–672). In the excerpts below, two Australian scholars, writing some fifty years apart, examine the backgrounds of those who came to their country as convicts. ♦ *As you read, consider whether people’s attitudes changed between the early and mid-1900s. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

CHAPTER 26

Australia’s Convict Colonists

Sir Ernest Scott (1916)

No country in Europe had a harsher criminal code than England at this time (early 1800s). . . . As late as 1837, the year of the accession of Queen Victoria, an official list of offences for which sentences of transportation [to Australia] might be inflicted contained over 200 items. Many were very serious, but others were offences for which sentences so harsh would be deemed barbarous nowadays, such as slaughtering butcher’s meat without a licence, damaging trees and saplings to an extent exceeding £5, stealing oysters from an oyster-bed, defacing marks on government property, poaching, or being upon any land armed by night for the purpose of taking or destroying game or rabbits. Not all convicts who were transported had committed offences even of this kind. An Irish knight was sent out for abducting the wealthy heiress of a Quaker banker, and an officer of the Indian army for killing his opponent in a duel. . .

Political agitations in Great Britain which were obnoxious to the Government, and rebellions in Ireland, brought to New South Wales a class of convicts who were wholly different from the ordinary criminals supplied from English jails.

O.H.K. Spate (1968)

Altogether a total of some 160,000 convicts were sent to Australia, all but 10,000 of them to the eastern colonies. . . and before 1850. The convict-descended component in the modern population is therefore very slight. . .

As to what manner of men they were, that has been much disputed. Undoubtedly some were the brighter lads of the village, those with pluck to raid the squire’s coverts or burn the rector’s haystacks; there was a very small leaven of politicals—Irish rebels, Scots Reformers, . . . Chartists; and some were men of family gone wrong: to the “gentleman’s crime,” forgery, Australia owed a number of professional men, among the best of her early architects, Francis Greenway. . .

To exaggerate these elements is comforting doctrine. By and large most of the convicts came from the submerged urban proletariat [working class], and there seems little point in extenuating their records: some got seven years for offences which would not now receive as many months or weeks, but many were undoubtedly tough professionals.

“ . . . slaughtering
butcher’s meat without
a license, . . . defacing
marks on government
property, . . . ”

Sources: (1) *A Short History of Australia*, by Ernest Scott (Oxford University Press, 1st ed. 1916; 7th ed. 1947); (2) *Australia*, by O. H. K. Spate (Praeger, 1968).

Questions to Discuss

1. According to these two writers, what kinds of crimes could be punished by being “transported” to the penal colony in Australia?
2. Which of these crimes involved people of the upper and middle classes?
3. **Recognizing Assumptions** What does the second writer imply about the relative number of convict descendants in the general population today? Why might present-day Australians want to “exaggerate” the number of professional people or political rebels in the convict population? Does either of these writers seem to do that?
4. **Making Comparisons** How do you think the 19th-century British system for punishing crime compares with present-day criminal justice in the United States? Do you think it was effective?

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