

### *Author Q&A*

#### **SECRETS OF THE DEAD: Voyage of the Courtesans**

*British author Sian Rees relied on court documents and first-hand accounts to tell the story of the enterprising way English women banished to an Australian penal colony survived and thrived on the high seas. Her book, *The Floating Brothel, The Extraordinary True Story of an Eighteenth-Century Ship and Its Cargo of Female Convicts*, was described by one reviewer as “a meticulously researched historical treatise that chronicles the sexual, physical and emotional exploitation of the *Lady Juliana* women from a lively feminist perspective.” After the book’s 2002 publication, it was adapted into Thirteen/WNET New York’s **SECRETS OF THE DEAD** documentary **Voyage of the Courtesans**, which premieres Wednesday, November 23 at 8 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Below, Rees shares her thoughts on this long-untold tale:*

**Q: How did you discover the story of the women of the *Lady Juliana*?**

A: I discovered it when, waiting for bureaucratic wheels to turn in order to get an Australian residence permit, I spent months in the British Library, reading about Australian history. Coming across a tantalizing mention of a female-only convict cargo, I decided to do some more research.

**Q: Some of the women on the ship seemed guilty of little more than poverty, and yet they received terrible punishment. Was it common at that time to sentence women and even children to death or “order of transportation” for such petty infractions as theft?**

A: Transportation was a very common sentence for felony. Judges now have a sophisticated array of sentences, for example imprisonment, fines and community service, and so can better match crime and punishment. These did not exist at the time so the sentencing options for a felony were transportation or death and many death sentences were later reduced to transportation when the condemned appealed to the crown for mercy.

**Q: It seems as if many of the women were chosen for this voyage in large part because of their age – because they would make good breeding stock. Is that true?**

A: Most of the women were certainly of child-bearing age and Sir George Arthur, governor of New South Wales, had put in a specific request for more women (along with more seed and cows). There were far fewer women than men in the colony and the authorities were frightened that the men were indulging in sodomy, regarded as a moral disorder.

**Q: How much money could the women make selling themselves port to port during the nearly year-long voyage? Did the sailors also take a cut?**

A: In London at the time, the older and less attractive of the women would have been selling sex from about sixpence upwards, although there are many instances of sex being sold for a plate of meat and a glass of gin. We don’t know whether the sailors took a cut as these are not the sort of

details recorded in official documents; nor, indeed, do we know whether some of the women themselves acted as pimps, taking a cut for supplying the services of the other, prettier ones. One madam and two of her teenage girls were all transported together on the *Lady Juliana*, and my guess is she resumed her former work when opportunity arose.

**Q: Did the women willingly mate with and become the “wives” of the sailors on the ship –or were they forced to?**

A: Every sailor and officer on the *Lady Juliana* was entitled by law to take a woman “as wife” for the duration of the voyage. Again, official documents don’t record these arrangements. My best guess is that, although the women did not officially have a say in the matter, discipline among the crew would have been adversely affected if the men were allowed unlimited access to the females or if the females had been coerced into unwanted sexual partnerships, and 18th-century captains, on routinely undermanned ships, and continually on the lookout for mutiny, could not afford ill discipline.

**Q: What happened to the women once they reached Australia?**

A: Nearly all the women married: some within a couple of weeks, most within the next year or so.

**Q: Percentage-wise, how many eventually returned to England?**

A: Possibly 10 percent eventually returned to England, although very few did so at the end of their sentence. They had to pay their own passage home and this took many years to save; most also had families and, unable to pay for tickets for everyone and reluctant to leave young children, had to wait until they had grown up.

**Q: Was this a one-time event – or did Britain continue to ship female convicts to Australia?**

A: Britain continued the practice until the 1860s, although never as many women as men.

**Q: Did any of the women die before reaching Australia? How many were afflicted with disease or impregnated?**

A: About half a dozen died on the voyage, which was exceptionally good for ships of the time, whether convict ships or merchantmen. Half a dozen more became pregnant, some of them having their babies in Rio, others just after arriving in the colony. Many, convicts and seamen alike, went down with scurvy during the Atlantic passage.

**Q: Was the idea of a floating brothel ever imitated anywhere else or at any other time in history?**

A: There was sex aboard most of the female transport ships, usually between male and female convicts, or female convicts and members of the crew. This was considered not only normal, but conducive to good order on the ship until Victorian ideas of morality put a stop to it.

**Q: What do you think would have happened to the penal colony if the women had not arrived?**

A: If the women had not arrived, the colony would have survived but would have taken more time to become firmly established. The ship that saved the colony was not the *Lady Juliana*, with what the officers in Sydney called “useless mouths” aboard, but the one which came in soon afterwards, carrying food, livestock and seed. Without that one, the colonists would probably have starved to death, the *Lady Juliana* women with them.

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