Finding Forrester

The life and death of Joseph Forrester, convict silversmith

Joseph Forrester was a convict whose transportation to Tasmania offered him the opportunity to establish himself as the area’s foremost silversmith, if he could only escape his criminal urges, writes Douglas Wilkie.

Joseph Forrester’s death was mysterious and unexplained, and was almost undiscovered and unannounced. For many years those who wrote about him could never finish their story, and those who wrote usually restricted their discussion to an evaluation of his silverwork, accompanied by a brief summary of what they could find in his convict conduct record. What they told was the story of Forrester the prisoner, not Forrester the man. My task was to find Joseph Forrester, the man.

Others have also endeavoured to find the missing humanity in convict lives – the ‘invisible men’, and women, who have disappeared in over a century of misconceptions about convicts and their lives and characters. In 1998 Hamish Maxwell-Stewart’s The Search for the Convict Voice looked for the voice of the convict rather than the voice given to them by others. Lucy Frost and Maxwell-Stewart followed this up in Chain Letters by bringing together the stories of over a dozen convicts and their families as revealed through letters, tattoos, diaries, petitions and love tokens. In most cases what is revealed is very different to the itemised and standard descriptors of the penal bureaucracy whose records were previously used as the sole source of information about convicts, and which tended to give an impersonal and empirical picture of ‘who were the convicts’. Indeed, there were some convicts, as David Roberts has noted, whose experience was ‘so exceptional as to seem unsuitable for arriving at any general approximation of the convict experience’.

In Joseph Forrester’s life story, as in most convict lives, there are gaps, and where there are gaps we faced with numerous possibilities. Terri-Ann White’s entry in Chain Letters uses fiction to give life to her convict stories — but even without the overt use of fiction we must still use conjecture and imagination to recreate those stories, recognising that, as Jerzy Topolski observed, ‘the same source information may be used to construct various historical accounts of any fragment of the past’. We must endeavour to fill the gaps for, in James Bradley’s words, ‘A narrative must be whole,
Otherwise it has no sense.

The chronological framework of Joseph Forrester's life is largely built upon evidence from convict records and contemporary newspaper reports. Chain Letters includes the stories of convicts who left their mark engraved upon metal tokens, or literally tattooed upon their bodies. Joseph Forrester appears to have had no tattoos, but he certainly left his mark engraved upon silver and while there do not appear to be any covert messages to family or loved ones hidden among his embossed patterns and images, the description of his work as being 'bold' and 'naïve' compared to London silversmiths may tell us something about his training, and that, given the scarcity of skilled silversmiths in Australia, he was the best that could be found at the time. But to really understand Joseph Forrester would have involved much more speculation and conjecture had it not been for a substantial cache of letters written by Forrester and his brother to their uncle and cousin in Scotland.

Kirsty Reid has observed that apprenticed to their uncle, Robert Keay senior, of Perth (Scotland) to learn the trade of silversmith. A cousin, Robert Keay junior, also learned the trade and became a close friend of the Forrester boys. William Forrester completed his apprenticeship, moved to London, and by December 1825 had taken a furnished house in Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell—a centre for silversmiths, goldsmiths and jewellers. Houses were, he observed, 'a very difficult thing to get in a good neighbourhood'.

Improving skills Younger brother Joseph, born in 1805, was a rather troublesome and unsteady youth who did not complete his apprenticeship and moved to London with William. Unable to find work he was supported by William despite attracting trouble from people to whom he owed money. Confiding in his cousin Robert, William revealed that Joseph was 'such a simpleton' who 'cannot keep his mouth shut'. William would not leave him in charge.

Joseph had lodgings in Princes Street, Bridgewater Square and was called to give evidence at the Old Bailey in a case against Philibert Mathey who had been charged with deception and forgery. The late 1820s saw an economic downturn in London with widespread bank failures, bankruptcy and unemployment. William regularly received financial assistance from both his uncle Keay and his cousin Robert and was embarrassed that they came to his aid in their own hard times. Patrick Forrester, another uncle at Hull, sent him small jobs to do. The downturn continued and by February 1826, to save money, William was setting diamonds to avoid purchasing gold; he employed only one munter, one setter, and Joseph. Despite some optimism, a valuation at the end of 1826 revealed assets insufficient to cover the cost of gold and silver needed for the work William had contracted to do, and he asked Robert for another £50 to get him over more bad times.

A disastrous fire On the positive side, Joseph's skills continued to improve. In May 1827 when his uncle Patrick Forrester came to stay they saw 'more of the sights to be seen in London than ever'. Patrick bought nearly £1,000 worth of silver plate while in London, 'but very little jewellery'. Perhaps on Patrick's advice, William insured the contents of his house, and told Robert that he wanted to move 'as I am not at all comfortable where I am at present but the expense will be enormous to me in fact I am afraid to think of it'. The insurance was wise, as on Sunday 29 June 1828 a fire burned the upper floor of the Red Lion Street house 'with considerable fury, threatening destruction far and wide'.

Financial troubles and the destruction caused by the fire put further pressure on the Forrester brothers, and on the evening of 15 January, 1829, Joseph, possibly hoping to avoid the cost of purchasing diamonds, broke the window of Charles Plumeys long-established jewellery shop

Had Joseph been employed in another workshop he may have lost his job, or been charged with some offense, much earlier than he ultimately was.
on Ludgate Hill and stole eleven diamond pins and two brooches, valued at £35.

Hamish Maxwell-Stewart is wary of the practice of deploying nineteenth-century middle class readings of convict lives as the “real thing”, however, in a scene foreshadowing Charles Dickens’ “Stop Thief” episode in Oliver Twist, Forrester was chased by a crowd down Ludgate Hill into a cul-de-sac where he was caught. He was tried and found guilty of breaking and entering. It had taken Joseph less than a minute, but the prescribed sentence was Death – the premises being a dwelling house as well as a shop. Fortunately for Joseph, by the late 1830s death sentences for property crimes were routinely commuted to transportation for life. Two months later William was declared bankrupt. The relatives in Scotland were unimpressed.

Before the voyage
Awaiting transportation, Joseph Forrester was sent to the hulks where his behaviour was good, but once on board the convict ship Thames bound for Van Diemen’s Land he was caught breaking in to the ship’s hold. After arriving at Hobart on 20 November, 1829, and listing his occupation as silversmith and jeweller, Forrester was assigned to work for John Christopher Underwood, a prominent Hobart merchant and auctioneer. While Underwood imported a wide range of goods, including jewellery, silverware, and watches, it is unclear whether Forrester actually practiced his trade while working for him.

In October 1830 David Barclay, a Scot from Montrose and of almost identical age to Forrester, arrived at Hobart and opened a jewellery and watch-making business in Elizabeth Street. Barclay soon expanded his business and sought whatever skilled convict watchmakers, silversmiths and jewellers he could find. By 1832, Joseph Forrester was reassigned to work for Barclay.

In London, William’s bankruptcy, coming so soon after Joseph’s conviction, strained relationships with their father’s side of the family, and correspondence either went through their uncle Kay or their cousin Robert. William contemplated leaving England, possibly thinking he would join Joseph in Van Diemen’s Land. By March 1831 business in London had briefly improved and he again had plenty of work before him.

Joseph’s troubles were of a different nature. David Barclay was described as a ‘man of marked individuality, of great mental vigour & of remarkable mechanical skill’ with a caustic tongue which he could use with effect on provocation’. He was also full of ‘sarcasm and humour, and shrewd wit’.

A caustic tongue and sarcastic humour would surely have provoked Joseph Forrester as much as Forrester provoked Barclay.

It was a dangerous combination, not only because of the clash of personalities, but also, as J C Byrne observed, ‘If assigned on his first arrival, the felon is subjected to all the peculiarities of his master’. While most employers treated their assigned servants well, A.G.L. Shaw believes 20 percent relied upon punishment to get results from their servants, and another 20 percent were ‘pure slave-drivers’.

While Shaw’s figures may be debatable, Barclay seems to have been among this group. The skills, role and treatment of convicts have been discussed extensively in Convict Workers. However, many of the conclusions were based on broad quantitative rather than individual qualitative evidence, and it could be argued that revealing the life of an individual resists reduction to statistics.

Before starting with David Barclay Forrester’s record was clear, but from July 1832 he regularly managed to find his way to one or other of the many public houses in Hobart: the Spotted Cow in July; Help Me Thru The World in September; George and Dragon in December. His punishments ranged from being admonished; being reassigned; confined to his cell on bread and water; and ultimately, receiving 25 lashes. We might imagine he spent other Saturday evenings at the pub but was never caught.

Behind bars again
On Christmas Day 1832, Forrester was accused of being insolent to Barclay and fighting with a fellow servant. He was confined to his cell for six nights but allowed to go to work during the day. Barclay needed Forrester’s skills, but Forrester clearly found Barclay difficult, and by March 1833 he had had enough. He stayed away from work and was accused of inciting his fellow servants to insubordination. Threatening to abscond into the bush if he was sent back to Barclay’s, Forrester was sentenced to fifteen months on Natman’s Road Party instead. A number of Forrester’s misdemeanours coincided with those of Archibald Simpson, a 25-year-old watchmaker from Stirling, also assigned to Barclay. But while Forrester was sent to the Road Gang, Simpson was sent to Port Arthur where he spent his time trafficking in articles
of jewellery', 'making rings to traffic', and other offences.

Whether Simpson was a bad character who influenced Forrester, or whether the worst in Forrester, Simpson and their fellow servants was brought out by Barclay's sarcasm is difficult to know, but the punishments Simpson suffered while at Barclay's were significantly worse than Forrester's - regularly receiving punishments of between 25 and 50 lashes. The list of Simpson's punishments fills the available space in one record book and continues into a new book.

Other servants such as William Cole, a watchmaker, and Charles Jones, initially a labourer, also worked for David Barclay at the same time as Forrester, and went into partnership during the early 1840s. Cole had been transported on board the Stakesby in 1833 for stealing two watches from his master, and like Simpson and Forrester, had been subjected to continual punishment at Barclay's, including two years hard labour at Port Arthur for stealing one of

Barclay's sixpenny screwdrivers. Jones arrived on the Georgiana on 1 February, 1833 and was immediately sent to Barclay's. Jones's record is even longer than Forrester's, frequently being absent without leave, being drunk or insolent, attempting to enter the room of a female servant. Jones also spent time on the tread wheel in 1834 and on the chain gang in 1837.

**Unnecessary punishments**

It might be tempting to think the convicts received just rewards for their behaviour but, given Barclay's reported caustic wit and sarcasm, many of the punishments suffered by his servants were probably unnecessary. It is important to distinguish the punishments received as a result of the Assignment system itself, from the fact that less than one in five convicts actually committed new criminal offences after being transported to Van Diemen's Land. Nevertheless, Forrester could have benefited from convict Henry Tingley's advice that, 'All a man has got to mind is to keep a still tongue in his head, and do his master's duty, and then he is looked upon as if he were at home; but if he don't he may as well be hung at once, for they would take you to the magistrates and get 100 of lashes'.

We might imagine that a master would not report a servant's misdemeanours to the court if it meant losing valuable and irreplaceable skilled labour - as Margaret Dillon suggest, 'where convicts and employers negotiated reasonable working conditions, employers rarely took their workers before the courts on discipline charges'. Indeed, there were some employers like James Macarthur, who told a Select Committee on Transportation in 1837, 'it is in the interests of the assignee to make his convict servant as comfortable as possible. The principle on which we have conducted our establishment is, where a man behaves well, to make him forget, if possible, that he is a convict'. The ongoing punishments suffered by Forrester probably did little to help him
was in desperation that Forrester absconded from the Chain Gang after a month. Another six months hard labour was added to his original sentence. By mid-November, found guilty of feigning sickness, he was given seven days solitary confinement on bread and water.

**Surviving the chain gang**

Forrester’s displays of protest while on the chain gang were by no means unusual. He survived the chain gang and eventually returned to Barclay’s where he soon made a silver cup for presentation to George Augustus Robinson in ‘acknowledgement of the benefit this Colony has derived from the successful conciliation of the Aborigines of this Island effected by him’. Another cup was commissioned for presentation to J H Cawthron by the Southern Agricultural Association in 1835.

Joseph avoided trouble until January 1836 when he struck a fellow servant and was confined to his cell for 24 hours. In June he was drunk and fighting in the yard of the Albion public house and spent a week in the cell on bread and water. In August he was absent without leave, and in December he was absent from the church muster. Eight months of relative quiet passed until August 1837 when, soon after a fellow servant, John Pleit, was sent to the Road Gang, Barclay accused Forrester of using threatening language and being insolent – another 25 lashes were inflicted upon his back. In London things were faring much better for brother William and on 30 September, 1837 he married Charlotte Lister at St James Church, Westminster.

The demand for Joseph Forrester’s skills as a silversmith was steady and spreading beyond Hobart. In 1838 he made a gold and silver presentation snuff box, ordered from Barclay by Alexander Dick of Sydney. Amid the financial difficulties faced by himself and William during the 1830s, Joseph could never have imagined that this box would sell for $160,000 150 years later.

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forget that he was a convict.

Forrester’s departure to the Road Party was not good for Barclay. The people of Campbell Town had just ordered a silver presentation cup for James Simpson, the Police Magistrate, and Barclay was compelled to explain that Forrester was ‘the only one in town capable of making such plate so that unless a man arrives in the course of a few weeks you have no chance of getting it done in the colony’. Barclay was able to replace Forrester with John Hill, but Hill was an optician by trade and Forrester’s skills could not be matched. James Simpson’s silver cup was eventually made in London and presented to him in August 1834, two years after being ordered. Charles Jones would eventually have skills that seemed to surpass Forrester’s, but in 1833 he had come to Barclay with a labourer’s background and still had much to learn. He was originally intended to be assigned to public works.

In May 1833, two months after joining Nottman’s Road Party, Joseph Forrester was found guilty of idleness. Then he lost his hammer. Hardly surprising — he was a silversmith, not a stonebreaker! But he was found guilty of neglect of duty and sentenced to an extra three months in prison with hard labour on the Chain Gang. When James Backhouse, the Quaker Missionary, visited Nottman’s Road Party in the same year he saw men being flogged for neglect of duty. Each man was required to break a cubic yard of stone, which Backhouse thought was excessive for men not accustomed to hard labour. The penalty of up to 50 lashes he thought was ‘an act of oppression’ which ‘tends to harden men, and to drive them to desperation’. Presumably it
After serving nearly ten years working for David Barclay, Joseph Forrester was granted a ticket of leave on 22 May, 1839 and could have started his own business, but setting up as a silversmith required special equipment not available in Hobart, and it required capital. Fortunately, Joseph inherited about £40 (an annual salary for many) from Euphemia Boswall, heir to the Blackadder estate near Edinburgh. She died in 1829 leaving a fortune of £12,000. Beneficiaries included the children of William Young, maternal grandfather of William, Joseph and Christian Forrester. Joseph would probably have been disinherited but for the efforts of his brother and cousin. The father's side of the family did disown him, and when an uncle, James Forrester, died in 1840, he left a small fortune of £1,000 each to William and Christian, but nothing to Joseph. A study of family attitudes ‘at home’ towards transported convicts, and how those attitudes were reflected in popular mid-19th century literature such as Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, would undoubtedly be revealing.

**A new freedom**

It appears that Joseph continued to work for Barclay after gaining his ticket of leave and accrued more misdemeanours on his record—drunk and disorderly; away from his authorised place of residence; failing to attend chapel on Sunday. In early 1840 Barclay's workshop made a gold snuff box that did 'great credit to the ingenious maker', to be presented to Captain King, Port Officer at Hobart. It is not stated whether the 'ingenious maker' was Joseph Forrester, however Forrester did make a silver salver for presentation to James Garrett, Presbyterian minister at Bothwell in October 1841. Forrester's skills have been described as 'naive' when compared to work being done by silversmiths in London, however, given the scarcity of skilled silversmiths in Australia he was the best that could be found.

In April 1841, Forrester married Mary Ann Sadler, a free emigrant. Forrester was 36, Sadler was 26. Joseph wrote lovingly of his wife to William, who forwarded the news indirectly to relatives through their cousin Robert. A boy, John Henry, was born in January 1842, but died seven months later, the death later being blamed for a depressive illness that affected Mary Ann for the next six years.

Forrester received his conditional pardon in June 1842, his conduct being described as 'exemplary' for the previous three years. Marriage, supposedly, was 'the best instrument for reform'—at least for female convicts. Perhaps the presence of Mary Ann Sadler in his life had also been a reforming factor for Joseph Forrester—certainly the punishments that he had received at Barclay’s and on the chain gang were roundly criticised as hardening men rather than reforming them. But another path to respectability and reform was through business activity. While the original condition on his pardon was that he could not leave the colony, Joseph left Barclay’s within a week and opened his own business. In London William still complained of slow business but, always supportive of his younger brother, he found the flattening mill (used to roll bars of silver or gold between cylinders to create thin ribbons of metal that could then be more easily worked) Joseph required, and shipped it out to him on the *Janet Izat*. Sympathetic members of the family sent finance, and his cousin Robert Keay sent a shipment of silver plate and jewellery. Intending to attract customers, Joseph advertised the newly arrived stock in December 1842, but the publicity also attracted thieves and within a month the shop was burgled of its entire contents. Most of the property was fortunately recovered.

William wrote to Joseph in mid-1842 at the time of sending the flattening mill, but the ship bearing the letter, the convict ship *Waterloo*, was wrecked off South Africa. Joseph waited nearly a year for William's letter before writing home with news that he was 'pretty well established and have got a good share of the work and thank God getting a comfortable living'. But he missed his family and old friends – 'I am most comfortable in my home but often think of you and all my relations and should like to end my Days in my native land'. He added, 'I often think of the happy days of my youth and when I used to ride behind the Gigg when we used to go fishing – those times are gone never to return'. Forrester's wife was supportive and when an eye inflammation prevented him from working for four months he said, 'I could see to do nothing – but thank God I have got a careful wife and have again got about and my eyes are now better than they have been for years'.

Despite David Meredith's suggestion that the positive accounts of life in Van Diemen’s Land found in convict's letters were often ‘the partial truth, exaggerating, or simply lying’, the letters written by Joseph Forrester suggest that, although he wanted to eventually return home, life after Barclay was not all bad and he was enjoying both his marriage and business success. His expressed desire to end his days in his native land appears to be typical of many others who either wrote to the government or wrote home to friends and relatives. There are no extant letters written during his time.
with Barclay and, given that letters before and after that period have survived, it is possible that Barclay's iron rule prevented Forrester from writing home.

By September 1843 Forrester was making silver plate for St Georges Church, 'two or three more good orders', including a presentation plate for the captain of the Psyche, and 'Plenty of Jobbing'. In March 1844 he was called to court as an expert witness to explain the process of amalgamating silver.

Forrester's conditional pardon was extended to the other Australian colonies in October 1845, and then to any country 'except Europe'. The recommendation was that he had 'been above sixteen years in the Colony the last twelve years of which period he has been free from offence ... and produced good testimonials of character'. Certainly he had been free of any criminal offence in the eyes of the law, but Barclay saw things differently, and it is probable that the good testimonials came from people he met after leaving Barclay.

A silver cigar case commissioned by jeweller, William Cole, for presentation to former Assistant Police Magistrate, William Tarleton, brought Forrester more good publicity in early 1846, however, the ongoing economic depression meant diversification was in order, and in March, after five years in Collins Street, Hobart, he moved the business to 52 Liverpool Street where he opened a pawn-broking shop. With business struggling in Van Diemen's Land, and an over-supplied labour market from the release of probationary convicts, prospects looked better in Melbourne, and Joseph and Mary Ann Forrester decided to join a growing exodus to Port Phillip. The Forrester's made their way to Launceston and left Van Diemen's Land on board the steamer Shamrock on the morning of 14 November, 1846. It was almost seventeen years to the day since Joseph Forrester had arrived at Hobart on board the Thames.

To be continued in our Sep/Oct issue, on sale 18 August.

Douglas Wilkie has completed studies in Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and Australian History, as well as undertaking a major investigation of the origins of Australian gold rushes as his PhD thesis. Recent publications have included studies of some extraordinary men and women who found themselves at the transportation and the British justice system.

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Further reading

Australian Jewellers: gold and silversmiths makers and marks, Kenneth Cavill et al. (Sydney, 1992)


Convict Workers: reinterpreting Australia's past, Stephen Nicholas (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1988)


Gender, Crime and Empire: Convicts, Settlers and the State in Early Colonial Australia, Kirsty Reid (Manchester, 2007)


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