

Castor, a Black from Madagascar

On the 12 April 1856, a man from Africa died in the vicinity of *Tarree* Estate. His name was Castor, a man of colour, a labourer, aged 50 years, who died from heart disease after being ill for 14 days. He never married nor fathered children. Witnesses to the burial, which took place the following day, were Henry Flett, William Wynter Jnr. and Thomas Dyball.ⁱ Given that the only cemetery at that time was the private cemetery on *Tarree* Estate, it is assumed he was buried there. His death certificate stated he was born in Madagascar but his story, for the purposes of this article, begins in Mauritius where he was put on trial, for Castor came to New South Wales as a convict.

The island of Mauritius lies in the southwest Indian Ocean, 800 km east of Madagascar. It was first settled by the French in 1721 but the British took control of the island in 1810 during the Napoleonic Wars. The French plantation owners used African slaves to work their properties from the beginning of settlement but the British Government had abolished the transportation of slaves across the seas in 1807 and was determined to stop the importation of slaves to Mauritius from the African continent. The French planters responded by illegally importing slaves from near-by Madagascar and East Africa, a trade which the British governors of the island had great difficulty in stopping. The powerful Franco-Mauritian community was determined to protect its vested interests, particularly as the sugar industry began to develop in earnest during the 1810s and 1820s and required slaves to work the plantations. One estimate is that between 30,000 to 50,000 African men, women and children were illegally imported into Mauritius from Madagascar and East Africa between 1811 and 1827.ⁱⁱ

Castor was not born into the slave community in Mauritius but was brought to the island from Madagascar, but was this his country of birth? It is possible that Castor was born elsewhere on the African continent and brought to Madagascar to be sold. There is no way to know for sure. Slaves purchased on the African Coast for \$20 to \$25 were sold for \$100 to \$200 in Mauritius, a price 'calculated to cover the expenses and the losses, and to afford a profit adequate to the risks incurred'.ⁱⁱⁱ

His death certificate states his date of arrival in the colonies was c.1836 but this is incorrect. The ship indents indicates that Castor was tried in Mauritius on the 25 June 1825 for an unknown crime, found guilty and given a life sentence with transportation. He arrived in Sydney in June 1826 aboard the *Governor Phillip* and was described as being 5'6½" tall, having a muscular frame, with a raised mole on the back of the neck, black eyes, black hair, very dark complexion, and listed as a labourer.^{iv}

Castor was not the first African transported from Mauritius. Sophie, a Malagasy domestic slave, was shipped to New South Wales in 1825. From 1825 to 1845 between 100 and 150 Mauritian convicts arrived in the colonies, including slaves, ex-slaves (after emancipation), Indian convicts (originally transported from British India to Mauritius) and indentured Indian and Chinese immigrants who were brought to the island to work on the plantations after slavery was abolished in 1835.^v Their crimes can be seen in the context of resistance against their masters. Their tactics ranged from minor insubordination such as foot-dragging, false-compliance and feigning illness to major crimes such as arson, assault or theft against their white masters and mistresses. Such crimes directly challenged the social order of the plantation society. Transportation was seen as a solution to restoring the social order.^{vi}

Convicts of African descent were also transported from Britain. In her book, *Black Founders* (2006), Cassandra Pybus stated that at least eleven African men were on the First Fleet.^{vii} These men were former slaves who had escaped from American plantations during the American War of Independence and joined the British Army on the promise that they would gain their freedom. Although Britain was defeated by the American colonists, the black soldiers were allowed to sail to

England with the British Army. Many found it hard to make a living in the post-war period and some turned to crime which landed them in gaol. Convicts selected for the First Fleet included some of these former slaves. For the next decade or two, a sprinkling of black convicts were transported to the Australian colonies from England, the most famous being William (Billy) Blue who was granted land which took his name, Blues Point in Sydney Harbour.

I have not been able to find any record of the first three years of Castor's life in the colonies. However, October 9th 1829 found him admitted to the *Phoenix* Hulk moored in Lavender Bay for transportation to Port Macquarie, as an invalid.^{viii} Having a disability did not prevent convicts from being transported to New South Wales but the numbers increased after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. Disabled veterans found it difficult to survive and sometimes turned to crime to support themselves and their families. In the 1820s, 5.1% of all males transported from Britain to the colonies were in some way physically or mentally impaired.^{ix} By the 1830s this proportion had dropped to 3.9%. The numbers of invalid convicts were further increased by convicts who became chronically ill or severely disabled while serving their time in the colonies. Whether Castor was already an invalid when he came to New South Wales or sustained an illness or injury in the colonies is not known. His life as a slave in Mauritius would not have been easy, nor was his life as a convict.

In Britain the physical and mentally impaired were not spared from the workforce. In the lower classes, they had to contribute to the family's income in some way. In rural areas they could easily be integrated into the agricultural workforce. Those who could not support themselves were sent to the workhouses. In the colonies, invalid convicts were put to work either assigned to a master or joined a government invalid work gang, doing menial tasks such as collecting shells for lime-making, keeping convict huts clean, breaking and spreading stone for road gangs, to more sedentary (and skilled) occupations such as tailoring and shoemaking.^x

In 1811, Governor Macquarie had an old Government barn at Castle Hill repaired to provide an asylum for 30 mentally impaired persons which was replaced in 1828 by the newly built Lunatic Asylum at Liverpool. In the same year the principal superintendent of convicts, F. A. Hely, reported that there were '173 sick convicts and 31 lunatics in the Colonial Hospitals and another 214 cripples, invalids and idiots within the convict population'.^{xi}

By 1830, an invalid gang was established at Port Macquarie. The settlement had started as a place for secondary punishment in 1821 but was opened to free settlers in 1830. Convicts still serving their colonial sentences were either assigned to masters or transported to Norfolk Island or Moreton Bay. The vacant buildings were appropriated to house invalids and 'educated prisoners'. Convicts who were no longer productive workers and classified as invalids, were now sent to Port Macquarie.^{xii}

Male convicts were flogged without regard to age or disability. Not long after arriving in Port Macquarie, Castor was brought before the Bench for absconding, robbery and a violent assault on the watchman of the sheep. He had been at large in the bush for almost three weeks. Among his possessions were an iron pot, a sheet from the hospital, and several items of clothing. When cornered, Castor used a knife to slash the belly of the watchman who was saved by 'some bread between his shirt & his frock'.^{xiii} He was sentenced to 100 lashes but the punishment was stopped by the medical superintendent in attendance after receiving 94 lashes. The fact that the punishment could not be completed would indicate the poor physical state Castor was in after surviving three weeks in the bush.

It is interesting to speculate if Castor understood the English language. How well did he understand what was said to him? Certainly English was not his first language. As well as his native tongue, he may have understood some French creole from his time in Mauritius. To be brought to a

strange country as a convict and not fully understand what was expected of him, may have been one reason behind his frequent misbehavior.

The *Government Gazette* listed him as absconding from Port Macquarie in September 1832. A further entry in the *Gazette* in December the same year stated he had absconded from a gang at Moreton Bay, then a secondary penal settlement.^{xiv} It would appear that he was sent there to serve a colonial sentence.

Moreton Bay Penal settlement was established in August 1824 as a place to send convicts who committed further crimes in the colonies. The settlement's most notorious commandant was Captain Patrick Logan whose reputation for the cruel treatment of convicts became part of convict folk lore. Logan was killed by Aborigines in October 1830. He was replaced by Captain James Clunie. Under Clunie's command, Moreton Bay began to develop as a town and the continuous unrest that was experienced under Logan became a thing of the past. Unfortunately, extensive research through the Morton Bay records did not reveal any further information about Castor's time in the penal settlement.

By 1837, Castor was assigned to William Wynter Snr to work on *Tarree* Estate.^{xv} He was granted his ticket-of-leave by June 1842 and a conditional pardon in February 1849.^{xvi} There is no further information about Castor's time in the Manning Valley but the fact that there are no records would indicate that he stayed out of trouble during his time in the valley. In William Wynter, he found a good master who had a reputation of treating his convicts fairly. In 1866, John Bunt wrote of Wynter:

I have heard many persons who were his assigned servants at this period say there never was a kinder, more indulgent master, one who more readily comprehended their true character, or was so willing to do anything in his power to alleviate the suffering incident to their unfortunate position.^{xvii}

Wynter spent time in the West Indies while serving in the navy.^{xviii} He would have been aware of the slave trade there and perhaps had some sympathy for his black convict. As an assignee, Castor would have worked on *Tarree* Estate, according to his physical capacity. He remained in the valley for the rest of his life.

Wynter lost ownership of his estate in 1844 when he was unable to meet his mortgage repayments, but he and his family were able to remain on the property in a house known as 'The Gardens'. His son-in-law, Henry Flett, bought the estate in 1846 and the Flett family moved into *Tarree* House. William Wynter died in October 1853. By then, Castor was a free man.

Castor's story and those of other convicts of African descent give another dimension to the history of race relationships in this country. His death certificate indicated he never married or had children but there is always a possibility that he fathered a child outside of marriage. Cassandra Pybus followed the lives of black convicts from the First Fleet and others and found that some married white convict women. How were their children and descendants received by the white community?

In 1912, a young man named Thomas Conquit was shot and injured by police in a remote mining hamlet in the Snowy Mountains. He was described as part Aborigine but further research by Pybus revealed that his grand-mother, Frances Martin, was the daughter and grand-daughter of African-American convicts.^{xix} It would appear that darker-skinned descendants could find themselves classified as Aborigine. This would be one of those ironies in the colonial history of Australia, where a slave (or former slave) was transported as a convict to New South Wales, gained his/her freedom through the convict system, only for his/her descendants to be denied citizenship and forced to live under the draconian rules of the Aboriginal Protection Board.

Sometimes history is stranger than fiction.

ⁱ Death Certificate, No. 3115/1856.

ⁱⁱ Richard Allen 'Licentious and unbridled proceedings: The illegal slave trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the early nineteenth century', *Journal of African History*, vol.42, no.1 (2001), pp.91-116.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Allen, 'Licentious and unbridled proceedings'.

^{iv} Bound Indents 1826, Fiche No. 660, p.43 (film 397, 4/4011)

^v Clare Anderson, 'Unfree labour and its discontents: transportation from Mauritius to Australia, 1825-1845', University of Leicester, from a paper given at the British Australian Studies Association 1997 Postgraduate Conference.

^{vi} Clare Anderson, 'The politics of punishment in colonial Mauritius, 1766-1887', *Cultural and Social History*, vol.5, issue 4, 2008, pp.411-422.

^{vii} Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006.

^{viii} Phoenix Hulk Entrance Books, October 9, 1829.

^{ix} Beverley Earnshaw, 'The lame, the blind, the mad, the malingerers: Sick and disabled convicts within the colonial community', *JRAHS*, vol.81, part 1, p.26.

^x *Ibid.*, p.30.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p.30.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p.31.

^{xiii} 14 December 1829, Port Macquarie Bench Books, SRNSW Reel 2723.

^{xiv} *Government Gazette*, 26 September 1832, 26 December 1832.

^{xv} 1837 Convict Muster.

^{xvi} Ticket of Leave, no.42/1501, effective 13 June 1842 (4/4164, reel 944). Conditional Pardon, no.49/361, effective 1 February 1849 (4/4464, reel 790).

^{xvii} *Manning River News*, 2 June 1866.

^{xviii} *Northern Champion*, 1 April 1955.

^{xix} Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders*, pp.179-182.