
THE CAORTHANN AMULET AND THE TURKEY

A ONE-ACT PLAY WITH FOUR SCENES

CHARACTERS

Anne Mary Dougan – a 20 year old convict woman from Yorkshire with slight intellectual disability and a pleasant, gentle face. She is about 8 months pregnant, just over 5 feet tall, fair complexion with dark brown hair (short nose, average mouth, round dimpled chin, large round head with a small face and low forehead). A Yorkshire accent with a hint of Irish.

Liz (Elizabeth Tyrell) – a 20 year old convict woman from Liverpool. Just over 5 feet tall with a fair complexion, black hair (large head with a round face and low forehead). A red mark and tattoo on her right arm, which says “Louisa Sutton”.

Invisible woman – an unknown, invisible convict woman in Crime Class with Liz.

Catherine Ward – a 19 year old Irish convict woman with bandaged hands. Fervid. 5 feet tall. Sallow complexion, dark brown hair, blue eyes, oval face with a high forehead and small nose.

Git (Bridget Mullins) – a 20 year old convict woman from Yorkshire. Less than 5 feet tall. Fair complexion with brown hair and grey eyes. Oval face and high forehead. (Wide mouth and small nose. Three dots on her right hand. On her left arm 8 dots and some other blue marks, and the initials ilHN, HAN, NAH, MOL, LOM.)

Turnkey – an ex-convict employed by the Female Factory to oversee prisoners.

The play takes place at the Ross Female Factory, Tasmania, with scenes from 1848, 1850, 1851 and 1853 superimposed on the site as it appears today.

SCENE I

Ross Female Factory, Christmas Eve 1848. Anne Mary Dougan is alone in the hospital, quietly singing “Hey Diddle Diddle” to herself as she makes up a bed and wipes clean the headboard (badly). She stops and sighs, putting a hand to her stomach.

Anne: Do y' think I'm a dish Banty?ⁱ Your daddy did, he said to me, "you're a dishy little thing". "Y' mu'nt go on so", I said, but I thought me face might be shining. It were a full moon y' see. I were the dish and he were the spoon.

I do so love to see it shining up there y' know. I can feel it's shining down on dear Mama and poor Jamie. Mama alaw'ys said it brought his fits on though. I don't know. I were just a whiflingⁱⁱ lass, on for a lark, and clemming.ⁱⁱⁱ I didn't think on me liefer^{iv} Mama nor me billy.^v

Oh me little bantling, why'd I lift 'em spoons? Venturesome fool I was! They was just lying there, shining in the moonlight. I didn't think it would do no harm. Good luck a spoon's meant to be. Two for twins. Two on your saucer and a pot 'n pan^{vi} will come and marry you. I thought your daddy might, but here I am.

Glancing at the door: Why must they be so mean?

I di'n't intend no harm me bantling. I didn't know it were a bub coming. It were just me pains so tormentin' . . . and then it were gone. I tried to clean the soiling so they wouldn't punish me – they do scold so. It's always blood and hurting at me moon time, an' then that. I had na bled in a triflin' while. All that extra muck seemed only nat'ral. I tried not to peer. Peeping always mithers^{vii} me. I imagines things so as I fright meself sometimes Banty. I'm frighted of bearin' you. They made me look over Eliza in all her groanin'-time.^{viii} She cried out like the Devil were at her; but now she's in the nursery an' to watch her with the little lass sucking an' like a moppet, her mits a-working. I makes me nesh^{ix} all over and longing for you here, in me arms.

Pauses and is looking hard around the room, considering.

Anne (*under her breath*): No Caorthann^x here.

What can I do? We was always hither and thither upon the road peddling trifles, but if ever we passed a Witchy Tree^{xi} with her lovely bright berries Mama would break off a twig and make me a knot and hang it about my neck. "That'll keep ye safe", she'd say, and it did. Till I let it slip an' now look at me, all lonesome here.

Anne's staring at the wooden headboard of the bed she's just made. She looks hard at the door again. The singing of Christmas carols can just be heard. She goes to a cupboard and takes out a pair of scissors, then returns to the bedside. Concentrating hard, she scratches a shape on the footboard of the bed. It is a small, loose trinity knot shape or triquetra, like a Rowan twig amulet with the ends of the twigs tied at the top to make the top-most loop.^{xii}

* * *

SCENE II

*Ross Female Factory, June 1850. **Elizabeth Tyrell** is in the laundry, it's freezing cold with a southerly wind howling outside and she has her arms deep in cold water and soap suds. She's crying, then suddenly she stops, feeling something inside a garment she has been scrubbing. She feels around and then pulls out five four holed bone buttons. She swiftly glances behind her then secretes them in her garments.*

An invisible convict woman nudges her – only Liz's reaction can be seen by the audience.

Invisible woman: Looks like someone took pity on all them tears.

Liz: Chut!

Invisible woman (*in a lower voice*): Three's fair 'n. I won't tell.

Reluctantly Liz hands over two buttons. Then, reacting to a response from the invisible woman, she quickly adds another.

Invisible woman: Count your lucky stars.

Liz: I was in the lucky bed last time I were sick.

Invisible woman: *Snorts.*

Having Zillah Smithy tuck you under her wing is pretty wicky.^{xiii}

Liz: A fortnight in solitary for it weren't.

Invisible woman: Only sounds right for what I hears you was up to.

Liz resumes crying.

Invisible woman *sighs.* I know how it is. Scares y' this place. No one but bushrangers, darkies, and all them fellas; good men some of 'em might have been but they're just like us, all driven to wickedness. I'd rather be in here too, if they'd not be mitherin' us so.

* * *

SCENE III

*Ross Female Factory, Early summer 1851. **Catherine Ward** is in solitary confinement, standing at the door. She's trying to look through the grate covering a small, high aperture or window. It's quite dark and raining heavily outside.*

Catherine, *shouting*: You pagan pigs! Dirty Sassenach!^{xiv} You're all going to drown in this. You'll take us all with ye but praise the Holy Father for he's having none of ye. He'll clear you all off his blessed ground this very evening.

See it you did there, didn't you? That fearsome cloud right over your cowerin' little *Anglican church*. The waves were coming right up to it. Right around the corner, coverin' all the turf an' the steps too. That's what he's after; he'll clean thing up, you wait. Amen. Ye thieving English kern!^{xv}

Catherine *retreats, paces angrily around the cell, then returns to the grate. She has some red and white beads in her hand, a kind of makeshift rosary, which she has pulled out of somewhere in her clothing.*

Catherine (*shouting*): Mouchen!^{xvi}

Retreats, paces, returns to the grate: Mouchen ye bodach!^{xvii}

Come here to me Mouchen. I know ye ken hear me!

You know what Johns was giving out on that *snaidhm an Tríonóid Ró-Naofa*^{xviii} in the hospital? A lover's knot! What would she know, that devil worshipper? Said it was a witches' charm. Then she took off her shoe and was after us buryin' it to keep the wicked spirits out. Said we needed 'good magic'. I took her shoe and slammed it at the window for a good 'n' pure reason – to let the Holy Father's rain in and wash you sinners all away an' down t' Hell.

Catherine (*crossing herself*): *In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*

She lifts the hem of her skirt and with a swift, powerful movement, tears it all the way up to the waistband.

* * *

SCENE IV

*Ross Female Factory, Autumn, 1853. **Git (Bridget Mullins)** is sitting in a solitary cell but the door is slightly open and her posture is relaxed. She is smoking a small clay pipe and has an olive-coloured glass bottle beside her, from which she occasionally drinks.*

Git *singing*: Oh that I was an itty bitty bird,

with me wings trimmed oh so bravely o!

Oh that I was a fine turkey

with my fan-tail oh so fanned oh-o!

Mason says he'll have a fine fowl

For his dinner oh yeah he thinks so oh.

She sighs deeply and smokes. Then starts tracing a triquetra pattern on the ground. She adds a turkey's tail feathers on the top and turns the downwards loops into wings. . . (continue drawing a turkey ad lib).

A turnkey appears at the door.

Git smiles and hands her the bottle.

Turnkey: Come on, they'll be looking for you in a minute.

Git gets up laconically and gives the turnkey a pat on the shoulder.

Git: Thanks. A girl needs a moment out, even if it's in like. Mind you stash those buttons somewhere safe so you can sell 'em back to us when they're needed.

The two of them chuckle as they make their way towards hiring class.

T H E E N D

Notes

Character of site

Eleanor Conlin Casella noted that remote locations were intentionally chosen to make punishment more severe and terrifying (*Archaeology* 18). Liz and her invisible companion's feelings are a response to their sense of isolation and remoteness.

Conlin Casella's outline of the layout of the Ross Female Factory was also helpful, along with records from the Tasmanian Archives and information in Lucy Frost's *Convict Lives of the Ross Female Factory* book.

Conlin Casella noted the site's exposure to southerly weather and flooding of the RFF site (*Archaeology* 16). The weather conditions described in the scene's with Liz and Cath reflect this.

Language

I deliberately chose to focus on women from Ireland and the mid-north of England, who might have a similar culture and language. Sources that were helpful for imagining the kind of language the women might have used include Alan Garner, Elizabeth Gaskell and Emily Bronte, as well as Grose's and Vaux's dictionaries and various online sources for Irish terms in Hibernian English and Gaelic.

The women

My aunt, Josephine Colahan, helped a great deal with historical research on the women. Detailed information about each is appended.

The ages when at Ross are based on notes in the women's convict records, as are details of appearance (which are provided as a guide only, in the interest of historical accuracy, if this is desired). In regards to height, I have allowed for a little growth as most of the women were very young when transported (the youngest were Bridget and Elizabeth, who were only about 13 when they arrived in Van Diemen's Land).

The following are some key points pertaining to how and why I characterised the women as I have.

Anne – Anne's convict record is quite sad, suggesting that she was a bit simple-minded, but relied on for help by her mother, who was also caring for an older son suffering from fits. Her family seem to have originated in Ireland, probably following work to England, where Anne was born, and maybe becoming increasingly itinerant after the loss or departure of Anne's father and with changing industrial revolution employment availability.

Anne's use of an Irish word for Rowan indicates the significant influence of her mother over her early life and how elements of other languages can persist in families down the generations. Anne has the most notably accented and colourful language of all the women, suggesting that she retains much of her original 'mother

tongue. She has not learnt to speak more 'properly' within the system due to her intellectual impairment and childish qualities.

Liz – Elizabeth's convict record suggests someone quite mild, unlucky and sad, perhaps looking for reassurance and comfort from others. Her scene is mainly intended to indicate the longevity and ongoing impact of Anne's simple act of vandalism, but which also indicates how frightening convict women might have found Van Diemen's Land, especially those from the cities, and how urgently they might have desired any kind of comfort from those around them.

Catherine – Irish characters are often portrayed as 'the pagans', but they, in fact, also proudly Catholic. I wanted to show the English through Catherine's eyes, making them the 'pagans' for a change, and therefore suggesting how such labels are mutable, emotionally assigned and easily politicised.

Catherine's convict record suggests an angry, potentially violent character, but also a certain egotistical quality which can manifest like a kind of madness, in that it enables individuals to justify bad behaviour to themselves. (She appears to have collaborated with others in a series of thefts and violent offences after receiving her ticket of leave – see newspaper police reports).

Catherine was punished several times for damaging clothing (see convict records). This act has resonance with ascetic's attitudes, often, to clothing and also the rending of clothing in mourning, both of which seemed to suggest Catherine might have a fervid, fundamentalist personality.

I imagine Catherine's language as being heavily accented with Irish, but quite 'proper'. She uses some Irish turns of phrase and terms, but, for the most part, she attempts to express herself as though she is superior to the English.

Git – Bridget is a laconic character, a bit like a traditional royal fool – charming, easy going and brimming with humour and song. For this reason she might be able to win the support and confidence of others, therefore perhaps her experiences within the prison system might have been somewhat smoother or easier than those of others'. Bridget's many absences without leave, noted in her convict record, might indicate a 'devil may care' attitude. Her 'destruction of a turkey' has a curious farcical quality about it, given the lack of any detail about what really went on.

How did different characteristics or personalities affect convict women's experiences? Conlin Casella's reports indicate that there was probably a thriving economy in contraband items (also suggested by the earlier Flash mob phenomenon), and that alcohol was almost certainly consumed in the solitary confinement area. This would have required the cooperation of non-convicts or overseers, and in fact the boundaries of the factory were probably more permeable than is recognised – Hiring class convicts may have come and gone to a greater extent than is recognised, and then there were the many overseers who were actually ex-convicts. How did this influence their interactions with different convict

women in the factory? Surely personality had a significant influence on the different interactions between women, between convicts and overseers, and on the experiences of individuals.

Items mentioned

Several objects mentioned are based on items discovered during archaeological excavations of the site. These include the buttons, which Conlin Cassella suggests might have been used for trade (*Archaeology* 52, 70). White beads were found in the Crime Class area (*Archaeology* 69). Conlin Casella suggests they were a kind used commonly in trade, but were also used as rosary beads. Perhaps they could have been repurposed as such.

Conlin Casella noted that no pipes were found in the Hiring Class area, but that they, and the remains of glass bottles, were common in the solitary area (*Archaeology* 71-73). Perhaps women in hiring class were subject to relatively less surveillance to others, and might have found opportunities to sneak off to solitary for some luxuriating.

Spiritual culture

A number of sources inspired thinking about the spiritual culture of convict women. These include Ian Evan's investigation of magical marks and items found in colonial Australian buildings, and Ian Morrison's work on archival documents about 'colonial cunning folk' - William Allison, Moses Jewitt and Benjamin Nokes. Alan Garner is one of the most interesting sources I have found for thought about the coexistence of pagan and Christian culture in rural middle England and the kind of culture convicts might have brought to Australia.

The Trinity Knot, or triquetra, (pictured below) has pagan and Christian usages - in Celtic and Nordic mythology it symbolises universal balance/sacred geometry and the interconnectedness of all things. For Christians it represents the Holy Trinity. Trinity knots were made with Rowan twigs or wood to ward off evil powers/spirits/witches (see Pitt Rivers Museum).



LEFT - TRINITY KNOT OR TRIQUETRA; RIGHT - ENGLISH ROWAN TWIG AMULET (PITT RIVERS MUSEUM).

The burial of a shoe references Ian Evan's documentation of different kinds of magical tokens which he suggests were sometimes used to protect buildings in Tasmania. Apparently shoes were often used to bring good luck or keep evil spirits away.

The invisible woman and the visible turnkey

Why is one invisible and the other not? The aim of this is to hint at a 'thickening' materialisation site, as the stories unfold – it becomes increasingly alive and visible. This could be suggested visually in the production.

References

- Black, Susa M. *Tree lore: Rowan*. The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, <https://www.druidry.org/library/trees/tree-lore-rowan>.
- Casella, Eleanor Conlin. *Archaeology of the Ross Female Factory: Female Incarceration in Van Diemen's Land, Australia*. Report for the Cultural Heritage Branch (DPIWE, Tas.), the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and the Tas. Wool Centre, Ross; 2002.
- . "Doing trade': a sexual economy of nineteenth-century Australian female convict prisons". *World Archaeology*, Vol. 32(2), pp. 209–221.
- . "Every Procurable Object: A functional analysis of the Ross Factory Archaeological Collection". *Australian Historical Archaeology*, 19 (2001), pp. 25-38.
- . "To Watch or Restrain: Female Convict Prisons in 19th-Century Tasmania". *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001), pp 45-72.
- Evans, Ian Joseph. *Touching Magic: Deliberately concealed objects in old Australian Houses and Buildings*. Doctoral Thesis, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, 2010.
- Frost, Lucy, editor. *Convict Lives of the Ross Female Factory*. Convict Women's Press Inc., 2011.
- Garner, Alan. *Red Shift*. Lions, 1973.
- . *Strandloper*. Harvill, 1997.
- . *The Voice That Thunders*. Harvill, 1997.
- Grose, Francis. *The Vulgar Tongue*. Summersdale, 2004.
- Morrison, Ian. 'Colonial Cunning Folk, part one: William Allison'. *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Blog*, Libraries Tasmania, 2018.
- . 'Colonial Cunning Folk, part two: Moses Jewitt and Benjamin Nokes'. *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Blog*, Libraries Tasmania, 2018.
- Tasmanian Archives. Plans of the Ross Female Factory. Item numbers: PWD266-1-1693; PWD266-1-1694; PWD266-1-1695; PWD266-1-1696; PWD266-1-1699.

The Pitt Rivers Museum. *Small Blessings: Amulets at the Pitt Rivers Museum*. University of Oxford. <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/amulets/index.php/museum-trail/15-resources/146-trail-rowan-loop/>

Vaux, James Hardy. *A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language*. Project Gutenberg, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0600111.txt>. Accessed 21/5/18.

Appendices

The following collaborative workspace documents are appended. These contain detailed notes and source information for each of the women.

- Catherine Ward - <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Ward-23320>
- Mary Ann Dougan - <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Dougan-343>
- Elizabeth Tyrrell - <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Tyrrell-815>
- Bridget Mullins - <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Mullins-4563>

-
- i Coined, from 'bantling' – baby, similar to buntling, could be pronounced closer to 'Bunty'. Thought to be derived from the bands used to wrap infants (swaddling).
- ii Small child.
- iii Starving.
- iv Dear, beloved.
- v Brother.
- vi Rhyming slang for 'old man'.
- vii Bothers.
- viii Labour.
- ix Tender.
- x Irish for Rowan Tree (see Black).
- xi Rowan Tree.
- xii Refer to Exegetical Notes for images of a triquetra and Rowan amulet.
- xiii From 'wick' – quick, alive; coined to suggest lively or lusty.
- xiv Scottish and Irish derogatory term for English, probably from 'Saxon'.
- xv Band of soldiers, Irish insult.
- xvi Mrs Mouchen is a woman Catherine was been found guilty of threatening with a knife, for which she was sentenced to 14 days in 'the cells' (see her convict record).
- xvii Boor, pig or low-life.
- xviii Gaelic literal translation of 'Holy Trinity knot'.