

MEET MARGARET DALZIEL

“Surgeon’s report; bad. Behaviour; idle and disorderly.”

- Margaret Dalziel’s convict record

The fiery young Scottish highwaywoman tested the system to its limits but, given trust and respect, she turned her life around.

Free society was expected to maintain a respectable face to the world, despite the somewhat disreputable surroundings of a convict colony at the end of the earth. And in a time of large families, frequent illness and few labour-saving devices, one or two household servants were indispensable. But sometimes they were more trouble than they were worth, and Margaret Dalziel certainly fitted this description. She arrived in 1851, described as a Protestant housemaid from Glasgow who could read.

She was transported for ten years for highway robbery involving a tin case and registered papers. It sounds like the plot of a Victorian melodrama! She had two prior convictions, one for stealing a watch, the other for housebreaking. On board ship the Surgeon’s report was simply ‘bad’. She was only 5’ tall, with a ruddy complexion, brown hair, blue eyes and several tattoos.

Her first assignment was to James Hurst; he was a former Overseer of the Coal Mines. She did not commit any offences in his household, perhaps because he was used to managing convicts, but her next master was not so fortunate. From him she absconded and was removed to eight months’ hard labour at the Female Factory. She was next assigned to James Calder; he was a man of many parts, surveyor, writer and artist, historian and ethnographer, but he could not manage Margaret.

Within three days she had been charged with being drunk and out after hours and sentenced to six



The hard, heavy, hot and dirty work of servants made possible the elegance of the Commandant’s Residence

months’ hard labour at the Factory. For the next nine months she was in and out of the Factory, and her record was marked ‘not to be assigned south of Bridgewater’. Presumably the flesh pots of Hobart had proved an irresistible temptation. So she was sent to Daniel Stanfield at Clarence Plains, today’s Rokeby. Almost immediately she was in serious trouble there, charged with ‘injuring her master’s clothes’ and sentenced to three months’ hard labour back in the Factory.

She continued to abscond after brief periods from her next few places, receiving several more long sentences of hard labour until she was assigned to Superintendent James Boyd at Port Arthur. There we might think she had met her match in the former Chief Warder of Pentonville Prison, but after less than two weeks she absconded and remained at large for three weeks. This seems remarkable in such an isolated and inhospitable place; where had she hidden, how had she fed herself and kept warm? Did she have help?

AMAZING STORIES, EPIC HISTORY

So it was back to the Factory for Margaret yet again. After fourteen months – which included further offences escalating from general misconduct, through refusing to attend prayers and finally assault – she appeared in December 1857 at the old Impression Bay Probation Station, where the typhus fever-stricken Scottish immigrants from the *Persian* emigrant ship were quarantined. She was presumably at work nursing them. Most of the victims were Highlanders who spoke only Gaelic, and perhaps Margaret was one of the few available who could make herself understood to them and so was selected for this potentially fatal job. After about five weeks and 10 deaths the station was closed, and Margaret received her Ticket of Leave two days later, fitting reward for her courageous service.

After that, apart from the occasional ‘idle and disorderly’, Margaret remained out of trouble. In 1858 she married former convict Robert Carter and they had one son, James. There is a poignant postscript to her story. Noted on her record is an enquiry from one Rose Dalziel in 1865. Given that on her original record Margaret claimed to be single with no children, Rose may have been her mother or her sister. In another hand it is tersely noted that Margaret was to be informed of this enquiry – five years later.

Visitors to Port Arthur can visit the Commandant’s House and a number of other furnished houses to gain an insight into both the elegance of middle class life and the hot, heavy, dirty work that servants did to maintain it.