

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM  
AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 10 AUGUST AT 8PM.**

Present: The Vice-President, Ian Terry in the chair, and about 65 members and friends.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous meeting were read, and confirmed as a true record.

Speaker: The Vice-President introduced Dr Hamish Maxwell-Stewart as an Associate Professor in the School of History and Classics at the University of Tasmania. Taking his doctorate in Scotland he long had pursued convict studies in Tasmania.

Dr Maxwell-Stewart began by presenting two contemporary views –first of George Washington Walker to the effect that the conditions of convictism extend the life of transportees, and second of Linus Miller, who claimed that transportation was murderous and that modern gaols offered greater chance of health. The project to be discussed tonight confronted these issues. While based in Tasmania, it involved scholars from across the world. The primary data came from Tasmania’s remarkably rich convict records, but the project would extend beyond the convict era and the convicts themselves to culminate with a study of Tasmanian-born recruits in the first A.I.F., about whom there was also much information was on record. Scholars had become increasingly interested in the history of health, individual and collective, one notable hypothesis in the 1990s being that the experience of one’s grandmothers was crucial in determining life outcomes. Likewise various studies had confirmed how height in adulthood indicated general quality of life, and that body mass index was crucial to longevity. At least for ‘Western’ man, longevity had transformed since the mid-nineteenth century, from an expectancy of around forty then to eight now. The change began *before* breakthrough advances in medical science.

Having outlined the various records relating to convict health, Dr Hamish-Stewart discussed health on the voyage to Australia. The early weeks were most likely to see convicts fall sick with dysentery and related conditions and respiratory disorders, with another hump often coming as the ship reached the far south after calling at Cape Town. Overall however death rates were remarkably low, compared even with free-migrant movement across the Atlantic, let alone slave ships. Aboard the transports soldiers and children suffered more sickness while the ship was still in port than did convicts, probably because they were under less stringent control. Infectious diseases tended to ‘burn out’ as the voyage proceeded, distance thus giving Australia some immunity. Scurvy, however, was a constant threat. The death-rate for women on transports was markedly higher than for men. Once landed, however, this situation reversed, evidently because most women spent little time in any institution before being sent out as servants. The incidence of male deaths was markedly high in the early months ashore, this probably resulting in part from troubles contracted on the voyage, and also from reaction against conditions of servitude. After the first year of service, however, the rate diminished sharply, so that overall convicts proved healthier than the soldiers guarding them. There were variations according to situation, the death rate of those working in gangs at Port Arthur being much beyond the norm. Suicide contributed little to the first-year death rate, but was more prevalent as men served beyond seven years under sentence, presumably their hopes of freedom exhausted. Overall, the evidence supported Walker’s hypotheses rather than Miller’s.

In his closing remarks the speaker elaborated on how the project would extend into the post-convict period. It might even establish comparative data with convict siblings who remained in Britain. Whatever, the aim was to build a story of communal health and demography that would make Tasmania a world leader in such matters.

After many question, the Vice-President thanked the speaker for an ‘absolutely wonderful talk’ that would change perceptions about the convict experience. The meeting closed at 9:15.

Michael Roe for Secretary

Caroline Homer, President