Pybus, Cassandra and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart

American Citizens, British Slaves: Yankee Political Prisoners in an Australian Penal Colony 1839-1850
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This detailed and intriguing study deals with the almost 100 Americans who found themselves transported to the then notorious Australian penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania) in the late 1830s. On the surface a footnote to the history of both countries, the book’s brief is much wider than it appears.

In the first place, it demonstrates again that the US was still enmeshed in British colonial history for many years after political independence. Relations with Canada, for example, were relations with Britain, and indeed to many at the time the Canadian border beckoned with all the fevered promise of extending American “freedom” that continues to animate those in power today. In 1838, however, it was a motley collection of wild-eyed patriots, adventurers, and naïve ideologues who crossed into Upper Canada (now Ontario) on three occasions to free those benighted souls still living under the British yoke.

The raids were dismal failures, most of the raiders were captured, and the raids were followed by complex three-way diplomatic manoeuvres between the US, Canada and Britain, in which the American prisoners were caught in a legal swamp, cross-border terrorists of the 19th century. Despite the legal problems, many of them were sent on to England, and thence to Van Diemen’s Land, although almost all of them avoided the worst of the island’s convict locations.

The latter two thirds of the book deals with the Americans’ experiences while convicts, based not only on colonial records but on the seven cross-checked book-length accounts published when the survivors were eventually pardoned: captivity narratives in the American tradition of capture, tribulation, righteousness and release. For the American convicts were not simply prisoners but outraged freedom fighters whose ideological enthusiasm had not been taken up by those they wanted to free, and who found themselves prisoners of the very yoke they had wished to free others from. This gave rise to specific tensions in their narratives, “between the vivid recreation of the systematic degradation and brutality of convict life and the presentation of their superior American manliness and their republican virtue” (xiv), circumstances they explored in such detail, and often with great verve and precision, so that this small group of volumes is surprisingly “the largest collection of convict narratives in existence” (6).

In the manner of histories of convict experience, the book chronicles the intricacies of the control system, the varied privations and conditions endured, convicts’ interaction with different levels of power, and in this case the slowly-grinding cogs of American and British diplomacy that eventually saw the “Patriots” released early and pardoned in the mid to late 1840s. As they were not British citizens, they should never have entered the British convict system, but then again, America had not been at war with
Britain so they could not be classified as prisoners of war either (although many of them believed that the contemporary tussle between the US and Britain over the Maine-New Brunswick border conditioned their treatment). While some of their number died from the sea voyage, or on account of the subsequent conditions, the great majority survived and generally received rather better treatment than most. Coming from a frontier economy not dissimilar to that in the Australia of the period, their skills were in demand by the system to the extent that they were not ground down as prison fodder or brutalised as were the urban poor who made up the bulk of the British convicts. Between ten to fifteen of them even chose to stay on in Australia after their release.

Taking its place then as a superbly researched, lucidly written work in the areas of early 19\textsuperscript{th}-century American political enthusiasm, American-British-Canadian relations, and Australian convict history, this book has several not always overlapping constituencies. Yet the interaction of early US history with that of the British colonies of the time, and not simply along the Canadian frontier, yields much of interest to observers of both American and British colonial history, reminding us that American history in this period of national consolidation can reach as far as Australia. By an irony that points up the multi-levelled connections, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's land the Americans encountered, Sir John Franklin, was nobody less than a nephew of Benjamin Franklin.