

A  
**DESCRIPTION**  
OF  
*Sydney, Parramatta, Newcastle,*  
*&c.*  
**Settlements**  
IN  
**NEW SOUTH WALES,**  
WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE  
**MANNERS AND EMPLOYMENT**  
OF  
**THE CONVICTS,**  
**IN A LETTER**  
FROM  
**JOHN SLATER,**  
To his Wife in Nottingham.

Published for the Benefit of his Wife and Four Children.

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1819.

A LETTER<sup>i</sup>

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SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, APRIL 27, 1818

*My dear Wife,*

NO distance, no length of absence, nor yet any pleasures of amusements can so far attract my attention as to cause me to neglect writing according to my promise, to endeavour as far as is in my power lies, to ameliorate the sufferings of my unhappy family, and to satisfy the curiosity of my friends. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1817, we were aroused by break of day to enter upon a fresh scene to the one we had lately been used to: myself and many others of my Hulk-mates were ordered to prepare immediately for our departure from the Captivity Hulk, to proceed on board the ship *Larkers*<sup>ii</sup>, for our destination at New South Wales, where we found ourselves guarded safely by soldiers who were placed at the hatchways of the vessel, and, two hundred and fifty in number of us, confined to the main deck, couped up as close as sheep in a fair, but I must acknowledge, however unpleasant it was, Captain Wilkinson allowed us every comfort we could reasonably expect, and indulged a certain number of us with the liberty of the deck, so far as seemed to him consistent with his safety, and when he got better acquainted with the men, took off their irons and shewed favor to the deserving – shortly after we got on board the *Larkers*, we weighed anchor, and set sail, and again cast anchor at Torbay, from which place we finally bade adieu to Old England, on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1817, and with a flying top sail sighed our last farewell to our sweethearts, wives, families, friends and relations; but so hardened in infamy are most men in a similar capacity to that in which I am unhappily placed, and so abandoned to all sense of fine feeling or affection, that instead of a serious gloom prevailing, nothing but curses and blasphemy was apparent in every eye and countenance. Our ship was very healthy, for we lost but three men from our number.

We had a very pleasant passage of exactly sixteen weeks, excepting two nights and one day, which were something alarming to a landsman, but seamen fear no danger, and only view such matters with indifference. We arrived here on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, 1817, and in the midst of anxiety, every heart was elate with the news, anxious once more to set foot on shore, and to learn in what manner the prisoners were likely to be disposed of, each man sedulous for his own welfare. Our Captain had in the course of his voyage kept well up to the southward, so that I never in my life experienced more cold, but now we were arrived in a climate, where we had been led to believe we should find ourselves annoyed by too much heat. But this is a very mistaken notion; the climate is very healthy, and the air is truly salubrious, and as the seasons vary of course according to nature, the difference of summer is only affecting to persons who are compelled to take more exercise than ordinary.

Before I proceed to far, I shall think proper to inform you of a robbery which took place; on my coming on board the ship I consigned my box and property into the hand of the chief mate, who likewise received property of other persons on board, and put the whole down the hold, which from some inattention of the said chief mate, was gotten at by the prisoners, and plundered in toto, and not found out until we arrived a Sydney, when it was too late to discover the offenders, and have not been able to recover the same, which has been a very great loss to me. I mention this circumstance, to act as a caution to you, that whoever you may give charge of your property to, you may be sure and look at it about once a month, observing the most leisure time, not to be too troublesome, as I know of no better way of securing yourself than this, from the desperate robberies which are committed constantly on board such ships bringing convicts to this country – for instead of conviction softening their conduct, and leading them to reformation as might be supposed, they are hardened thereby, and will thief from a piece of biscuit to the main mast if it were possible they could secret it – honor they have none, they would as soon rob their messmates as a stranger, and mind what I caution you against – make no friendship with the best of them Observe this injunction strictly.

The first countryman I met after landing was William Kirby, a tailor, whom the people of Nottingham suppose to be dead, he is healthy and doing well.

Now, my dear wife, I shall endeavour to explain for your perusal the manners and customs of this colony,

although it is inhabited by Britons, vary much from those of England. Sydney is the capital and seat of government, and is pleasantly situated on the south side of the Cove, named from the town Sydney Cove; the government house commanding a full view of the Harbour, stands on the summit of a regular hill about half a mile from the water's edge, although the house is not to be compared to any grand building at home, it is nevertheless very pre-possessing in its appearance to strangers, and it is truly grateful to the view of a person just come to anchor, after a tedious voyage. Government house lies on the east side of a ship at anchor, the town S., S.E and W, and on the summit of a rock. To a view westerly, is Dawes's point, on which is a battery, mounting only a few guns, but sufficient for what is intended. The new general hospital is to be observed on an eminence beyond the government house, and is indeed a most excellent building exceeding all possible expectation for so infant a colony as this, and is also as amiable a charity. It is inclosed by a large stone wall, is itself a stone edifice, and round it is a lofty and spacious verandah, with stone pillars, and a verandah also up stairs with wooden pillars to imitate those underneath. There are three surgeons appointed to this hospital, viz. the principal surgeon of the colony, and two assistant surgeons, and some assistants to them. On the left of the government house is a guard house, where mount the governor's guard; and on the left of that is the habitation and office of his Excellency's Secretary; adjoining to which is next the house of his honor the Judge Advocate; and next the residence of John Oxley, Esquire, Land Surveyor General; the house opposite to which is occupied by the Rev. Mr. Cooper<sup>iii</sup>, the resident Chaplain; near this spot is the Bank of New South Wales, and this quarter of the town is most respectably inhabited. Many of the inhabitants have got good houses of stone and brick, very neatly executed, their private property; but Sydney in general commands the attention of a stranger for its neatness even in the poorer orders of society, every house having a garden attached and most gardens being stocked with the peach tree, which thrives abundantly and gives a most delightful countenance to nature in her cultivation and improvement by art. A new house is about to be erected for the Supreme Judge; and among the buildings of the colony, I must enumerate the barracks at the head-quarters as a principal; the soldiers' hospital, at Sydney; government house at Parramatta; the light house at the entrance of Port Jackson, on the south head of the harbour's mouth, &c. There is at Sydney a space of ground unenclosed, called Hyde Park, named after Hyde Park at London, but is at present merely a spot of land intended to be improved upon as time may best suit. A penitentiary is erecting, but upon what principle I cannot say, it is expected to be finished in a few months.

Since the present Governor took the command, the roads from town to town have been very much improved, for the convenience of the settlers bringing their produce to market, and many prisoners have gained their pardon, by working upon these roads, and assisting in the construction of new ones. There is a good road for upwards of one hundred and forty miles in the interior of the country which branches off to the several towns, viz. Parramatta, sixteen miles from Sydney to Castle Hill, to Richmond, to Windsor, To Hawkesbury, to Liverpool, to Bunbury Curraniv, Cowpastures, &c. and to Bathurst Plains, beyond the Blue Mountains, in a part of the country newly discovered.

The Blue Mountains are exceeding lofty, and to make a road over which was considered, at one time, almost insurmountable, being so inexpressibly difficult to ascend – steep and variable; but Captain Cox with a chosen party of prisoners, succeeded about three years ago, after very great labor and expense, in accomplishing this desired object, for which the prisoners received their pardons. Settlements are formed and forming on the other side of these mountains, and such fertile grazing land I never heard speak of, as it is described to be but the land on the nearer side is not so fruitful in many places as wished, and in cases of a flood, or other accidents, Sydney and this part depend on another settlement called Van Dieman's Land, about nine hundred miles by water to the southward of Port Jackson, which, freed from any such impediment, produces the most astonishing crops, and succours this part from starvation. These floods I speak of, and which we have reason to dread every March, or about that time, are caused by the very heavy falls rain upon the Blue Mountains, which for the want of a speedy vent in a proper channel, produce an influx of the River Hawkesbury, so high as twenty feet, at times about the banks, and sweep away consequently, grain, pigs, poultry, sheep, and cattle, and everything, both crops growing, and barns with their contents, to the great injury of the settlers in general, and total ruin of many. You would

scarce credit that several gentlemen on these occasions lose four or five hundred sheep, and consider themselves lucky if they have time to save their cattle, which they preserve by driving them on to the highlands. A corn stack with poultry and pigs has been seen seven miles at sea, driven down this river so rapidly; in short, these floods sweep barns and houses not well secured, as well as property, and are the terror of the country – but what impoverishes one establishes another, as the settlers uninjured by these rains make a fine market of the grain, inasmuch as wheat has been so high, as the loaf weighing 2lbs sold for a dollar; but those days are gone by the Van Diemen's Land supplying this place so abundantly. The produce of this country is simply stock of every kind; wheat and Indian corn, and vegetables of all kinds. The growth of hops has been encouraged, and also that of flax, but the latter is not so much noticed as might be expected. The tobacco plant has been, and is attempted at by many but does not attain that perfection expected. The manufacture of the country is but very little – some coarse cloth, and some hats are the chief commodities attended to and which have attained any degree of perfection; also earthenware of an inferior quality. Some small brigs have been built and launched, but the colony is too young to be expected to produce any matters of importance. At Parramatta there is a factory for females, who are employed in spinning, &c. in the manufacture of blankets, &c.: this is a government establishment, and the place where women who do not conduct themselves with propriety are sent for punishment, and confined for limited sentences when, if no amendment takes place, they are punished in a more exemplary manner.

The colony at large is governed by Lachlan Macquarie, Esq; there is also a Lieut-Governor at Head-quarters, (Parramatta,) and another at Van Diemen's Land, but all things require the sanction and signature of Governor Macquarie to establish their legality. The laws are executed by the authority of the Supreme Judge, who superintends civil causes; by his Honor the Judge Advocate, in criminal causes; by the Superintendent of Police, and the several Magistrates of the colony, in petty and frivolous offences. A prisoner is very closely looked after, and the Superintendent of Police has the power of sending a prisoner, having committed an offence, to Newcastle, the harbour where the convicts of this country are banished to; he can send them for one, two, three years, or more, as the character of the person, or the nature of the offence may require, to which order the Governor gives his sanction, and that is sufficient. All Magistrates have this power; nevertheless, depredations are committed daily. All heavy causes are sent to Sydney to be tried, and in cases of murder at any out settlements, the parties are returned thither, if found guilty, to be executed. Trifling matters are arranged without troubling the Judge, if the parties are prisoners; but if free, the regular forms of justice must be gone through.

On the arrival of a ship of prisoners, the Governor's Secretary goes on board, accompanied by the principal Superintendants of convicts, and the tradesmen in the service of government, for instance, carpenters, bricklayers, &c. are selected for the several branches they pretend to; servants also, of certain descriptions, are appropriated to such gentlemen as may want them, and what remain unengaged are then sent to the different outposts to supply the settlers who may seek for their aid. It is no uncommon matter to see a jeweller, a clerk, or a tailor, with a reaping-hook in his hand cutting grain; or with an axe felling a tree. Hard work and hard fare is generally the lot of a settler's man, but I am fortunate and remain at Sydney, headquarters. No prisoner can travel from one town to another, without a pass signed by a Magistrate, on pain of being sent to Newcastle, or punished at the discretion of a Magistrate. The Superintendent of convicts assigns the men to their different gangs, when each man receives orders what his is to do from another prisoner appointed overseer over him – thus prisoners becoming overseers, obtain their pardons in course of time. Each gang musters and attends church on a Sunday morning. A prisoner for his labor receives 7lbs of beef, and 7lbs of flour from the King's stores, and an overseer half as much more as a common man. Government men work from day-light until three o'clock, excepting an hour for breakfast, and the rest of the day is for the prisoner to employ himself as he may think proper, but on Saturdays from day-break until ten o'clock without a breakfast hour. A man offending those in authority over him, is marked, and as men are constantly sent to the outstations, he may expect to be sent the first opportunity – thus men are punished. Some offences, such as stowing away in a ship to desert from the colony, and insolence, &c. are punishable with the Jail Gang, which gang is employed emptying necessaries, and at all dirty and hard work, and sleep in the jail, and are compelled to wear a dress half brown and half white, exposed to public view. Industrious

attentive people, steady to their duty, will gain a living before idle and disorderly persons; but truth I must tell, that a man must be well known before he is entrusted, or can do so comfortably as he might wish, as so many fall short of their promises, and so much artifice and dishonesty prevails.

As I have spoken of Newcastle, the place for sending convicts and prisoners to, from our Courts of Criminal Jurisdiction, I shall endeavour to explain in what manner the misery, which is intended they should bear, is extended to them: on their landing at Newcastle both legs are put in irons, they are set to work in the coal mines and about the lime-kilns, and are looked after with the strictest scrutiny. A man at this place cannot earn any thing by labor, as all the work is on account of Government, and thus solely depending on his meat and flour, out of which he has to defray his lodging, washing, &c. he is reduced to the lowest state of indigence and poverty which man can possibly bear, and which I should fall short in the explanation of

Newcastle derives its name from the two Newcastles in England, both being famous for their adjacent collieries and this Newcastle being the only spot at this part of New South Wales in which that article is come at. Van Dieman's Land has a place somewhere in the interior likewise, in which they dig this article for their own purposes. Coals are frequently sent from this port to India, but not in such large quantities as might be expected, mostly instead of other ballast should a ship be wanting. All persons on the settlement of Newcastle are prisoners, with the exception of the Commandant, the Surgeon, the Storekeeper, and the Soldiery, which makes the misery still further; a constable obtains half a ration more than a common man; so does an overseer and all petty officers, therefore in the midst of poverty, such an indulgence and exemption from the labor of the place, makes them vigilant and dutiful, even sometimes to more than strict propriety, for they are often found in malicious lies and enmity against their fellow prisoners with the view of favor, and when such case is exposed, the punishment they intended to administer to another is very deservedly extended to themselves. The Commandant is a humane good man, but the people are such a set of rascals, punishment is necessary to be frequent for example sake. The punishment generally inflicted at this place is corporeal, and that over the breach, by the beat of the drum, two floggers alternately administering twenty five lashes until the quantum sufficit be given. In this unhappy spot of course it happens that some of good family, as well as others, have to meet the punishment of the place, for errors they may have committed in the country, and it is no uncommon matter to see a clerk, a doctor, a clergyman, or at least persons intended for such employment in the days of their youth, carrying a basket of lime or coals, in company with a man who has been bred a thief from his cradle. Thus the misery of a self-convicting conscience adds torment to their state, and the unhappy countenance of each fellow sufferer adds poverty and makes the punishment more irksome. Men at this settlement reduced to the last state of despair, frequently run into the woods and live upon what nature in her uncultivated form affords among the wild productions of the forest. But soon the delusion vanishes, starvation threatens them close, and afraid to return to their duty, they make the best route they can, crossing rivers and lakes and sleeping in the open air, enduring every privation of comfort, until, if they should survive the fatigue, they arrive at some of the settlements where hopes of the fostering hand of christianity may lead them; pity induces some of the poor settlers to relieve them, but fear which ever haunts the guilty mind, makes them afraid to stay long in a place, till at length they are apprehended, when they receive a severe punishment for their misconduct, and provided they do not stand charged with any additional robbery, they are then returned to where they ran from, where they are again punished. A man of the name of Creig, actually asserts, that when he made a similar effort to extricate himself from this state of bondage, he came to a spot where he beheld, leaning against a tree, the skeleton of a man, with a musket by his side, also against the tree, and which he supposes to be a bush ranger, like himself (as they are called who run away to the woods). Many are compelled from hunger to give themselves up, and very frequently so starved that they can scarce crawl upon their hands and knees to the happy spot of a dungeon.

Tobacco, tea and sugar are so very expensive at Newcastle, that no poor man can purchase; and should a prisoner there find a friend to send him a little of those articles, he gets pork, beef, and flour, in return for what he may indulge his neighbour with who have to rob their allowance of beef and flour to purchase such luxuries. There is at this Newcastle a government house, a jail, a store house, a church, and an hospital, which are but indifferent

buildings compared with those at Sydney; the poor prisoners' houses are for the most part built of timber and mortar plastered against them. The town is situated upon the river Hunter, named after Governor Hunter, and is but small. About eighty miles up the river on the second branch there are a few settlers farmers, but these men are prisoners also, who have got a grant for particular services performed to government. These men are settled at Patterson's Plains, and the grain, &c. they grow does not leave Newcastle, neither is any traffic allowed to this port, saving in coals; the lime being all wanted to government.

I shall say little of Van Dieman's Land, as the manners and customs are exactly the same with the rest of the colony. The settlers from this part of the territory send potatoes and onions, wool, skin, &c. in great quantities to Sydney. The seat of the Lieutenant-Governor is at Hobart town, on the Derwent river. The other towns are George's Town, Port Dalrymple, &c.

The head clergyman of the colony is Mr. Marsden, and there are several assistant divines; there are also a good many methodists, who meet with poor encouragement from the lower orders – they are missionaries sent from England to convert the natives of New Zealand, Otaheite, &c. which islands are within six or seven weeks' sail, and to which we have several small vessels trade.

The several jailers of the colony have more followers than the clergy have, yet I must acknowledge religion gains ground fast in the colony. Formerly marriage was not known, but latterly under the influence of Governor Macquarie, to his credit be it known, that ceremony is very frequently solemnized, and people do not depend on each other's word, quite so much as usual. However such matters are too common, and scores of women I know who have cohabited regularly with different men and lived as man and wife, happy with each, and with unconcern about it. Happy! I say wrong! for very little happiness such a man or woman has, but I mean without killing each other, a few blows, and when that can't do, why part and no more about it. Women are generally of a very drunken cast, and a glass of rum will purchase favors even from married people, so very ill habits have they contracted either on board a ship or at home. It is no uncommon matter for women following their husbands to this colony to lose their characters on board the ship coming out – by drunkenness, whoredom, and the like, and the consequence is, they have to provide for themselves on landing, as their husbands are not compelled to take them under such circumstances. On the arrival of a ship from England, a list of the letters is immediately exposed for view, and I have often already looked this over very anxiously, but never yet obtained one for me. As I am speaking of letters, I think it proper to mention, that all letters put in the post office at home, must be postage paid to the Land's End, which is done by inquiring of the postmaster at the office, who will receive the charge; and be sure you observe that he writes postage free on the direction, or it stops in London office, and goes no further.

I had nearly forgotten to inform you, of the most material matter to me, of any I had to write concerning – we have in this colony a stocking frame, brought out here by a man of the name of Bates, but who has since sold it to a Jew. This Jew hires it to a man of the name of Hitchcock, a Nottingham man who pays rent for it, and makes a comfortable living for himself and family beside. Now, my dear Wife, it seems to strike me, which can be easily enough done by ALL lending their aid, as a number may assist one, when one may not have the power to help a many. If they would collect a trifle it would ALL help, and then you or my brother Sam or Joe, might purchase me a small frame, it would be fortune for you to bring out to me. One about 24 or 26 gauge, and about 18 or 20 inches wide, so that I could either make hose or pieces. I could get plenty of work, and support my family in credit. If you can raise this, bring also with you an engine to make needles, and also a few needles and sinkers to begin with, likewise some cotton to make a start. Should you have any money over and above, keep it close, and do not let your shipmates know of it, or you will be robbed of it; and as the Captain will not, in all probability, be on board when you first go on board, keep it snug until you are certain, but do not allow any person to know you have got money, or to see it, or you will lose it by force; but when the Captain comes on board then give it up to him, and ask him to take charge of it for you.

We have a printing office here, and publish a Gazette weekly, also there is a paper published weekly at Van Dieman's Land; but I cannot send them because I cannot afford to buy them: they contain little more than the news in the colony, copies out of the English prints, and Government General Orders.

When you get the frame, I think you had better make interest among some of the gentlemen at home, to get permission for it to come out, and then you will be safe; but some good friend at home will certainly direct you on my account, and in pity to my family. Remember me most sincerely and affectionately to my brothers Sam and Joe, and my father and mother. Tell the children I have not forgot them, and tell Jane I hope she is a good girl. Hoping to see you and my dear children, I conclude, in good will and sincerely to all inquiring friends, and in love to you and my family, Believe me,

*Your very affectionate, though unfortunate husband*

JOHN SLATER

*Direct to me,*

*JOHN SLATER, Silk Weaver,*

*Sydney, New South Wales*

*P.S. With a thought that you probably continue in the same mind as when we parted, with respect to following me to this country, I have made application to the Principal Superintendant for you to be sent out by the Government at home; he tells me that you will receive an order for that purpose from the Secretary of State, directed to the Rev. Mr. Sitwell, of Morley, but should this not be the case, and I should not be allowed this indulgence so soon on account of my being but a younger member of the colony, use every exertion in your power; get the overseers of the poor and the clergymen of your parish, and some magistrates to sign a petition to that effect and if you can get one of the Nottingham Members of Parliament to present it you are sure of coming. I write this because I think it is possible that you are still anxious to come after me.*

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*FINIS*

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### Postscript

John signs off by sending his love: 'Tell the children I have not forgot them ... Your very affectionate, though unfortunate husband, John Slater, Silk Weaver, Sydney'. Poignantly, he adds, 'P.S. I write this because I think it possible that you are still anxious to come after me'. Catharine was indeed anxious for a family reunion and followed John to Sydney, arriving in January 1822. Samuel, 21, Sarah, 19, and Elizabeth, 16, all were reunited with their father after five years of separation. Sadly, Jane, whom he specially mentions in his letter, appears not to have survived. However, a new arrival, Henry, was born in Sydney in March 1824. It seems the Slaters prospered in the new colony; John went on to become a constable.

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### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The original spelling has been retained.

<sup>ii</sup> The convict transport ship on which John Slater was embarked was the *Larkins*.

<sup>iii</sup> The Reverend William Cowper. Cowper arrived at Port Jackson in August 1809 where he took up duties as minister of St Philip's Church, then being completed. For the first ten years of his ministry, he was the only clergyman permanently in Sydney.

<sup>iv</sup> Campbelltown.