

# A Tale of a Prison-Ship

By Carolyn Murphy Weddell

It was 1977, and my mother and I were watching the telecast of Alex Haley's *Roots*. The sickening image of Kunta Kinte shackled by enormous and inhuman wrist, leg, and neck shackles came up on the screen. My most vivid memory of the occasion, however, is the remark my mother murmured at the time: "Awful, horrible...I've seen chains like that. When I was a little girl, my mother took me to see an Australian convict ship in New York harbor. I remember the terrible chains on the wall." She then made her usual observation about the British having the best public relations in the world; we then resumed watching the program.

At the time, this rather unusual comment by my mother did not really register with me. Although I was by then a junior in high school out on Long Island, I had not quite shaken off the childish impression that my mother had lived through *everything*.

It would therefore not have been unusual for her to have seen an Australian convict ship. I was a "change of life" baby, and I had become accustomed to the fact that my parents were always going to be older than everyone's else's. The advantage was that they could tell me first hand about historic events such as the Great Depression and the Second World War; why should their experiences not then have included visiting an Australian convict ship? Since Mother had once told me about being "given the eye" by a group of Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) troops on the subway circa 1943, I just filed the information in my head under "Miscellany—Australia."

All through college and my first few post-graduate Manhattan years, the information remained filed away. A resurgence in personal interest in my own roots (as an American-Irish Catholic New Yorker who had lived on Fordham Road in the Bronx until the age of 9) brought back with a surge of Irish chauvinism the memory of my mother's remark. Unfortunately, my grandmother (a native of Tullamore in County Offaly) had died in the late 1960's, and my mother, having been a very little girl when she visited the ship, could not give me any details about it. Once again, the memory was filed away.

My first "real" job in New York City was with TIME Inc. (now Time-Warner). Most TIME "alumni" (doomed to spell the company name forever in all uppercase) are familiar with the unique and wonderful resources of the company's editorial library. Whether that library is still or will remain so unique depends on whether the current management will have the foresight and/or funds to preserve its newspaper and magazine clippings files, which date as far back to the 1920s and before. The company recently eliminated its marking staff, which had clipped articles for those same files, having decided that online database searches will serve as an adequate replacement. Even if these files are not overtly discarded to "make space," usage and acidification will eventually reduce them to dust.

At any rate, it was this library that inspired me to become a librarian (actually, a computer-wielding "information specialist").

As a TIME Inc. library clerk, I took advantage of the company's free-tuition-for-job-related-education policy to obtain my Masters of Library Science at the Columbia School of Library Service. While in an advanced reference class, I had to complete a local area bibliography and chose my "other" home town, Sag Harbor, where my family had either visited or lived since the 1930's. As part of my research, I spent a day amidst the dark-wooded architectural splendor of the Brooklyn Historical Society (which encompasses the Long Island Historical Society). While there, I spotted on a reference librarian's desk a vivid color print entitled "Cruelty Presiding Over the Prison Ship." This depicts a rather morose angel (reminiscent of Durer's portrait of "Melancholia") seated with an open book above the hold of a prison ship, from which hold can be seen the extended, imploring arms of a host of American soldiers. The librarian explained that the print had been made around 1876 for the centennial of the American Revolution and in memory of the American soldiers who had died as prisoners in the British prison ships of Fort Greene in Brooklyn (for whom the Prison Ship Martyrs' Memorial tower was erected).

I was excited by this serendipitous discovery, since I exclaimed to myself, "Prison ship, British—this must be what my mother was talking about!" I requested a color photographic reproduction of the print. When I received this, I went to great expense to have it mounted and framed as a birthday gift for my mother. My disappointment was great when Mother opened the package: "No, the ship I was talking about was *not* in Fort Greene. Yes, I *know* about the Revolutionary War. Just how *old* do you think I am, Carolyn? Besides, this is utterly macabre; I couldn't put this up in my house." (The print now hangs in my living room; I tell people that it inspires me to write my Amnesty International "Freedom Writer" letters, which is partly true.)

Returning to the TIME library with a renewed zeal, I was determined to find my mother's prison-ship. Since she was born in 1920, I began painstakingly to go through every *New York Times Index* beginning in that year. Using a variety of search terms (e.g., "Prison," "Convict," etc.), I was overjoyed to find the following citation in the October-December 1927 index volume, with the description, "SUCCESS (Convict Ship)- D Smith, who sailed her from London to N Y C in 1912, sails for England; tells of money made on trip." The December 18, 1927 article runs as follows:

## "FORTUNE IN CONVICT BRIG.

Captain Smith Says He Made \$1,000,000 Showing the Ship Here.

Captain David Smith, who sailed the old British convict brig Success from London to New York in ninety-six days in

# THE OLD AUSTRALIAN CONVICT SHIP.

## NOW in NEW YORK—Foot of W. 129th St.

At FORT LEE FERRY

The Oldest Ship in the World, Built 1790 in British India  
 Raised from the Bottom of Sydney Harbor, Australia

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC DAILY  
 10 A.M. to 10 P.M.  
 Admission 50c  
 Children under 12 years Half Price

Foot of West 129th Street  
 at Fort Lee Ferry

PRISON SHIP

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC DAILY  
 10 A.M. to 10 P.M.  
 Admission 50c  
 Children under 12 years Half Price

Foot of West 129th Street  
 at Fort Lee Ferry

The World's Greatest Educational Exhibit has been visited by over fifteen million people

Shown here are now shown in their original state all the various Dismal and Condemned Cells, the Whipping Posts and Manacles, the Branding Irons, the Punishment Bells, the Leader-tipped Cat-o-nine Tails, the Cotton Bats and Other Cruel Inventions of Man's Brutality to his fellow man.

This Wonderful Vessel has made History through Three Centuries. She Marked the Beginning and the End of England's Monstrous Penal System. She has held Lurid Horror and Dreadful Iniquities besides which even the terrible stories of the Black Hole of Calcutta and the Spanish Inquisition pale into insignificance. She is the Oldest Ship in the World and the Only Convict Ship Left Afloat out of that dreadful Fleet of Ocean Heels which caused the Seven Seas in 1790 A.D. She is Unchanged after all these Years, nothing being omitted but the Human Freight and their Sufferings from Cruelties and Barbarities Practiced upon them.

Mitchell Library, Sydney, N.S.W.

A poster advertising the "SUCCESS" when on exhibition in New York.

The Convict Ships 1787-1868, Charles Bateson

the Summer of 1912, sailed yesterday on the White Star liner Cedric. He said 20,000,000 Americans had visited the ship in the last fifteen years, netting him more than \$1,000,000.

The Captain said he had left the convict brig at Toledo, Ohio, where it will remain for the winter. "I believe my grandchildren will someday be showing the Success, and that it is a better legacy for them than bonds or securities," Captain Davis said. [Prophetic words for 1927.]

He added that the convict brig was built at Moulmain [sic], Burma, of teak in 1790 and used for forty-seven years to transport convicts from England to Sydney Australia, then known as Botany Bay.

Just before sailing time, Purser John T. Cummings received a radio message for Walter G. Hinchliffe, the English aviator who piloted Charles A. Levine from Croydon to Venice in the Columbia, saying that he had sailed Thursday night on the French liner Paris. Previously he was supposed to have sailed Wednesday night on the Berengaria."

Since the article made reference to the year 1912, I then went back to that year of the *New York Times Index*. In the April-June 1913 volume, there was an article cited for the date April 25, 1913, entitled "Old Convict Brig in New York Harbor." The text ran thus:

### VISITORS TO CONVICT BRIG

Ancient Carriers of British Prisoners Attracts [sic] the Curious Here.

The old convict brig Success, which was moored at the foot of West Seventy-ninth Street [later West 129th Street] on Wednesday, was visited yesterday by a crowd, who explored the dungeons in the hold, where the convicts were confined, loaded with chains, and listened to the account given by the guides of the tortures inflicted upon the unfortunates by the brutal warders. In the days when the Success was used for conveying convicts to Australia, then called Van Diemen's Land, a man could be transported for killing a rabbit that he caught on his land or for snaring a pheasant.

The Success [sic] was built in Moulmain [sic] Burma of teak and copper sheathed in 1790 for the old East India company, but was so low that she was sold to the Government. She is 135 [185?] feet long and 598 tons burden, and is lightly sparred for a brig of her size. Her brow is almost as bluff as the stern. She was 96 days sailing from the London Docks to Boston a year ago. There are stories of ghosts clanking their chains and weird marrow freezing groans being emitted from the dark dungeons below the orlo[illegible] deck for those who like thrills and like to hear how people suffered in the good old days."

Not trusting the reliability of newspaper reports laden with grammatical and spelling errors, not even those of the reputable *New York Times*, I continued my research. Armed with the name of the ship—the Success—I consulted Charles Bateson's book *The Convict Ships 1787-1868*. This contains a small section on the Success, complete with illustrations. Bateson, however, makes a rather fine distinction between a "convict ship," which transported convicts from England to Australia, and a "prison ship":

### The Story of the "Success"

Of all the Indian vessels associated with the transportation of prisoners to Australia the most famous is the Success. A wealth of myth and legend clings to her name, and thousands of people who visited her when she was floating museum continue to regard her as the last and most famous of the convict ships. She was still on show in America, complete with cat-o'-nine-tails, handcuffs, leg irons, the waxen figures of prisoners, and all the rest of the paraphernalia, in the 1930's. Billed as the "last of England's Infamous Felon Fleet," the Success was claimed to have been "the commodore or principal devil-ship" of the fleet, and was stated to have been built in Pegu, as Moulmein was originally named, in 1790. Even such an authority on Indian-built ships as Commander W.H. Coates accepted the Success as having been built at Pegu in 1787.

The truth, of course, is the Success was not built at Moulmein until 1840, and she was never a convict ship. Her original owners were Phillips, Shaw & Lowther, of the Exchange Buildings, London, and for six or seven years they employed her as a Country Ship and in the United Kingdom-East Indies trade. They then put her into the Australian emigrant trade, and on September 19, 1847, she sailed from Plymouth on her first voyage to Australia. On that occasion she conveyed 245 emigrants to Adelaide, where she arrived on January 17, 1848. The following year she carried emigrants to Melbourne, and she made a third voyage, also with emigrants, in 1852, arriving at Melbourne on May 31, after a passage of 123 days from Plymouth.

While lying in Corio Bay, Geelong, her crew deserted her to try their luck on the goldfields, and the Success was then purchased by the Victorian Government. In August the work of converting her into a prison hulk began, and early the following year she commenced duty as a floating prison. With four other similar hulks—the *President*, the *Sacramento*, the *Lysander*, and the *Deborah*—she was moored in Hobson's Bay, off the Strand, Williamstown. The Success continued to be used as a prison hulk until 1858, and later served as a women's prison, a reformatory and dormitory for boys, and an explosives hulk.

In the 1870's she was sold. Her new owners were speculators who fitted her up as a convict ship and exhibited her as a grim relic of the convict days. In 1890 a former bush-ranger, Harry Power, joined her as compere, and the following year she was towed to Sydney by the tug *Eagle*. She arrived on November 6 and remained on exhibition for some months. She then again changed hands, and it was announced that she would be taken to England to serve as a floating museum. The residents of Sydney, however, had no desire to see her taken overseas, and she was quietly scuttled when lying in Kerosene Bay. Six months later she was raised, but her owners were refused a Customs clearance on the ground that she was unseaworthy. She left Port Jackson surreptitiously, however, and reached England safely. She was exhibited in English waters until 1912, when she was purchased by an American company and crossed the Atlantic in 98 days. [The *New York Times* stated 96 days.] She remained on display at various American ports until the

shortage of shipping during World War I caused her to be equipped with a Diesel engine and converted into a cargo ship in 1917. She was sunk when she got caught in ice at the junction of the Ohio and Kentucky rivers, but she was again raised and once more resumed her old job as exhibition ship. The *Success* was one of the star attractions of the Chicago World Fair in 1933, and she was still afloat five years later.

In 1930 it was claimed that 21 million people had visited her during her long career as museum ship, and even if this total is a gross exaggeration, it is certain that very few of her visitors realised [sic] that she was not the convict ship she claimed to be. For a convict ship the *Success* never was!"

The original broadsheet advertises the *Success* as "The Old Australian Convict Ship NOW in NEW YORK—Foot of W. 129th St. at FORT LEE FERRY—The Oldest Ship in the World, Built 1790 in British India—Raised from the Bottom of Sydney Harbor, Australia." It then states the ship was "OPEN TO THE PUBLIC DAILY from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M.—Admission 50 cents—Children under 12 years Half Price." The promotional "blurb" is appropriately vivid, as is the montage of the ship itself and its various cruel exhibits (including, inexplicably, an "Iron Maiden") "[In large type] *The World's Greatest Educational Exhibit has been visited by over fifteen million people.* [In smaller type] Aboard her are now shown in their original states all the airless Dungeons and Condemned Cells, the Whipping Posts, the Manacles, the Branding Irons, the Punishment Balls, the Lead-tipped Cat-o-Nine-Tails, the Coffin Bath and Other Fiendish inventions of Man's Brutality to his fellow man. This Wonderful Vessel has made History through Three Centuries. She Marked the Beginning of the End of England's Monstrous Penal System. She has held Lurid Horror and Dreadful Iniquities besides which even the Terrible Stories of the Black Hole of Calcutta and the Spanish Inquisition Pale into Insignificance. She is the Oldest Ship in the World and the Only Convict Ship Left Afloat out of that dreadful Fleet of Ocean Hells which sailed the Seven Seas in 1790 A.D. She is Unchanged after all these Years, nothing being omitted but the Human Freight and their Sufferings from Cruelties and Barbarities Practiced upon them." These hyperbolic claims no doubt brought in the crowds.

Since Bateson's book left off with the *Success* still afloat, I wondered what had become of it; might it still be afloat somewhere near Chicago? By sheer coincidence, it happened that Robert Hughes's heartbreaking book *The Fatal Shore* was published just as I was completing my own research. His book is more of an indictment of the British penal system in Australia than any authentically ghoulish convict hulk could ever hope to be. I went to its index and found an entry for the *Success*. However, I was met with the following, a rather disappointing dismissal:

"Yet despite neglect, amnesia and a thousand unconscious acts of censorship, the [penal] System did continue to flourish in popular memory—as Grand Guignol. One of the few tourist attractions of Hobart [Tasmania, Australia] in the 1880s was the *Success*, a convict hulk that had lain in Port Phillip Bay for years and had acquired a delectably bloody reputation, as its prisoners had joined in the killing of "The Demon," John Price. Entrepreneurs had bought her and fit-

ted her out with dummy convicts and an imposing array of fetters, gratings, handcuffs, punishment-bands, balls, chains and cats, all genuine (such things had not become expensive colonial antiques at the time), along with the black iron armor worn by the bushranger Ned Kelly at his last stand at Glenrowan. When most of the population of Tasmania had trooped through her, the owners sailed *Success* to Sydney in the hope of bigger crowds. She was promptly censored: Scuttled in the dead of night by indignant citizens who did not wish to be reminded of the [convict era] Stain, *Success* sank at her moorings with the loss of all waxworks."

Hughes mentions nothing of the subsequent raising of the ship; however, he does mention the ready availability of genuine artifacts of the convict period. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the *Success* may well have been fitted with authentic "props." Since Mr. Hughes was and is the Art writer for *TIME*, I sent him a copy of his book through interoffice mail, with a brief synopsis of the convict ship story and a request for an autographed inscription to my mother. I got the book with an inscription and autograph but no comment on the story.

Most remarkably, I was able to locate a copy of the ship's promotional booklet. Having joined the American-Irish Historical Society in the aforementioned burst of ethnic pride, I decided to take advantage of their rich but (until recently) rather poorly maintained library. I found the booklet on the shelf next to a badly acidified collection of Tasmanian short stories. As I held the small pamphlet of 50 pages or so—which was in remarkably good condition, especially in comparison with its Tasmanian neighbor—I felt as if I were touching a bit of New York history. I imagined my grandmother, after her *Success* tour and with my mother in hand, perhaps perusing the book and considering its purchase, then no doubt dismissing the thought in favor of buying food for her six children. After all, she had already paid 75 cents just for the price of admission for herself and my mother! I could not borrow the booklet and I was not at the time allowed to photocopy it; my personal frustration was matched by a relief that the book had been and would be preserved against any assaults on its physical integrity. With any luck, the booklet is still in the collection of the Society.

Though not a "convict ship" as strictly defined by Mr. Bateson (i.e., though it served as a prison hulk, it never actually transported convicts from England to Australia), the *Success* is nonetheless notable for its own remarkable history. Its exhibitors may be faulted for claiming an authenticity for the ship, but the authenticity of the horrors represented by the ship cannot be denied. The *Success* is also notable as a part of New York City; how many people today are aware that from 1912 to 1927 an "Old Australian Convict Ship," authentic or no, was a tourist attraction at the foot of West 129th Street at the Fort Lee Ferry? An immigrant Irishwoman—my grandmother, Catherine Bracken—considered it to be an educational experience for her young daughter (if only to provide a vivid example of the ways of "Albion perfide"); it must therefore be considered a part of the history of the New York Irish. That young girl, Mary Bracken Murphy, made the connection later, as a mother herself, between the suffering of the Irish (and English) under the British penal system with the suffering of Africans under the system of slavery. I am grateful for having had that connection made for me.