

# History

## The Angel of Newgate

*Author Deborah Swiss celebrates the work of Elizabeth Fry*



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Elizabeth Fry reading to the prisoners in Newgate jail in 1816, accompanied by JJ Gurney, Dorcas Covetry, Thomas Fowell Buxton, and Samuel Gurney.

It is nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. I find myself standing before the Rajah Quilt in the National Museum of Australia. This treasured piece of history, at eleven feet across, is much larger than I had imagined and I feel humbled as I view its rich shades of gold and burnt umber, still vibrant after 170 years. The finely crafted artifact is rendered more precious still by blood stains from the inexperienced fingers that stitched together the patches while their ship crashed through the seas on the 105-day voyage from Great Britain to Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania). An inscription on the quilt's border pays tribute to Quaker reformer Elizabeth Gurney Fry and her Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners.

I'm on the other side of the world, tears running down my cheeks. I had only seen pictures of the quilt and viewing it in person was like reaching into the past – a vivid remembrance of the 179 female

prisoners headed for a lifetime of exile aboard the convict ship *Rajah*. Housed just above the bilge, the women sewed without light in the mildewed darkness. Yet they discovered beacons of hope in the small parcels of needles, thread and patches that Elizabeth Fry and her volunteers had given them. Donated scraps of cloth became marketable quilts in the hands of the convict women who sewed them during their arduous sea journey to prisons in Australia.

### Making a difference

For nearly three decades Elizabeth Fry reached out to women who had been arrested for petty theft, or been caught pilfering food or clothing, as the only means to survive other than prostitution. In considering her commitment to society's outcasts, I wondered: What makes one person extend a hand to help while another turns a blind eye? This question was always in the

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back of my mind during the seven years I immersed myself researching the extremes that typified Victorian England. An all-too-common pattern soon emerged. While the wealthy grew richer, the poor fell further into desperation. High unemployment alongside widespread hunger and homelessness were attributed to bad choices and God's will. An old hymn reflects the excuse that gave the upper crust permission to overlook the destitute:

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high and lowly,  
And order'd their estate.*

### **A passionate reformer**

While nearly all of British society deemed impoverished young girls worthless, one determined crusader dared to show the world that one person can make a difference. Elizabeth Fry, Quaker and mother of eleven, was dubbed 'the Angel of Newgate' by a skeptical London press. The tireless activist comforted nearly 12,000 of the 25,000 women who were transported to 'female factories' on Australian shores. She set up soup kitchens for the starving and founded a nursing school that provided care for those without funds.

The first woman to speak before parliament, she became the catalyst for prison reform around the globe. Casting aside the notion that poverty is a crime, she helped thousands of adolescents who had become children of the streets. Among them were girls whose stories I uncovered, including fourteen-year-old Agnes McMillan, who stole warm stockings during a cold Glasgow winter and was punished with a seven-year sentence in Van Diemen's Land and exile for life. Elizabeth and her volunteers taught girls like Agnes a skill they could rely on once freed and assured them that they deserved a second chance at a good life.

### **A simple act of kindness**

Few men dared to enter London's Newgate gaol where Agnes and the others spent up to six months in sub-human conditions while they awaited the next transport ship. Fear could not deter Elizabeth Fry. In January 1813, she and fellow Quaker Anna Buxton walked hand-in-hand into Newgate's female ward as their heels sunk deep into its carpet of mud and filth. Captivated by the three hundred pairs of eyes riveted on her face, Elizabeth felt drawn to a young mother who cowered against the stone wall and anxiously cradled a tiny infant. Eyes lit with compassion, so

many times a parent herself, Elizabeth reached forward to comfort the mother and child, unfazed by the lice as she stroked the baby's fine hair. This gesture of touch, pure in intent and unmarked by judgment, composed the chaos and hushed the room to an eerie silence. The Quaker's gentle manner shocked the condemned as it drew them yet closer.

Compassion was a rare commodity at the turn of the nineteenth century. The wealthy rarely spoke to those outside their class, save to bark orders at their servants. Neither Elizabeth nor Anna carried the slightest hint of moral condescension into Newgate's dungeon. Three hundred women immediately connected with the two Quakers, the lines of class erased by an act of human decency. In this grey mildewed cage, dignity entered a setting where it seemed out of place but where it took hold in its purest form.

Elizabeth Fry's enduring legacy began with a simple act of kindness and the question, 'What doest thou need?' Through her lens of kind understanding, she looked the ragged women in the eyes and dared to see their humanity. She answered the women's request for clean clothes, sewn by an army of Quaker volunteers, and established a schoolroom for the children who were imprisoned with their mothers. Newgate was only the first leg of the journey for the convict women and Elizabeth's influence extended beyond the seas where she lobbied successfully for prison reform in Van Diemen's Land.

### **An inspiration**

More sinned against than sinning, serving sentences that far exceeded the scope of their crimes, the 25,000 convict women followed a journey from desperation and injustice to love and redemption. Given hope and a second chance, they became the heart and soul of a new nation. In writing about the remarkable transformation of the resilient women who later became the founding mothers of modern Australia – in Agnes McMillan's case from street orphan to loving grandmother in New South Wales – I thought about parallels haunting our alleyways today. I thought about everyday heroes who dare to follow Elizabeth Fry's courageous path as they reach out to perfect strangers. Maybe there's a bit of the divine in all of us just waiting for the catalytic moment that moves us to act selflessly. Every day we get the chance to be that person and that's a blessing in itself.

*Deborah's book The Tin Ticket: The Heroic Journey of Australia's Convict Women is published by Berkley Hardcover and is available on Kindle.*