From convict prison to the Gothic ruins of tourist attraction

Nicola Goc

This paper examines the transformation and commodification of Port Arthur from a convict prison to the Gothic ruins of a tourist attraction. Before the concept of preservation became the main emphasis of the Port Arthur site there was a period of time when historical and natural heritage bled into one another in a cycle of construction and destruction. This paper will explore the ways in which the site, in its ruined state, was interpreted and utilised from the late 1870s.

The concept of ruins as a tourist attraction in Australia has correlations with the European construct of the Grand Tour and its modern counterpart — mass tourism. The romancing of the ruins of the old prison site began to occur very soon after bushfires swept through the settlement creating what some commentators referred to as 'Australia's own Tintern Abbey'.

The process of sanitation and denial at Port Arthur began soon after its closure in 1877. Three devastating summer bushfires – in 1884, 1895 and 1897 – almost overnight transformed the abandoned prison into Australia's very own bona-fide ruins. After the third fire in late December 1897, *The Mercury* wrote on 4 January 1898 that fire would seem to be the destiny of Port Arthur:

> The third great fire has now occurred in the town ...How some of the poor wretches who suffered and sorrowed in the port half a century ago would have rejoiced had they witnessed the place on Friday night! Years of suffering would, no doubt, to their minds, have been at least partially avenged ... Thus fate seemed determined that Port Arthur should be wiped out. The name Carnarvon appears to be an inadequate effacement. People now shake their heads and say the place is 'gone'!

But such was not to be the case. Within days of the December fire day-trippers were again arriving to inspect the fire-gutted buildings, wander through the ivy-covered church ruins, in which daisies were flourishing, and take boat trips to the Isle of the Dead (Weidenhofer 1981:138).

In its new guise as picturesque Gothic ruins, set in Capability Brown parklands so redolent of 'the old country', Port Arthur became a tourist commodity, a leisure pursuit for excursionists. This new Port Arthur, conveniently renamed Carnarvon after Lord Carnarvon, but implanting connections with the ancient town in North Wales, could distance itself from its dark days of infamy. The picturesque ruins being romantically reclaimed by nature did not demand reflection or evaluation. *Thomas' Guidebook* for 1884 asserted: 'There is no Port Arthur now. The principal place on the Peninsula is named Carnarvon.' Visitors were urged to 'disremember ... the antecedents of the colony.'

The dramatic makeover allowed Tasmanians to reinterpret the site and to discard its convict origins and in so doing to reinvent themselves. As the *New Tasmanian Guidebook* in 1884 informed visitors: 'Transportation ceased in 1853, and the convicts, being mostly childless, have left little trace behind them'. This ability to obliterate the past enabled the newspaper owner T. C. Just to make the comment in the 1890s: 'In the future lies the history of Tasmania' (Young 1996: 46).

As long as Port Arthur remained an abandoned prison complex, with bleak rows of empty cells to remind visitors of recent incarcerations and deprivation, with the Model Prison's panopticon a grim reminder of man's ingenuity in finding ways to subjugate his fellow man, Port Arthur's convict past could not be denied, much to the concern and distress of most Tasmanians. When two years after Port Arthur's closure some of the convict records were put up for auction in Melbourne and others were published in a mainland newspaper, a *Tasmanian Mail* correspondent spoke on behalf of the majority of Tasmanians. The writer, whose identity was not revealed, complained that it was 'a bitter, cruel thing to do, as there are many people in the colonies whose lives have been blameless, and against whom nothing can be said except that their parents have been sent out. To revive the old, sad stories may do much harm, can do no good' (Young 1996: 46). In 1889 *The Mercury* believed it was 'quite time that the colony was freed from the last vestiges of a system which was got rid of with some trouble' and called for the demolition of Port Arthur. Convict ancestry was still overwhelmingly a black mark. The stigma barred people from clubs and societies, from social, political and economic advancement and was an insurmountable stumbling block against entry into 'polite' society. The stigma of convict ancestry was something most Tasmanians rigorously sought to avoid.

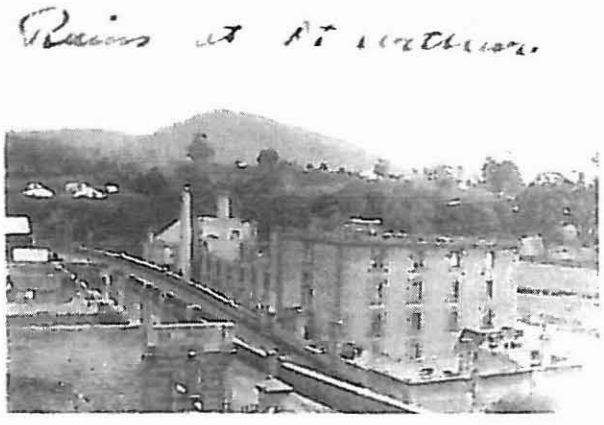

Figure 1 *Ruins of Port Arthur.* (Private collection)

But with Port Arthur's swift transformation to a tourist commodity the imperative to raze the site was no longer seen by some as a crucial step in Tasmania's progress. In fact, with tourism trumpeted as the saviour of the island state, the new Port Arthur, which by the 1880s was accommodating

thousands of visitors a season, had become a tourist icon. 'When visiting Tasmania one simply must "do" Port Arthur', the 1884 *New Tasmanian Guidebook* proclaimed.

Ruins have been attracting tourists around the world since ancient times, engendering feelings of time passing and the sense of witnessing a piece of history fading into oblivion. Australia had nothing to compare with the ancient ruins of Europe, but, following the devastating bushfires, Port Arthur in its ruined state provided a re-inscription of the European Gothic in an Australian context. The ruins of Port Arthur evoked imaginings of the grand ruins of Britain and Europe and the convenient name change helped strengthen Port Arthur as a European trope.

The burnt-out church, with its similarity to the great abbey ruins of the United Kingdom, took on iconic status as Australia's own Tintern Abbey. With such Gothic conventions as luxuriant ivy climbing over towering walls, lofty roofs open to the brilliant blue canopy of Heaven, imposing towers and spires surrounded by a backdrop of wooded hills, the burnt-out ruins of the Port Arthur church became Tasmania's most recognisable tourist icon. The appeal didn't end there: out in the picturesque harbour was the little Isle De Mort; in all its Gothic romanticism, it was enough to send 'a sharp spasm of pleasing melancholy' up any excursionist's spine (Burn 1895: 6).

Figure 2 *The ruined church. (Private collection)*

Port Arthur as a Gothic reconstruction also reinforced a comforting sense of familiarity with its park-like setting, redolent of Capability Brown's park landscapes, its romantic avenues of elms and oaks and its spring and summer profusion of English blooms across the fields. When the site was abandoned the perennial borders and gardens had gone to seed, scattering daisies and jonquils across the settlement, while ivy, briars and kiss-me-quick creeper reclaimed the ruins. Nature reconstructed Port Arthur as a romantic replica of what had been left behind in the 'mother country'. A visitor in 1889 was delighted at the site of the English daisies carpeting the floor of the ruined church.

J.W. Beattie, who produced the first tourist guide to Port Arthur and did much through his photography to promote the site as a tourist attraction, described Port Arthur as 'redolent of the old country' and the church as 'one of the most picturesque relics of Port Arthur; its ivy-covered walls and surroundings of English trees produce quite an "old country" effect' (Beattie c.1905).

Mention was frequently made of the 'Englishness' of the site in guidebooks, which also emphasised the romanticism of the setting and the melancholic quality, but specific mention of the prison history was rare. Such mentions were usually couched in terms of 'a past best forgotten'. The 1937 Tasmanian government tourist booklet *Tasmania, the Jewel of the Commonwealth*, described Port Arthur as a

> place of astounding natural beauty where, after a lapse of a few years, it was found that visitors were curious to see this relic of the 'bad old days' now happily long past. Guides are employed and ply a busy trade in showing tourists through the model prison, the main penitentiary and a handsome spired church. Port Arthur, as a visiting journalist truly said, is Australia's only bona-fide ruin.

The burnt-out church, with its air of Gothic romanticism, played a major role in drawing tourists to the site. While other buildings were under threat of demolition even in recent times, demolition of the church was never seriously considered and extensive structural work was carried out to save the church from collapsing. With its elegant spire and ivy-covered walls, positioned at the summit of the spreading lawns overlooking the picturesque bay, the church ruins evoked a religious significance that set it apart from the sordid convict stain.

Visitors to Tintern Abbey spoke about the 'impressive sense that led to meditation ...The light laugh was stifled, sedateness ruled the hour' (Andrews 1989: 97) and a similar solemnity was reported by many upon visiting Port Arthur's church – though perhaps their thoughts were for the poor wretches who once worshipped in the unconsecrated building. Visitors were particularly impressed with the ivy-clad walls, both at Tintern Abbey and at Port Arthur. Tintern Abbey became in Wordsworth's words, a 'pleasing intermixture of wildness and culture'. Ivy, a symbol of timelessness and endurance was not only an important aspect of Gothic ruins, but also a great sentimental favourite with Victorians and Edwardians. Illuminated alphabets, book plates, picture frames, greeting cards, religious texts and books of verse were decorated in banners and borders of ivy. At Tintern, as well as at Port Arthur, an ivy-leaf souvenir from the church was an essential keepsake of your visit.

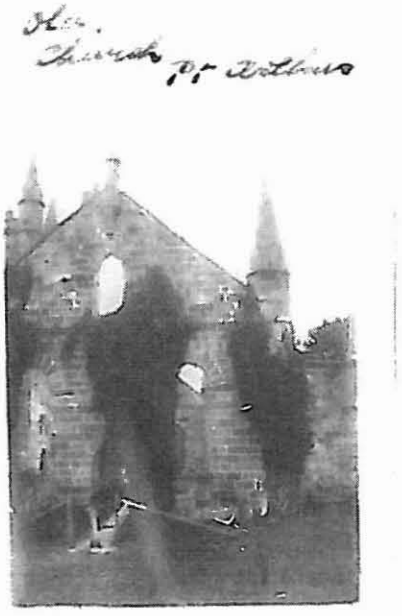

Figure 3 *Tourist at the church. (Private collection)*

However one Englishman, visiting the Port Arthur ruins two months after the church fire in 1884, scoffed at the artificially created ancient ruins:

> You have a ready way of making ruins in this colony. At home we prefer to conduct a visitor through the crumbling cloisters of some ancient abbey... Nothing less than a church battered down by Oliver Cromwell is an accepted ruin. But here, in Port Arthur, is a modern church without a roof, with broken fronts, with perished windows, and to complete the picture, with green ivy climbing up its black and crippled walls. Yes, it is undoubtedly a ruin ... Ours take a great many years to crumble away ... [But in Australia] a bush fire; an unfortunate change of wind, a handful of sparks, and the ruin progresses until in a week it is a complete ruin as though built in the days of Constantine (Davidson and Spearitt 2000: 37).

Port Arthur, abandoned prison, had moved on and been reborn as Gothic ruins in the blink of an eye.

The tourist trade began soon after the settlement was closed, with the curious, mainly young people on cheap steamer tickets, swarming over the settlement appropriating anything they could lay their hands on, thus in their own way hastening the decay, erasing the past. After the third bushfire in December 1897, with the ruins still smouldered, excursionists arrived by the hundreds to climb over the site, souveniring relics. While the majority of Tasmanians still wanted the past erased and Port Arthur demolished, the locals knew the value of the site as a tourist attraction – it had already been providing them with a new income. By the late 1880s more than 3000 sightseers were visiting the settlement in one season (Young 1996). After fire gutted the church the visitor numbers rose sharply with steamers carrying up to 900 passengers at a time, many of them interstate visitors.

The excursion steamer *SS Nubeena* in the 1890s left Hobart every Monday and Thursday at 8.30 am arriving at Taranna where the conveyance met the steamer and took the passengers 'to Port Arthur, a distance of seven miles of splendid scenery'. Visitors had the choice of staying on with accommodation at Carnarvon Hotel – the old Commandant's residence – or later at the Hotel Arthur or at several private boarding establishments.

Pleasure boats had been plying the River Wye on the way to Tintern Abbey in summer months for more than a century by the time the steamers began the excursion to Port Arthur. Travel companies began to put together holiday packages to Tasmania with the primary reason to visit the Port Arthur ruins. While Cook's *Australasian Traveller's Gazette* did not mention Port Arthur until 1893, by 1896 Cook's prided themselves on having 'opened up' the overland route to the site and offered a series of package tours to mainland and local tourists.

Tintern Abbey had its old beggar woman who kept the keys to the gate and showed tourists through the Abbey. Port Arthur had old Alfred Mawle, a former convict who for a shilling, described the buildings and escorted visitors among the 'h'oaks, h'elms, and h'ashes'.

In the early 1890s W.C. Ballard set out from Melbourne for Tasmania on board the *Manopouri* with a party of 150 travellers who were all looking for something beyond 'the hackneyed old haunts'. At Port Arthur Ballard was struck by the church, the only building at that stage in ruins. Already he said 'its Gothic design and clinging ivy' gave the church a sense of 'antiquity'. There was a carnival atmosphere at the settlement with the strains of popular tunes dispersing over the harbour as the City of Hobart band played on the lawns for the mainland visitors (Luke and Ballard 1893). At the Model Prison, however, they were stopped from entering by the private owner who refused to let them look inside. This prompted Ballard to complain that the 'government did not see its way to retain this very interesting relic of the penal system, for from the very nature of its history every visitor is anxious to see it, and if carefully looked after, it could have been a permanent source of revenue'.

The Tasmanian government had a different view; it was keen to erase the dark stain of convictism from the collective memory of Tasmanians. When in 1889 the Government determined to rase the site, by making demolition a condition of the auction sale of the settlement, the locals signed a petition calling on the Government to retain the site and stop the sale (Young 1996). Minister A.T. Pillinger was determined to see the sale go through but, when faced with the petition, backed down on the demolition condition. The auction went ahead and the Model Prison was sold to the retired Anglican Chaplain of the Peninsula for an 'absurdly low price'. His intention (which was never realised) was to convert it into a high-class hotel and pleasure resort. The penitentiary failed to sell and only a few smaller buildings, one in ruins, were sold and demolished. Port Arthur was destined to live on in its makeover state as the picturesque ruins of a tourist resort.

The duality of beauty and brutality at Port Arthur was not something from modernity – it had been recognised by visitors from the earliest days while the settlement was still a thriving convict prison. David Burn, visiting in 1842, when the settlement was at the height of its convict occupancy, was taken aback at the beauty and terror:

> Port Arthur opened its capacious basin to our astonished and delighted gaze. 'What! This is the pandemonium – this the repository of the worst of guilt!' was the natural exclamation bursting from our lips. Whatever the core, the outside is a goodly and enchanting one. What lovely bays! What noble basins! What splendid anchorage! (1895: 6).

He found the Isle De Mort 'picturesquely sorrowful, soothing in its melancholy... placid in its solitude'.

A decade later F.T. Cockburn visited Port Arthur and was so struck by the settlement's natural and cultivated beauty that he seemed blinded to the presence of the convicts, all he saw was the settlement's prettiness:

> Port Arthur has a pretty church, with a pretty garden near it, and looking thence across the bay to the opposite hills you have a remarkably pretty view; all visitors see this, and eight out of ten of them ever afterwards descant on the beauties of Port Arthur (Webster 1988: 47).

Anthony Trollope was not so easily blinded, recognising the duality dilemma when he visited in the mid-1870s just before the prison's closure. He noted that 'perhaps no spot on the globe has been the residence during the last 60 years of greater suffering or of guiltier thoughts' yet at the same time acknowledging 'it is probably the most picturesque prison settlement in the world' (1875: 140).

This duality has dominated the way the site has been interpreted for the past 130 years. Its natural and cultured beauty provided a convenient rewriting, a re-inscription, a makeover so complete that the human presence of the convict

men, some 12,000 of them, who endured incarceration at Port Arthur has almost been erased. Port Arthur has been prettified, romanticised – distanced from its prison past.

It is a reflection of where the site stood in the Tasmanian mindset that it was the Scenery Preservation Board which took over the management of the site in 1916. Later a subordinate committee, the Port Arthur Scenic Reserves Board, took over the management. 'Beautification' was the order of the day with sanitation still on the agenda as proposals were frequently put forward to demolish sections of the settlement – such as one proposal to demolish the penitentiary and replace it with a pavilion and a scale model of the building (Davidson and Spearitt 2000). Port Arthur had become a scenic attraction and its scenic values needed to be maintained and preserved – the convict prison's transformation to picturesque parkland ruins was complete.

A visiting Tasmanian journalist in the 1940s wrote of 'its touch of old romantic England, of exquisite stonework crumbling amid scarlets and pinks and whites of wild roses and native flowers ... its stately trees and warm sea air breathe history, charm and peace through every byway every moment of the day' (Smith 1945: 5). In the 1950s and 1960s those involved with the site believed the site's primary importance was its tourist appeal and that the site had 'far greater appeal' in its 'romantic semi-rural condition'; 'there is a more widespread appreciation of natural beauty and of historic buildings than ever before', a report of the 1950s concluded. 'Port Arthur, once regarded in some disfavour as a blot upon Australian history, is now the most interesting set of ruins in the Commonwealth' (Davidson and Spearitt 2000: 658-659).

Anthony Trollope could not have imagined that a place of such brutality and suffering – which personified the convict experience in Van Diemen's Land – could ever become a tourist attraction. He had observed in his tour of the island that: 'It is not only that men and women in Tasmania do not choose to herd with convicts, but that they are on their guard lest it might be supposed that their own existence in the island might be traced back to the career of some criminal relative' (1875: 144). With a large proportion of the population directly descended from convict stock, Tasmanians sought to deny their 'shameful' past, to disassociate themselves from their convict origins. Trollope's prediction that the buildings at Port Arthur 'will fall into the dust, and men will make infrequent excursions to visit the strange ruins' (1875:153) reflected the opinion of the majority of Tasmanians of the time.

Tasmanians were unable completely to deny their convict heritage so they transferred their convict history on to others. Records were kept secret, some were destroyed or their existence was simply denied. Twenty years after the sale and publication of those convict records J.W. Beattie comforted anxious Tasmanians by perpetuating the myth that all records had since been destroyed. In his popular Port Arthur tourist booklet he claimed that 'a reliable history, founded on official records, can never be compiled, because the records have all been destroyed, and no one now lives who is in a position to fill the gaps which these missing records have left' (Beattie c.1905: 3). He included lists of crimes committed by inmates at Point Puer and Port Arthur in his booklet which was many times reprinted and still in the 1960s edition contained the comforting notation: 'These publications are ABSOLUTELY CORRECT in every detail, the names of each prisoner having been withheld, for obvious reasons'.

My great-great grandfather and great-great grandmother were both transported to Van Diemen's Land. Jeremiah Howell was transported at 18 for stealing a shoe-last. Catherine Bryce was exiled at 17 when, as a pregnant homeless housemaid, she was charged with setting fire to the house of her former master, a wealthy Dublin merchant. The Dublin gentleman had evicted Catherine when she became pregnant, forcing Catherine to prostitute herself for the three months before her arrest. For four generations Catherine's life history was a watertight secret. Like many Tasmanians I lived through autumns of ignorance at Port Arthur.

For more than a decade in the 1960s and early 1970s my family set out from Hobart on the eve of Good Friday, kids singing 'Farewell To Old England Forever' in the back of the Zephyr, bound for Port Arthur. In the crisp autumnal twilight we pitched our tent and later parked the Skyline caravan under the magazine tower, just north of Commandant Charles O'Hara Booth's residence, which in 1886 had become Carnarvon Hotel, but in my time was abandoned. We lit the eucalyptus kindling of our campfire where men once were flogged, the rusty stain of their blood embedded forever in the sandstone guttering as mute but undeniable testimony to their suffering. The ebullient Miller girls sang 'Jennifer Eckles' in the showers in the old convict cookhouse beside the penitentiary ruins – all the time believing that we were untouched by the convict stain, descended as we were from the good Commandant who resided in the homestead on the rise and kept law and order amongst the recalcitrant convicts. My mother innocently maintained the belief, handed down to her from her mother (whose mother had been a Booth) that Commandant Charles O'Hara Booth was our esteemed relative. In the Tasmanian tradition of denial – of secrets, lies and reconstructed family histories – we lived our autumns of ignorance, not innocence, at Port Arthur with the belief in our untainted bloodlines.

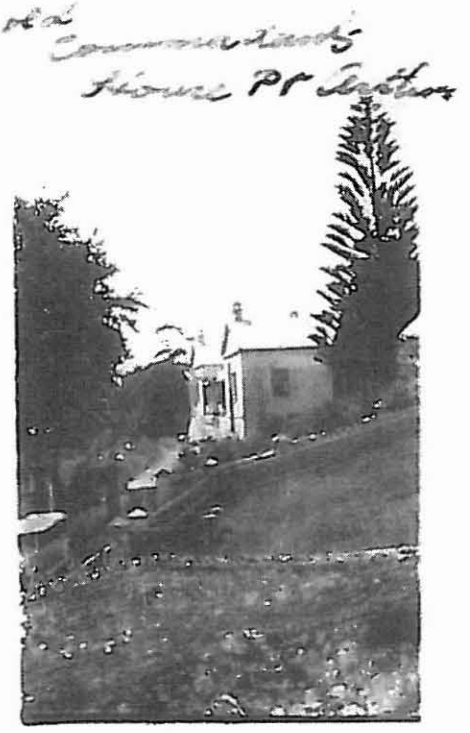

Figure 4 *Commandant's House.* *(Private collection)*

Early a hierarchy was established in Tasmania, created from a foundation of secrets and falsehoods, which is still perpetuated today. A hierarchy as rigid as any class structure, where children grew up with the belief in their superiority over others. The tide only started to turn in the past 15 years. Just a few years ago an extensively researched family history was published. It was the history of a prominent Hobart family whose ancestor just happened to arrive on these shores, not by free choice, but in the fettered chains of a convict. This comprehensive history ignored this significant fact.

For generations, Tasmanians visiting Port Arthur told themselves they were going to see how *other* people's ancestors had survived the prison experience. The canon balls, the bricks, the Bibles and padlocks they were appropriating as relics, were not the relics of *their* ancestors. The decaying ruins in their picturesque setting had so softened the past there was no imperative for reflection. Tasmanians did not have to accept their convict heritage so long as it was suppressed, denied. Port Arthur's dark infamy had lost all relevance. The convict remains, in their beautiful setting, allowed us to forget that Tasmania had once been a giant gaol and Port Arthur the Botany Bay of Botany Bay's Botany Bay – a site of incarceration, domination and subjugation, a place of cruelty, depravity, brutality and desperation.

One hundred and thirty years on, visitors can still be beguiled by the picturesque façade of ruins and the beautiful natural surroundings. They can still avoid being confronted with the settlement's convict history, though all who visit are aware of its recent brutal and tragic history of 1996 which has, in many ways, further overshadowed and blurred the convict origins (see Lennon, this volume). People can choose to avoid the guided tours and interpretation centres and spend the day picnicking on the manicured lawns and wandering along shady avenues climbing up to the mellowed Gothic ruins without actively engaging in reflection of the site's convict past.

The 1975 Port Arthur Management Plan was firm in determining that 'the site and buildings must... retain their romantic flavour.. To achieve this feeling, some structures will be maintained as ruins, stressing by their condition the fact that, whatever it was that happened here, it is gone and will not return' (Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife 1975:48).The difficulty for those managing the site today is to find the right balance. The parkland setting, the lawns and English gardens are not a modern interpretation; they are part of the convict landscape. With hundreds of men at their disposal successive commandants employed the work gangs to create the park-like setting with its avenues of elms and oaks, towering Grecian columns, a fountain and lily pond and broad garden beds which have delighted visitors ever since.

But the picturesque ruins have come at a cost: for many Tasmanians, who in 1993 made up only 10% of visitor numbers, Port Arthur is little more than a nice picnic spot. For the people whose ancestors were once part of the convict system, Port Arthur has little relevance. Port Arthur's transformation from convict prison to Gothic ruins of tourist attraction meant it survived the concerted attempts to obliterate the tangible evidence of its dark past, but the pay-off was a transformation which commodified the sacred ruins of our ancestors into a tourist asset – a scenic attraction. Its transformation has effectively disguised the pain, the suffering, the dark brutal years and has compounded a denial that still permeates Tasmania today.

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Clarification on Port Arthur Guide Alfred Mawle
"From convict prison to the Gothic ruins of tourist attraction"

Alfred Mawle, a popular guide at Port Arthur after its closure, is briefly mentioned in my 2002 paper "From convict prison to the Gothic ruins of tourist attraction" (*Historic Environment* Col 16, No 3, 2002) where he is incorrectly identified as a former convict of the penal settlement: "Port Arthur has old Alfred Mawle, a former convict". He was in fact, according to A. Geoffrey Horner, the son of "a clerk in the court house during the last years of the occupation" (Horner 1974: 7). Mawle was indeed a character who took to guiding with gusto providing visitors with quite a performance, as evidenced by the recollections below. It is perhaps the performative nature of his guiding that led to the misapprehension, held by several people I interviewed in the 1980s, that he was in fact a former convict. The following extracts provide a colourful profile of the Port Arthur tourist guide, Alfred Mawle:

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"Where's Alf?"

"My first question after arrival at Port Arthur rather surprised them at the hotel. My old friend, Alf the guide, had been dead for some years. His successor was waiting to show me over the ruins. This was disappointing, for Alf was a delightful old fellow, with a repertoire of quaint sayings and a quaint way of imparting his knowledge to visitors. He seldom took care of his aitches; but he 'knew his ekker,' as a schoolboy remarked after going the rounds of Port Arthur with Alf. Nothing could stop him, once he had started off with his amusing patter, standing heels together and feet placed in the correct quarter-to-four o'clock position. Alf was word perfect with each of his pocket histories: one for the prison building, one for the penitentiary, one for the church – one for every relic on his list.

"The new guide proved to be a different kind of man. He spoke good English and knew what he was talking about" (Barrett 183-4).

Charles Barrett (1944) *Isle of Mountains* Melbourne: Cassell and Company pp. 183-4. Barrett's book recounts his journey around Tasmania in 1943-4.

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"Only crumbling ruins remain now to mark the site of the great penal station and, speaking personally, if it was not for old Alf, the guide, I would find the place desperately uninteresting. Alf is a thorough native, his father having been a clerk in the court house during the last years of the occupation – that is, in the seventies – and he is well versed in penal lore. Added to this, he probably knows 'For the Term of His Natural Life' by heart.

"He was showing some visitors the Court House this day when I walked up and was telling them about the wooden hotel which was built above the stone veranda just after the war. Seeing me approach he fingered his moustache and spoke hurriedly, for I was not one of the circle.

"Ladies 'n gen'leman, 'ere they burned down the Port Arthur Hotel. It was a fine, modern buildin' and went for eighteen months.' And with that he hurried on to point out the 'hoaks and havenoos', leading to the Asylum, now the council chambers of the district, while I proceeded past the penitentiary to the Commandant's house, where I took a room for the night" (Horner 1974 pp 7-8).

A. Geoffrey Horner (1974) *Tasmanian Journey* Hobart: Cat & Fiddle Press. pp 7-8. Horner's recollections are from his tour of the island in 1936

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"For about a shilling, guides, including Alfred Mawle, described the buildings and escorted visitors among the 'h'oaks, h'elms, and h'ashes' that had thrived for so long. (Weidenhofer 1981:128).

Weidenhofer, M (1981) *Port Arthur: A Place of Misery* Melbourne: Oxford University Press p. 128

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