

'A sort of inland Norfolk Island'? Isolation, Coercion and Resistance on the Wellington Valley Convict Station, 1823-26¹

Removed as I am at so remote a distance from the immediate seat of government and the assistance of magistrates, it is most essentially requisite that sternness, and perhaps some degree of severity should be adopted for the good order and well being of all here...[N]o humane or gentlemanly conduct...nothing but fear will prevent them committing excesses.

Lt Percy Simpson, Commandant, Wellington Valley.²

David Andrew Roberts

Between 1823 and 1832 the New South Wales colonial government founded and maintained a remote convict settlement on the lower Macquarie River at Wellington Valley in the central-west of New South Wales. It was a small and relatively insignificant settlement and its rôle in the colonial penal system was negligible, a circumstance which may account for its neglect by historians.³ During its formative stage between 1823 and 1826, before it assumed the rôle of the 'Valley of Swells'⁴ for which it became notorious, the settlement operated as a government agricultural farm,

¹ I am indebted to Hilary Carey, Brian Fletcher, Erik Eklund, Dennis Williams and James Stephenson for their comments on earlier drafts. My thanks to the editor and the referees.

² Simpson to Goulburn, 25 April 1823, 26 August 1823, Colonial Secretary In Letters (hereafter CSIL, AONSW) bundle 4/1818. This is the principal source for the early phase of the Wellington Valley establishment.

³ There have only been fleeting references to the settlement's later rôle for the special or educated convicts, who from 1827 were segregated and banished to Wellington Valley by Governor Darling for a probationary term of light labour before their assignment to the private sector. This latter phase will be examined in a subsequent article. On the specials at Wellington Valley see Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 192 and 204, J.B. Hirst, *Convict society and its enemies: A history of early New South Wales*, Sydney, 1983, p. 89 and B.H. Fletcher, *Ralph Darling: A Governor Maligned*, Melbourne, 1984, p. 115.

⁴ *Sydney Monitor*, 29 June 1829.

accommodating around 80 men from the general pool of excess and unassignable convict labour retained in government employ. An Irish officer, Lt Percy Simpson, the first commandant, within a few months of arriving in New South Wales was administering the most remote sphere of public work west of Sydney, the Wellington Valley. There he constructed a village and agricultural operation with a workforce of discarded malcontents who deeply resented him and their circumstances. Case studies have been valuable tools in understanding the convict experience for masters and men⁵ and Simpson's particular problematic situation at Wellington raises broader questions about life and labour in penal New South Wales, especially the propensity for violence and misrule.

This study examines whether various circumstances, the remoteness of the station and the temperament of the commandant produced a régime of work and punishment which was excessively brutal and oppressive. Images of a convict system characterised by privation, cruelty and tyranny have dominated popular perceptions of the convict past since they were sown by the enemies of transportation and cultivated by ensuing generations who have dealt awkwardly with a murky and discomforting past in classic convict brutality sagas such as Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* (1874) Caroline Leakey's *The Broad Arrow* (1859) and the writing of 'Price Warung' (William Astley, 1890-92).⁶ The paradigm is perfectly illustrated in an anonymous fictional account, *Eumalga, or the White Chief*, allegedly the reminiscences of an old convict from the Wellington Valley settlement. Written early this century *Eumalga* depicted the settlement as 'a sort of inland Norfolk Island, or Ultima Thule, from which no poor convict was ever expected to return', a place of 'abject misery' where utterly

⁵ See, for example, Hirst's account of work on a large rural property in the Hunter Valley and the building of the Sydney water tunnel from 1827, Hirst, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51 and 66-68. For a more detailed analysis concerning a penal settlement see H. Maxwell-Stewart, 'Convict Workers, Penal Labour and Sarah Island: Life at Macquarie Harbour, 1822-1834' in I. Duffield and J. Bradley (eds) *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour*, Leicester, 1997, pp. 142-162. See also A. Atkinson, 'Master and servant at Camden Park, 1838, from the estate papers', *The Push from the Bush; A Bulletin of Social History: Devoted to the Year of Grace, 1838*, Vol. 6, May 1980, pp. 42-60.

⁶ Hirst, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-27, T. Griffiths, 'Past Silences: Aborigines and convicts in our history', in P. Russell and R. White (eds) *Pastiche I: Reflections on nineteenth-century Australia*, Sydney, 1994, pp. 7-26. See also D. Denholm, 'Port Arthur: The Men and the Myth', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 155, 1970, pp. 406-423 which attributes that settlement's notorious reputation to reckless and antipathetic press opposition to Governor Arthur and to Marcus Clarke's gothic rendition. On the brutality sagas, see L. Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, St Lucia, 1983.

powerless prisoners, 'naked and half-starved', were forced to perform gruelling tasks under the stick of sadistic overseers.⁷

These stereotypes are fundamentally challenged by understanding that power relations between master and convict were much more complex, that convicts possessed certain freedoms, opportunities, rights and avenues of resistance and that their masters employed more sophisticated, flexible systems of labour management than terror to extract obedience and performance. The focus shifts from oppression and misrule to treatment more judiciously managed and productively employed.⁸ But the severity of certain remote work situations is part of the equation, particularly those harsher penal régimes of the 1820s. They were one consequence of Commissioner J.T. Bigge's Report, Moreton Bay (from 1824) and Norfolk Island (from 1825). Punishment, rather than productivity, became the guiding principle behind life and labour. Severity there was shaped by the psychological and material consequences of banishment bolstered by the intimidatory powers of the commandant.⁹ The analysis of the Wellington Valley experience presented below largely abrogates any comparisons between Wellington Valley and places of secondary punishment, particularly Norfolk Island, but an analogy is not entirely groundless. Before the establishment of those régimes, similar conditions had existed at the Wellington Valley penal farm. In relation to Simpson's settlement we should not over-correct the classical stereotypes by 'draining almost all the blood from the story'.¹⁰

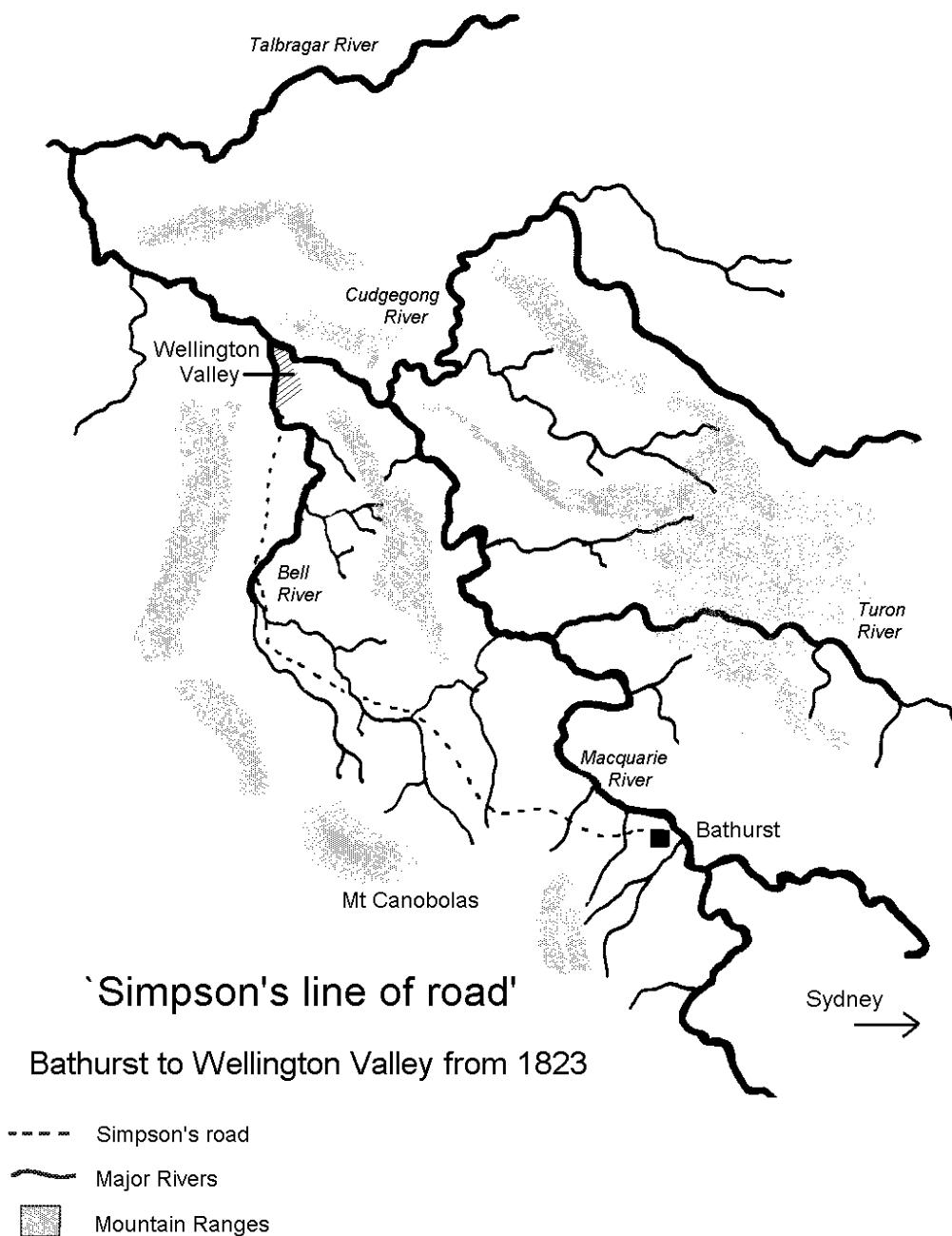
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⁷ R. Porter, *Eumalga, or the White Chief*, Wellington, 1910. Robert Porter was the proprietor of Wellington's first local newspaper. His bizarre historical-fiction was ostensibly based on the reminiscences of an old convict, Richard 'Dickey' Taylor, who died at Wellington in 1876, aged 74.

⁸ See especially key works by A. Atkinson, 'Four Patterns of Convict Protest', *Labour History*, 37, 1979, pp. 28-51, Hirst, *op. cit.* and S. Nicholas (ed.) *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past*, Melbourne, 1988.

⁹ R. Evans and W. Thorpe, 'Power, Punishment and Penal Labour: Convict Workers and Moreton Bay', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, 1992, pp. 90-111. See also R. Evans and W. Thorpe, 'Freedom and Unfreedom at Moreton Bay: The Structures and Relations of Secondary Punishment' in B. Dyster (ed.) *Beyond Convict Workers*, Sydney, 1996, pp. 64-82. For a general account of the increasing severity of the convict system in the 1820s, see Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-216.

¹⁰ D. Neal, *The Rule of Law in a Penal Colony: Law and Power in Early New South Wales*, Sydney, 1991, p. 207.



The Wellington Valley settlement was part of an ambitious extension of government and private enterprise in the western district from 1822 which involved a dramatic increase in the local population of convict workers. Most of them were servicing a burgeoning pastoral industry and another 300 or so were channelled into government work. The expansion of settlement contributed to a number of significant law and order emergencies, including an increasing numbers of convict bolters. It was also a period which spawned some infamous colonial institutions such as the Mounted Police and which saw the passing of the Harbouring and Bushranging Acts. Yet the

implications of these developments, despite a growing interest in the forms and impact of convict protest, still await detailed scholarly investigation some 20 years after Atkinson's seminal work, 'Four Patterns of Convict Protest'.¹¹ Historians have generally portrayed these disturbances as mass 'uprisings' or 'insurrections' against a régime of terror and brutality by the local landowner-magistrates and their chief law officer, the Bathurst Commandant, a position filled in 1824, by the contentious Major James Morisset. His career at Newcastle and later at Norfolk Island has earned him notoriety as one of the pre-eminent tyrants of the convict era. Morisset, as Shaw has noted, has received a 'bad press'. Robert Hughes, in particular, in his sensationalised account of the convict system has presented Morisset as a vicious, sadistic martinet, a portrait which has been contested. Neither Hughes nor Turner paid due attention to Morisset's short but troublesome reign at Bathurst. Conflicting interpretations illustrate the disparities between popular and scholarly understanding of the convict system.¹²

The rôle of food shortages and ration restrictions, the relative powers of masters and convicts and the extent to which problems of convict discipline may have partially reflected the changing circumstances of convict life and labour after the Bigge Report require closer investigation. More essentially the fragmented evidence should be read within the context of increasing agitation by the authorities and settlers for an enlarged military or police presence on the western frontier. A study of Simpson's régime at Wellington enhances our understanding of law and order emergencies during this crucial period and the great variety of the convict experience.

The Wellington Valley settlement, the first in a series of state-settlements after the Bigge Report, conformed to new principles which

¹¹ Shaw, *op. cit.*, 206, Atkinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-51. See also, R. Meppem, 'Convict Runaways, Rebels and Protesters, 1824-1830', BA (Hons) University of New England, Armidale, 1991. For more recent work, see H. Maxwell-Stewart, "I Could Not Blame the Rangers": Tasmanian Bushranging, Convicts and Convict Management', *Tasmanian Historical Research Papers and Proceedings*, Vol. 42, No. 3, September 1995, pp. 109-126.

¹² See, for example, D.S. Raxworthy, 'The Making of a Settlement: Bathurst, Kelso, 1813-1833', MA, University of New South Wales, 1988 and P.J. Vaile, 'Aspects of Law and Order in the Bathurst District', MA, University of Sydney, 1974. On the character of Morisset, see B.W. Champion, 'James T. Morisset of the 48th Regiment', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 20, Pt 4, 1934, pp. 209-226 and for a more demonising biography, R. Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868*, London, 1987, pp. 458-461 and 463-467, Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 206, 458-461 and J. Turner, 'The Fatal Slur and J.T. Morisset', unpublished.

the insubordinate and unskilled provided the labour for public works which would be more directly related to convict maintenance and subsistence outside the settled regions. The plan was to absorb up to 500 convicts in a constructive and self-sustaining project that would facilitate and administer the development of private interests, intended to be the first in a network of penal establishments spreading in a north-easterly direction along the lower Macquarie River.¹³ In this respect the settlement reflected emerging concepts about the rôle of the state in advancing a front line in the strategic and military invasion of new territories, extending the synthesis between punishment and profit by using convicts as 'Pioneers to the Free Settler'.¹⁴

Yet the plan was seemingly based on unrealistic expectations in relation to the development and expansion of settlement in the west, which subsequently absorbed only a small fraction of the colony's total growth.¹⁵ The Wellington Valley was the only convict settlement so far inland. Isolated by its means of supply and communication, it was almost immediately deemed unsuccessful and pointless. While it was apparently intended to be a destination for secondary offenders, Bigge recommended that places of secondary punishment be located on the coast in preference to the interior because they were more easily supplied and escape was more difficult. The experience at Wellington Valley vindicated his judgement.¹⁶

Before explaining the nature of Simpson's régime at Wellington Valley, we should recognize that severity bordering on depravity was contrary to the intentions of the colonial authorities. Sternness and rigidity increased after the Bigge Report amid growing uncertainty over the effectiveness and morality of bodily punishment.¹⁷ Commissioner Bigge, while detailing measures for achieving that just degree of 'severity and rigour' to render the convict system 'a subject of dread', remained sensible to the fact that the lash was a potentially

¹³ On the plans and projections underlining the settlement, see Brisbane to Bathurst, 28 April 1823, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, Vol. XI, (hereafter HRA) p. 80 and Simpson to McLeay, 30 May 1826, Governor Despatches, A1267/13, Mitchell Library, pp. 1379-1387.

¹⁴ Brisbane to Horton, 16 June 1825, *HRA* I, XI, p. 649. For discussion of the penal stations and the nexus between government and economy, see Evans and Thorpe, 'Freedom and Unfreedom'.

¹⁵ T.M. Perry, *Australia's First Frontier: The Spread of Settlement in New South Wales, 1788-1829*, Melbourne, 1963, p. 88.

¹⁶ Bigge, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

¹⁷ Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

degrading and an inconsistent instrument of discipline. His proposed regulations for the management of secondary settlements suggested restrictions on the powers of the commandants and emphasised the application of non-violent techniques for the correction of 'ordinary offences' including neglect of work, insolence and petty theft.¹⁸ Simpson could only sentence a convict to up to 50 lashes in cases of 'emergency' and was explicitly directed to prefer augmented duties and solitary confinement over corporal punishment in the belief that non-violent techniques were 'far more effectual than flogging'.¹⁹

In other cases where commandants were supposedly restrained by such stipulations and appeals to clemency and judiciousness, non-violent idealism was forfeited in practice, subverted by the severe and oppressive conduct of certain individuals such as Patrick Logan at Moreton Bay. As the colonial government was unable to manage its remote régimes directly, their isolation contributed to the pre-eminence of convict degradation to reinforce convict discipline.²⁰ We should, therefore, question how effective such stipulations and entreaties were in preventing despotic management at Wellington Valley.

Julian Reynolds' study of penal settlements identified two ingredients for despotic management, namely the character and habits of the individual commandant and the remoteness of the régime which insulated it from accountability and interference.²¹ Remoteness was the most critical factor shaping the short history of the Wellington Valley settlement. The road to the settlement in the 1820s was one of the longest and most difficult overland routes in the colony. It was an arduous haul for the supply teams whose extreme hardships became well known around the district.²² Teams were stalled for lengthy

¹⁸ Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of New South Wales, 19 June 1822, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 1, Shannon, 1968, pp. 175 and 185.

¹⁹ Goulburn to Simpson, 1 January 1823, Colonial Secretary Out Letters (hereafter CSOL, AONSW) 4/3507. See also Governor Brisbane's instructions to the founding commandant at Moreton Bay. Brisbane to Miller, 27 August 1824, CSOL, AONSW 4/3794.

²⁰ Patrick Logan was bound by the same restrictions as Miller and Simpson, though Governor Darling's administration, through its inaction, condoned Logan's illegal and capricious floggings of up to 200 lashes which in at least one case resulted in death. C. Bateson, *P. Logan: The Tyrant of Brisbane Town*, Sydney, 1966, pp. 104-110.

²¹ J. Reynolds, 'The Penal Stations of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land: The Reality Behind the Legend', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 67, March 1982, pp. 354-65.

²² Lawson to Goulburn, 14 October 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1798.

periods at Bathurst or at stations *en route* and portions of supplies and stock were mislaid and plundered. The flooding of rivers prevented drays reaching the settlement for up to three months at a time. Carts were upturned and men drowned attempting to cross swollen streams.²³ The Wellington commandant had no control over the quality of equipment and provisions and could only ever trust that more were on the way. This uncertainty created a miserable environment in which it was impossible even to provide standard rations, let alone positive inducement to work, conditions which helped to make it one of the least favoured spheres of public work and one of the most difficult to manage. Moreover, these circumstances created a closed settlement where a military commandant who controlled the flow of information to and from the settlement, was independently responsible and left largely to his own devices.

Simpson was typical of the caste of naval and military officers whose appointment to the civil service in New South Wales reflected an increasing militarisation of penal labour and discipline after the Bigge Reports.²⁴ From an established Protestant family seated in County Leitrim he had risen within an obscure regiment without purchasing his commission. After the Napoleonic Wars he briefly held the position of governor and judge advocate of the British protectorate of Paxos in the Mediterranean. He was one of a swarm of men guided to New South Wales through channels of patronage and privilege when prospects for private enterprise and lucrative public appointments were increasing. His Scottish wife was related by marriage to Governor Brisbane and he came with an order for 2000 acres of land. As it turned out, he accepted the Wellington Valley appointment at the expense of deferring his land grant. It appeared a sufferable alternative because of a special contract which tied his remuneration to the amount of wheat cultivated at the settlement, calculated at £4 per convict maintained on the produce.²⁵ It gave him

²³ Simpson to Maxwell, 14 July 1823, Simpson to Johnston, 31 August 1823, Simpson to Goulburn, 16 May 1825, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

²⁴ Evans and Thorpe, 'Power and Punishment', pp. 101-102.

²⁵ Goulburn to Simpson, 1 January 1823, CSOL, AONSW 4/3507. Simpson's incentive-based contract backfired when after three-and-a half years he lodged an exorbitant claim for just under £4000 based on his estimation of the number of convicts he could have supported on the produce. Governor Darling rejected the claim and sacked him. Simpson spent many years lobbying unsuccessfully for his remuneration. See the various enclosures in Stanley to Gipps, 15 September 1844, *HRA*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 127-135.

an uncommonly strong personal interest in his work, fostering an environment of urgency and compulsion, rather than laxity.

The character and career of Percy Simpson present an ambiguous and seemingly contradictory portrait. The reports of those who encountered him suggest an irascible and intemperate man who, like William Bligh, had a manner which tended to foster discontent and harden opposition.²⁶ He was constantly embroiled in quarrels with his peers and frequently involved in dispute and litigation, including an action brought against him in 1831 by an ex-convict whom he illegally sentenced to an iron gang.²⁷ He spent much of his long life battling executive decisions, the consequences of poor investments and insolvency. On the other hand, he was a capable and effective administrator of public works, evidenced in the road works undertaken on the Island of Paxos during his term as governor and his later achievements in the colony, which included the construction of the Great North Road near Wollombi and the dam at Lake Parramatta.²⁸

At Wellington Valley Simpson created a substantial settlement and agricultural operation within three years, cultivating upwards of 300 acres and constructing 40 public buildings from local materials. The centrepiece of the settlement was Government House. Approximately 80 men were employed in ploughing and sowing, thrashing and grinding wheat, baking bricks, burning lime, repairing carts, yolks and farm implements or felling trees to be hauled to the settlement for posts, rails and panels. A broader survey of life and labour on the settlement shows that it was not unlike most other convict work-situations with a hierarchy of responsibilities and labour and internal structures for promotion and demotion, combining coercion and incentive-based management strategies. The commandant's power was indirectly exercised through privileged individuals who presided over 'divisions' of men, most of them labouring in gangs. Other convicts undertook skilled work or one of the multitude of sundry

²⁶ G. Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, Cambridge, 1994. Among the many examples, Lt Nathaniel Lowe, sent to Wellington Valley in 1825 to investigate the conduct of soldiers of the 40th Regiment, reported that Simpson 'behaved...in a very petulant and overbearing manner, so much so as to exhaust the patience of any man', Lowe to Seilly, 22 January 1825, CSIL, AONSW 4/5782. See also similar comments by Lt William Lawson to Goulburn, 14 October 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1798.

²⁷ Darling to Goderich, 20 June 1831, HRA, Vol. XVI, pp. 275-81.

²⁸ For a good overview of some of Simpson's long-running claims and disputes and on his subsequent career as a settler and public servant, see K.H. Clouten, *Reid's Mistake: The Story of Lake Macquarie from its Discovery until 1890*, Speers Point, 1967, pp. 37-50.

duties and positions, all scaled according to the intensity of labour or the nature of the job. In the three months between February and May 1826 when the first comprehensive returns of public work were submitted, some 94500 bricks were produced, 800 posts and rails were split, 112 panels of four-rail fencing were erected and 300 bushels of lime were burnt in addition to extensive ploughing, harrowing, sowing and building.²⁹

Behind this impressive picture of order and industry recorded in the settlement's returns lay a chaotic and volatile state of affairs. Simpson's farm was beset with conflict and dissension which threatened at times to paralyse the operation. Though he arrived highly recommended and was backed by sound administrative and leadership qualifications, he had a lot to learn about the management of convicts. His term at Wellington Valley generated a barrage of reports respecting the insolence and treachery of his subjects. In these he was forced to concede that 'it must appear strange that from the civil and military situation I had held for some years before, that I should now find it difficult to manage a few convicts'.³⁰ The essence of his experience at Wellington Valley was that convicts could exercise considerable power in their relationship with their masters and could be exceedingly adept at exercising it.

The Wellington Valley convicts engaged in a wide variety of protests and forms of resistance. They were idle and insubordinate, feigned illness, pilfered food, smuggled and distilled liquor. They sabotaged the construction of buildings and the ploughing of fields. They burnt wheat stacks, drove away livestock, waylaid the supply carts and destroyed accounts. At times the dissent coalesced into major emergencies. In July 1823 Simpson's principal overseer and the settlement constable engaged in a 'daring and mutinous combination' to have the settlement abandoned. They incited other convicts to all forms of subversion while they circulated allegations concerning the commandant's mental health and his management of government business and property. It was an early indication of the extremes to which reluctant pioneers would go to protest about their situation.³¹

The principal and preferred means of convict resistance was desertion, a powerful tool of subversion in a situation where an absence could seriously disable a fledgling settlement. Not surprisingly

²⁹ Brown to McLeay, 25 June 1826, CSIL, AONSW 4/1895.

³⁰ Simpson to Goulburn, 26 August 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

³¹ Simpson to Goulburn, 24 July 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

it was one of the most severely punished offences at Wellington and the most frequently committed. Prisoners repeatedly removed themselves from the safety of the victualling stores and took their chances either in the bush or more usually in the settled regions. The number of absconders resulted in the Bathurst authorities posting convict constables on the Wellington road to intercept escapees from Wellington.³² Some deserted and came back. The young ploughman, Thomas Owen, for example, absconded and returned three times.³³ Some deserted *en masse*. In January 1825, thirteen runaways from Wellington Valley armed with sticks, were apprehended south of Bathurst by a team of privately employed overseers. The group was handed over to the detachment at Cox's River and escorted back to Wellington Valley.³⁴ It was precisely this type of lawlessness which fuelled the fears of the Bathurst gentry and underscored their warnings of mass rebellion.

Some have concluded that such disorder and dissent were provoked by the oppression of Simpson's régime of work and punishment. Dorothy Raxworthy blames the disturbances at Wellington Valley on his 'eccentric' personality and his proclivity to 'bouts of irrational, excessive...[and] unnecessary anger with subsequent floggings of all and sundry'.³⁵ Certainly the strongest evidence comes from Simpson's own pen. When his authority was in crisis the tone of his correspondence turned wrathful and furious as he demanded more powers and a flogger to smash the 'vile and disgraceful confederacy' of malcontents and subversives and to keep them 'in awe...[by] making the most serious, indeed awful example' of the leading troublemakers.³⁶ Yet this simplistic correlation between brutality and resistance may greatly misrepresent the situation, particularly as it fails to appreciate Simpson's limited power and ability to coerce prisoners solely by the threat of punishment. A closer analysis of the Wellington workforce and the nature of its grievances provides a better understanding of his particular predicament.

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³² Maxwell to Goulburn, 30 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

³³ Simpson to Ovens, 10 October 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

³⁴ Walker and Rankin to Goulburn, 1 February 1825, CSIL, AONSW 4/1801.

³⁵ Raxworthy, *op. cit.* pp. 108-109.

³⁶ Simpson to Goulburn, 26 August 1823, 31 August 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

In 1825 when the first muster was compiled, the Wellington workforce was about 70 to 75 individuals.³⁷ Generally the convicts were a typical fragment of the convict population retained in government employ during Governor Brisbane's administration. They were mainly young men in their twenties. Only a few were over 50. Irishman, David Davies, at 65 was the oldest. Englishmen predominated. Irish were about half the number of the English and there were several Scots. The majority had seven-year-sentences, with almost as many lifers but considerably fewer were serving 14 years.

In terms of human capital the workforce seems not as weak and inappropriate as the commandant frequently claimed, though the occupational data provided by convicts at the time of their arrival in the colony is suspect.³⁸ Most professed qualifications not immediately useful to an agricultural settlement. There were former colliers, canal-men, weavers, cotton-spinners, sailors and fishermen and the ubiquitous class of labourers. Some claimed to be skilled rural workers with agricultural-based trades, ploughmen, farmers, gardeners, reapers and thrashers and highly-prized mechanics, carpenters, blacksmiths, sawyers and bricklayers. These men were considered to be a 'labour aristocracy' according to the values and distinctions of the English working class or because their skills were in great demand in the colony.³⁹ Generally though, Simpson's situation proved the hollowness of their purported qualifications, at least in this particular and peculiar operation. Ultimately most of those at Wellington came to be at the settlement because they were poor tradesmen, troublemakers or paralytic invalids.

A more valid qualitative distinction under-used by historians considering particular work situations, was their respective careers as

³⁷ For population numbers at the station, see 1825 Population Book for Wellington Valley, CSIL, AONSW 4/1222.9 and Weekly Returns of Public Labour at Wellington Valley, CSIL, AONSW 4/1093.4. The statistical and biographical details in this article are drawn from a variety of sources in the State Archives of New South Wales, too numerous to list in full, including the Convict Indents, the Bench Books and the various bundles of petitions, affidavits and general correspondence received by the colonial secretary between 1815 and 1830.

³⁸ Nicholas and Shergold maintain that the occupational data in the convict indents is a reliable guide to skill, a point strongly contested by Shlomowitz. See Nicholas and Shergold, 'Convicts as Workers' in Nicholas, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-64 and R. Shlomowitz, 'Convict Workers: a review article', *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 30, September 1990, p. 73. For a rejoinder see S. Nicholas, 'Beyond Convict Workers: Unanswered Questions About Convict Economy and Society' in Dyster, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-9.

³⁹ S. Nicholas and P. Shergold, 'A Labour Aristocracy in Chains' in Nicholas, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-108.

convicts. In these terms, the stark minority comprised those who were fresh from the transports. Only about twenty convicts came to Wellington Valley within a year of arriving in the colony, from a total of 2551 men disembarked from 15 ships between 1824 and 1825. The great majority had already served two or three years doing the government stroke in clearing parties and road gangs or at government stations such as Emu Plains and Grose Farm. Many had briefly held positions of responsibility before being dismissed and returned to general service while others had been assigned and returned to the government as incompetent or resistive. Nearly all had at some time been disciplined by a superintendent or magistrate for theft, insolence, drunkenness, gambling or being absent from the muster. A number had served time at one of Governor Macquarie's penal settlements at Newcastle or Port Macquarie, including Richard Claringbold who had been at both. The Irishman, Robert Belfour, had spent six years in Hobart before attempting to abscond by hiding on a ship. His presence was discovered and he was handed over on arrival to the authorities in Sydney. Belfour was sent to Bathurst and eventually re-directed to Wellington Valley, as far from ships as it was possible to be at that time.

Men at Wellington Valley who had almost served their time risked their pending freedom with acts of defiance and subversion, combining with those newcomers who were unaccustomed to the privations, loopholes and opportunities of the system. The sense of a wretched alternative to their expectations from their previous experiences united them to a degree. Each was probably aware that they could likely do better for themselves elsewhere in the colony. Isolated at Wellington they were denied access to the wide range of opportunities in the settled districts for ameliorating a convict's lot, including better employment, the possible patronage of a generous master, the associations and networks formed with other prisoners and civilians and the company of women. Moreover, there were critical respects in which the conditions at Wellington Valley fell well short of the entitlements and protection convicts expected in recompense for their labour and the removal of their liberties. The quality of accommodation, for example, was unusually poor. Before the construction of the convict barracks (c.1828) most prisoners were housed in rows of bark huts with double-lined walls, described by the commandant as 'excellent', but by others as 'wretched'.⁴⁰ One

⁴⁰ Simpson to Goulburn, 25 August 1825, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818 and Kiernan to Goulburn, 18 September 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

stockman making a delivery to the settlement refused to stay in a 'filthy hut creeping with vermin' and chose to spend the night sleeping in the bush beside his horse.⁴¹ More cogently, the standard of rations was deficient. The official weekly prescription at Wellington Valley was only a slight variation of the meat and grain issued to government convicts in the County of Cumberland but those who came from other government stations, road parties and assignment probably brought with them expectations that rations included tobacco, sugar and soap. However, there were times, particularly in the early months, when even a fresh carcass of beef could not be guaranteed.

Convicts' views on their entitlement to a specified quantity and quality of food, clothing and certain sundry articles were a major determinant in master-convict relations,⁴² especially on the frontier where convicts were more reliant on their masters' paternalism and where it was more difficult to guarantee minimum standards. Simpson's ability and willingness to provide for his men was a measure of his capability in hard times. It was a mark of his generosity in better times. Providing satisfactory rations did not necessarily inspire fealty but certainly failure to do so legitimised dissent and spurred desertion. When supplies ran low, Simpson predicted an increase in the number of runaways.⁴³ When subversives wanted to incite mass desertion they spread the rumour that the authorities condoned their taking flight if they did not receive 14 pounds of flour.⁴⁴

Analogous to these deprivations were some very caustic personal difficulties between the commandant and his men, arising no doubt from Simpson's insistence on unconditional obedience and a habit of meeting opposition and criticism with a violent and possibly irrational temper. The problems were clearly illustrated in the dissension within his advance party of a few convict tradesmen from the government establishment at Emu Plains, acting under the promise of an early ticket-of-leave.⁴⁵ Within 18 months all but one had succeeded in having themselves removed from the station. It was not so much that they were unable to submit to a certain degree of deprivation for the sake of advancing their prospects, but that they were unwilling to do

⁴¹ Webb to Maxwell, 1 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁴² Hirst, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-50, Nicholas, 'The Convict Labour Market' in Nicholas *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114, Neal, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28 and Evans and Thorpe, 'Power, Punishment', pp. 104-105.

⁴³ Simpson to Morisset, 25 June 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁴⁴ Deposition of John Madden, 24 July 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

⁴⁵ Goulburn to Ovens, 2 January 1823, CSOL, AONSW 4/3507.

so for Simpson. One volunteer, who proved to be most troublesome, later offered his services to Miller's advance party to Moreton Bay where his exertions earned him the commendation of the commandant and eventually, a ticket-of-leave.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the Wellington convicts had been apportioned rather than re-transported. Most of them were sent up-country by the Bathurst authorities in a selection process governed largely by the opportunity for departmental superintendents to dispose of certain individuals. A secondary sentence ordered by the Bathurst Bench meant Port Macquarie though men were commonly re-directed into remote or less pleasant work at Bathurst as punishment for insubordination or irregularity.⁴⁷ The Irishman, John Reilley, was sent to Wellington Valley after being flogged at Bathurst for 'threatening to knock an overseer's Brains out with an axe'⁴⁸ though the transfer was not formally part of his sentence. Although he was not under a secondary sentence, like most of his colleagues, he was being punished for unsatisfactory talent or behaviour. Yet this fate was not necessarily regarded as a lesser penalty than transportation to the harsher places of secondary punishment, particularly in the couple of years before the establishment of the stricter penal régimes at Moreton Bay and Norfolk Island. As state-directed convict labour west of the mountains was essentially a form of exile, re-direction from Bathurst to Wellington Valley was a double-expulsion, a 'banishment in this land of exiles', as an educated prisoner later described it.⁴⁹ When the Bathurst magistrates sent absconders from Wellington to the penal station at Port Macquarie, others would absent themselves in order to receive the same treatment.⁵⁰

In short, Simpson had an obstinate workforce lodged in a difficult and unappealing environment. If coercion were necessitated by an innate aversion to labour as in the traditional analysis of Manning Clark or as a counterpoise to the considerable freedoms of penal New

⁴⁶ Petition of Henry Allen, 29 June 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1872 and Bishop to MacLeay, 14 March 1826, CSIL, AONSW 4/1803.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the case of Emanuel Gomez, ordered by the Bathurst commandant to a distant station in the stock department, Maxwell to Goulburn, 30 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁴⁸ Return of prisoners punished at Bathurst, March 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/6671.

⁴⁹ 'Candid' [William Watt] *Sydney Monitor*, 29 June 1829.

⁵⁰ Simpson thought it would have been more 'salutary' had they been sent to Sorrell's new settlement at Macquarie Harbour which was 'much dreaded here', Simpson to Goulburn, 14 August 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

South Wales as in Hirst's view,⁵¹ then in both respects force was likely to be an important component of convict labour at Wellington Valley. It remains to determine whether Simpson possessed the authority and the machinery to implement and sustain a régime of terror.

* * *

Although Simpson carried official instructions deliberately curtailing his power, the nature of any emergency warranting corporal punishment had not been defined and he had no directions on the sentences a prisoner might receive in any given period. There was considerable scope for bending the rules.⁵² Simpson's circumvention of the regulations is hinted at by the colonial secretary who reminded him to take 'especial care that the number from one to ten be deliberately counted between every stroke of the cat'.⁵³

The fundamental problem in ascertaining the nature of Simpson's régime is the paucity of evidence. No returns of punishment have survived and because Wellington Valley was a closed settlement and all mail to, and from, the settlement was directed via the commandant, there are few contemporary accounts other than his own. By comparison, places of secondary punishment, Moreton Bay, for example, had numerous government officials responsible to their respective departments in Sydney. There was no such accountability at Wellington Valley. The only exception was a briefly appointed surgeon, James Kiernan, who acted as the settlement's medical practitioner for less than six months. Kiernan's acrimonious departure resulted in allegations of irregularity and mismanagement at the settlement, though his claims must be treated cautiously because they arose from differences of opinion, conflicts of interest and notions of having been wronged. Simpson's rude and irascible manner also made him many enemies.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Kiernan's allegations did not include excessive brutality. Instead, he complained of the poor condition of convict accommodation and the want of facilities for the ill and injured. More

⁵¹ M. Clark, *History of Australia*, Vol. I, Carlton, 1962, pp. 243-243, Hirst, *op. cit.*

⁵² On 'offence splitting' and other common methods of circumventing the legal restrictions on corporal punishment, see M. Sturma, *Vice in a Vicious Society: Crime And Convicts in Mid-Nineteenth Century New South Wales*, St Lucia, 1983, p. 18 and Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁵³ Goulburn to Simpson, 16 September 1823, CSOL, AONSW 4/3509.

⁵⁴ Turner, *op. cit.*

seriously he alleged that sick convicts were being ordered to work contrary to his advice, citing the example of one old man with a severe case of venereal disease who was, said Kiernan, in a 'bad state' but was ordered to the fields and nearly died after taking a considerable dose of mercury.⁵⁵ The surgeon's report qualifies the urgency and severity of the work régime which was based upon Simpson's incentive-based contract. Kiernan's assessment is circumstantially supported by Simpson's returns of labour in which 10 to 15 per cent of the workforce, with ailments such as 'native venereal', sore eyes and pains in the bones, were listed as 'refusing to work'.⁵⁶ Simpson's intolerance, of course, must be partially attributed to the convicts feigning illness or self-inflicted injury to avoid work. He was not likely to sympathize with men who were not so much sick and injured as broken and exhausted. The point is that Kiernan's claims were not investigated beyond Simpson being required to furnish a reply to the charges. In the end, the authorities were less concerned with Kiernan's allegations of mismanagement and misrule at the settlement, than with whether he had reasonable grounds for redress in matters arising from his professional disagreements with the commandant. Governor Brisbane decided that he did not and Kiernan was denied further employment by the state.⁵⁷

The only other surviving testimony of Simpson's use of excessive or at least unwarranted corporal punishment comes from convicts not immediately under his authority but unavoidably within his sphere of influence. In 1824 the Bathurst Stock Department established an outstation at Wellington Valley on the opposite side of the Bell River to supply the settlement with beef. The stockmen were under the jurisdiction of a civilian Stock Superintendent, John Maxwell, stationed at Bathurst. Maxwell's men were drawn into conflict with Simpson over a number of petty matters and within months there were allegations that the commandant was behaving in an overbearing and unreasonable manner. One stockman wrote to Maxwell seeking protection after Simpson 'threatened to send a bullock cart and a file

⁵⁵ Kiernan to Goulburn, 18 September 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

⁵⁶ Weekly Returns of Public Labour at Wellington Valley, CSIL, AONSW 4/1093.4. The so-called 'native venereal' was probably an amalgam of European venereal disease and one of the indigenous treponemal infections described by J. Campbell, 'Smallpox in Aboriginal Australia, 1829-31', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 20, October 1983, p. 537.

⁵⁷ Goulburn to Kiernan, 24 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/3513. The governor accepted Simpson's version which accused Kiernan of improper and subversive conduct at the settlement, Simpson to Goulburn, 27 September 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

of soldiers to bring me into the settlement and have me damn well flogged', after he had requested that the commandant be more particular in making out duplicate receipts.⁵⁸ The threats were realised when head-stockman, Thomas Webb, on delivering a cow to the settlement, was detained and for reasons not stated, tied up and given 25 lashes. He was sent back to his station with a warning to the other stockmen that they would receive their punishment at the next opportunity.⁵⁹ Superintendent Maxwell at Bathurst was alarmed by such apparent 'persecution', knowing it would legitimise his men abandoning their post. He attempted to have the state intervene, only to receive a curt and dismissive response that the matter be referred to the Bathurst commandant, Major Morisset, who was not well disposed towards Maxwell.⁶⁰ The latter, for his part, could only advise his stockmen to give Simpson no cause for 'real complaint'.⁶¹

These exchanges reveal just how little access the settlement convicts themselves had to protection or recompense. Recent historiography has stressed the formal or legal avenues open to convicts, noting instances in which they successfully brought charges against their masters before local magistrates, especially pertaining to mistreatment. Complaints were uncommon and attended with serious risks, as three assigned servants of George Innes found in 1824 when the Bathurst Bench had them each receive 25 lashes for 'making a groundless complaint against their master'.⁶² While convicts in the settled districts might have fancied their chances before judicious men like Major Antill at Stonequarry, redress was less likely for convicts lodged 240 kilometres inland under the supervision of Simpson. Those who could have managed to get their cases before the Bathurst Bench were not likely to find a spirit of benevolent paternalism in the court of Major Morisset and the gentlemen justices of Bathurst.

The Wellington convicts sought their own justice and took their safety into their own hands by withdrawing their labour and compensatory retribution. Remoteness enhanced the power of these tactics because the extraordinary rate of desertion adversely affected the settlement. The inactivity of the authorities upon whom Simpson

⁵⁸ Rowan to Maxwell, 24 November 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁵⁹ Webb to Maxwell, 1 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁶⁰ Maxwell to Goulburn, 6 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800 and Goulburn to Maxwell, 24 December 1824, CSOL, AONSW 4/3513.

⁶¹ Maxwell to Webb, 15 December 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1800.

⁶² Return of convicts tried before magistrates at Bathurst, August 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/6671.

relied for support contributed to a high level of desertion. The colonial secretary, for example, discarded lists of runaways because Simpson had neglected to note the date of desertion.⁶³ Absconders readily found work in the settled regions. Two prisoners, including one who left Wellington on the fallacious claim that he was due for a ticket-of-leave were employed by the Bathurst commandant.⁶⁴ Moreover, the disciplinary problems at Wellington Valley were aggravated by the paucity of the military detachment, which consisted of one corporal and four privates for whom the posting was probably as onerous and unfortunate as it was for the convicts. They were not furnished with clear instructions regarding the nature of their duties and so at times refused to act as sentries, apprehend runaways or undertake escort duties.⁶⁵

These examples demonstrate the failure of the colonial authorities to provide adequate machinery for enforcing law and order in such extraordinary circumstances. In fact, on the issue of convict discipline at Wellington Valley, the Colonial Secretary, Goulburn, had unhelpfully conjectured that they would be 'much more docile than in Sydney' because they were removed from alcohol. Simpson informed the governor that such docility was rare among 'dissolute characters' and that the absence of luxuries like liquor seemed enough to ensure their disobedience.⁶⁶

The shortcomings in the commandant's armoury of disciplinary measures were exposed in the first, critical stages of the settlement when convict co-operation was most needed. The non-violent punishments recommended in his instructions were simply impractical. The hours of work involved in founding the settlement were too long to allow for augmented duties while solitary confinement merely relieved men from the rigours of ploughing and sawing at a time when their labour could not be spared. Yet if the cruder, immediate form of punishment were most applicable or most favoured by Simpson, then there were limitations which were practical rather than legal. Implementing corporal punishment required a brave and incorruptible volunteer from among a small, isolated group of hardened men.

⁶³ Goulburn to Simpson, 10 September 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

⁶⁴ Simpson to Ovens, 10 October 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818 and Return of Convicts employed by Lawson, 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1782.

⁶⁵ The first detachment of the 3rd Regiment claimed to be under instructions from the Brigade Major to obey no orders from Simpson 'under pain of dismissal and court martial', Simpson to Goulburn, 8 June 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

⁶⁶ Goulburn to Simpson, 1 April 1823, CSOL, AONSW 4/3508 and Simpson to Goulburn, 18 April 1823, CSIL, AONSW, 4/1818.

Simpson's first constable, the convict, Mathias Maher, had served three years in D'Arcy Wentworth's police force and distinguished himself by breaking up a gang which was plundering carts on the Parramatta road.⁶⁷ But when called on to flog convicts at Wellington Valley, Maher only complied through his 'dread of being reported' by Simpson. It was an ominous task even for the former scourge of the Parramatta bushrangers, 'for by doing so my name is branded all up the country and I am pointed at and abused wherever I go'.⁶⁸ When the settlement deteriorated to the point of general mutiny, Maher refused to flog.

Broader, long-term weaknesses in Simpson's authority were that the extent of his jurisdiction was so unclear that convicts such as Maxwell's stockmen involved in different work in other departments, mocked convicts under the commandant's jurisdiction. Simpson was denied the powers of a magistrate even after 1824 when the number of stipendiary magistrates in the western district was increased to deal with local exigencies involving Aborigines and rebellious convicts. He did not have the right to send a convict to a place of secondary punishment, a sentence which was served in addition to the original punishment. More significantly a magistrate could sentence a convict to up to 100 strokes (and probably more). These limitations were either an oversight or a precaution against the possibility of excess but they gave rise to many practical problems.

Simpson had little official support. The Bathurst commandant, for example, rarely ventured to Wellington to impose his authority and punish on the spot. Prisoners sent from Bathurst who were charged with serious offences at Wellington had to be escorted back to Bathurst, depriving Wellington of valuable manpower and risking the possibility that the prisoners might not be returned. The Bathurst magistrates also rightly refused to convict men who did not appear before the bench in person, even when they had been accused of the most serious crimes.⁶⁹ At least that was a measure of justice. The Bathurst Bench, however, rarely heard charges against Simpson's convicts except when deserters such as John Asker were

⁶⁷ Maher to Goulburn, 26 December 1822, CSIL, AONSW 4/1763.

⁶⁸ Maher to Goulburn, 28 March 1823, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

⁶⁹ The ex-convict clerk, William Evison, for example, burnt down a hut and destroyed the settlement accounts. The magistrates declined to interfere in the matter, it being 'contrary to law of England to determine guilt of a man not present to make defence', Morisset to Simpson, 12 September 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.

apprehended at Bathurst.⁷⁰ The difficulties engendered by these restrictions dominated Simpson's letters to the colonial secretary. His frustration produced the wrathful, violent language which intimates his predilection for force and brutality and probably caused the government to withhold vesting him with further powers. Limiting his powers was either an oversight or a precaution against the possibility of excess but in effect it constituted a dreadful failure to appreciate the consequences of forcibly exiling a workforce to an environment where extraordinary degrees of inducement, inspiration or coercion were required to ensure order and industry but where these resources were lacking. This was the quandary of authorities and settlers throughout the western district in these years and it was acute at Wellington Valley.

* * *

The essence of Simpson's predicament at Wellington Valley was that both master and convict had limited access to institutions and resources which might have mediated their positions to ensure order and industry, and also checked abuses and provided redress. Yet the outcome, as noted, was not unlike many other convict-work situations of the time, especially when the settlement stabilised and overcame some of the inconveniences and restraints which marked its earliest stages. After three years, the commandant managed to establish an array of rewards such as ration supplements, better accommodation and personal and official indulgences including salaries or permission for officials to have their wives on the settlement. All these measures allowed Simpson to secure some measure of allegiance from his overseers and constables promoted from the settlement population, men such as the Londoner, Ruben Clarke, who had worked three years at Emu Plains and who stepped forward to be Simpson's willing and reliable flagellator.

Eventually it also became possible to rely less on corporal punishment for the maintenance of discipline. In 1825 the construction of a gaol enabled Simpson to isolate the miscreants and to deprive them of communication and privileges, enabling him to punish without constant resort to flogging. When he was able to reserve Saturdays for personal maintenance, he could punish minor offenders with augmented labour, leg irons acquired for a gaol gang and time on the treadmill constructed for the granary. When supplies of tobacco

⁷⁰ Asker, a third-time deserter, received 100 lashes and two years at Port Macquarie. Return of convicts tried before magistrates at Bathurst, October 1824, CSIL, AONSW 4/6671.

reached the settlement, they could be withheld to supplement all other forms of punishment. The variety of punishment allowed for a gradation of sentences in which the various forms of disorder and neglect could be 'punished according to the nature and degree of the offence'. The settlement's general regulations stipulated that runaways could expect up to seven days solitary confinement on bread and water, with no tobacco, with up to six months on the treadmill or with the gaol gang. The severest penalty of 50 lashes was reserved for cases of 'repeated desertion or aggravated offences', with the definitions remaining entirely at the commandant's discretion.⁷¹

Simpson was required to order and supervise his own floggings. Normally charges by masters against assigned convicts were tried by the bench, a separation of powers which was an important check on the abuse of corporal punishment. In situations where the superintendents of public works were independently responsible, corporal punishment was in some respects more effective and efficient because it was immediate and personal supervision could reduce the possibility of lenience. At the same time convicts could hold the commandant personally responsible for the severity and perceived justice of any punishment. Studies of corporal punishment in the Royal Navy have shown that sailors endured 'acceptable violence', providing it could be perceived as legitimate, deserved or inflicted to protect the collective security and comfort of the ship's complement.⁷² Simpson was a stern disciplinarian in a place where exceptional severity was required for order and industry. The frequency of punishment, the harshness of its application or the proportion of convicts punished may have been less relevant than whether the punishment was perceived as being dispensed fairly or capriciously.

The final check on the commandant's power was ultimately his vulnerability to the most extreme consequences of excessive oppression. As the last station on the lower Macquarie, four or five days walk from Bathurst, Wellington Valley was vulnerable to any concerted, organised resistance originating either from within its own workforce or from the convict population of the Bathurst area. Such a threat seemed to have arrived in October 1825 when four armed bushrangers, reportedly from Newcastle, were lodged in the neighbouring hills. Six men from Wellington including Vincent Russell,

⁷¹ General Regulations for the Govt Establishment of Wellington Valley, 3 January 1824, *HRA*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 132-135.

⁷² N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, London, 1986, pp. 205-251.

the overseer of the wheat thrashers, stole valuable equipment and left to join the bushrangers. Reportedly, another 17 convicts were planning to abscond in a few weeks when the harvest commenced and the crisis was inflamed by rumours that armed convicts were on their way from Bathurst. These circumstances and rumours occurred at a time when illness and escort duty had reduced the military on hand to a pitiful sergeant and one private, an outrageous circumstance given the reports of lawlessness in the western district.⁷³ Simpson's report of the crisis was so fervid that Raxworthy describes the situation as an 'uprising' or 'mutiny'. In fact the calamity which Simpson foresaw did not eventuate. A couple of the men were back at the settlement later in the week, probably in the gaol. Most were there for the harvest in December that year, no doubt labouring in irons. Vincent Russell, who was missing for a short time, was later returned to the settlement and restored to a position of authority as constable.

There were undoubtedly crude expressions of power and moments of brutality at Wellington Valley but it was not an 'inland Norfolk Island'. Isolation afforded Simpson some protection from scrutiny and accountability, leaving him largely to his own devices but that isolation also made him more vulnerable to the limitations of corporal punishment, and more susceptible to resistance prompted by any injudicious cruelty. His remote farm on the lower Macquarie River provided ample scope for convict protest as well as abundant reasons for it, just as it allowed for despotism and misrule. It was fertile ground for lawlessness. Perhaps what is most telling is that the Wellington Valley settlement never disintegrated into a major catastrophe. The fact that such a disaster was averted suggests that Simpson's régime was not oppressively brutal if only because the commandant, despite his inclinations, was unable to construct it.

⁷³ Simpson to Goulburn, 10 October 1825 and 14 October 1825, CSIL, AONSW 4/1818.