

The case of Mary Bryant who, with her husband and two children escaped from Port Jackson in 1791, is frequently referred to and indeed a whole book has been devoted to her story.⁸ After capture she and four surviving companions (her husband and children had died on the way) were returned to England to Newgate prison where they awaited trial and an almost certain death sentence for their crimes. It is not clear how their case claimed the attention of James Boswell, but he exerted himself on their behalf, writing to and visiting Henry Dundas to plead their cause; in the collection there is a letter from Boswell to Dundas dated 10th August 1792. His intercession seems to have succeeded; ten months later according to D. B. W. Lewis,⁹ Mary Bryant was released by royal clemency which in a further six months was extended to her companions.

Thomas Muir in a letter to a friend in December 1793 also presents a case which evokes much sympathy from the reader. He was convicted of sedition in 1793 and sentenced to 14 years' transportation. The letter written from a hulk on the Thames is that of a deeply religious and well-educated man voicing his despair at his situation. In solitary exile he says 'There is dignity, there is a conscious pride, which even independent of philosophy, may support the mind; but I question . . . an exile such as mine, surrounded by the veriest outcasts of society, without the aid of religion and the example of Jesus'. Muir's philosophic resignation and submission to the will of God cannot have stood the test of life at Botany Bay for a note pencilled on the letter states that he escaped in 1796.

An interesting letter is from Sir Robert Peel who wrote to Sir R. J. W. Horton, the Under-Secretary of War for the Colonies, in 1827 asking to be informed

What are the circumstances in New South Wales which render it so important to that Colony that Convicts should be sent there in order that they may perform the functions of labourers? . . . I certainly know of no other destination of a Convict, which as a punishment to him or an example to others, answers its purpose so ineffectually as transportation to New South Wales.

I cannot reconcile the extraordinary demand for Convict labour with the amount of bills drawn from New South Wales for Convicts subsistence. If the speculators from New South Wales have without any direct sanction from the Government, entered into contracts in the mere expectation of the usual supply of convicts, I see no claim that they have to dictate the policy with respect to the penal influtions which this country is to pursue.

He continues to argue for diminishing as far as possible the supply of convicts to New South Wales.