



# The Little Wooden Horse

Written & Illustrated Mark Wilson

Published by Windy Hollow Books 2010

## Teachers' notes

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### CURRICULUM TOPICS

Study of history, society and environment  
English language and literacy  
Visual literacy  
Creative arts  
Learning technologies  
Mathematics  
Themes  
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### Introduction

*The Little Wooden Horse* is the story of Elisabeth and Tom, two convict children from different backgrounds, brought together in circumstances that lead to their incarceration and transportation to the new colony of Botany Bay. They showed courage and resilience in extraordinary circumstances. They were in the company of convicts selected for transportation by corrupt prison officials, because they were too sick, too old, or simply troublemakers.

The story has its origins in Georgian England with its peculiar mix of elegance, progress and squalor. Elisabeth and Tom are survivors of the smallpox epidemic that swept London and took their parents.

Like many children in recently industrialized England, Elisabeth works 15 hours a day in a steam driven cotton mill. She meets Tom at the orphanage where they both live.

When Tom is old enough to be sent to the mill with Elisabeth, they decide to escape the near slave

conditions, to live by their wits on the streets of East London. Caught stealing bread, they are sent to the terrible Dunkirk Hulk, where convicts are gathered for transportation.

They are assigned to the Lady Penrhyn with the women convicts, and set out on a journey with the First Fleet, a journey that many will not survive.

### Curriculum Topics

This picture book can be used with curriculum topics in primary or secondary schools in the following suggested areas:

### Study of History and Society

In England in the eighteenth century, there were 160 crimes punishable by death, from murder down to stealing a silk handkerchief or a loaf of bread (just as Elizabeth does in the story). Being a child made no difference to the authorities (Thomas McClean was only 15 when sentenced to death, commuted to transportation to Botany Bay).

**Discussion Point:** There was no organised police force, members of the public acted as “constables” to collect the reward when someone was convicted. Discuss how this flawed justice system discriminated against the poorer classes, who couldn’t defend themselves in court.

**Activity:** Research the role played by the British government in sending the First Fleet to Australia, and why they sent mostly convicts.

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the lives of the poorer classes in Industrialised London in 1787.

**Discussion Point:** What is the significance of the line in the song on page 2; “When you wake, you’ll have cake”. How does this relate to the story.

**Discussion Point:** research the 'Dunkirk Hulk' and discuss why it existed, the conditions there and what it was used for.

## English Language and Literacy

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

**Question:** This story is told as a third person past tense account of a convict girl named Elisabeth who finds herself transported to Australia with the first Fleet. Imagine if she were telling the story in first person. How might it have differed?

**Activity:** Tell the story in the voice of Tom, Elisabeth's friend.

**Activity:** This text is undercut by the inclusion of a different narrative style which adds to the telling of the story. It opens with a song written by an unknown source. Discuss narrative styles and genres with the students and invite them to choose one of these styles and to create a text relevant to the story.

**Activity:** Test your students' comprehension by asking them questions about the visual and written text.

**Discussion Point:** Students might be encouraged to use critical literacy skills to unearth meaning in this text. What might have happened to Elisabeth and Tom after they arrive in the new land.

## Visual Literacy

The visual text of a book works with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, as explored below:

**Activity:** The cover of a book is an important part of its message. Read the cover and discuss its impact. What is the author suggesting with this image?

**Activity:** The medium employed in most of the illustrations is acrylic painting on canvas, which are impressionistic in style. However there are also some other illustrations done in charcoal, black pen and ink and pencil which appear as if in frames in the midst of the landscapes. Try to create your own painting in this medium, depicting some scene suggested by this text.

**Discussion Point:** What are the 'Roaring Forties' and how has the author illustrated this phenomenon.

## Creative Arts

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

Students might paint their own image of the Lady Penrhyn and the other ships of The First Fleet. They may choose other images suggested by this text as well. After the works are completed, students can then display the works as an exhibition created in response to this text.

Create a play depicting the story, highlighting the plight of convicts bound for Australia. Your play might be set against a stage set created by members of the class. They might paint a backdrop using images from the story, or create their own. They could create computer images and project them onto the wall behind the actors. Choose relevant music to accompany your script.

Create a map of the world as it appeared in 1787. The maps available then were quite different to world maps today. Student could then trace the voyage of the first Fleet, firstly to South America, then South Africa and on to Australia.

Secondary students might study the Australian film entitled 'Against The Wind'.

Research popular songs of the time, such as All the Pretty Horses that the author features in the story.

## Learning Technologies

The topic of the First Fleet is one which can be widely researched not only in libraries but on the internet where there is a wealth of information (see bibliography below).

## Mathematics

Statistics relating to the first fleet might lend themselves to related mathematics activities.

**Activity:** An analysis of the various convict lists, quantities of stores, tools, livestock and supplies, and how these might reflect the subsequent success or failure of the future colony. In particular, the type, amount and condition of plants and seeds were crucial if the colony was to survive.

## Themes

### Bravery

Bravery is often described as if it consists of fighting battles and fierce heroics. Elisabeth shows another type of bravery; that she would put herself in danger for a friend.

**Discussion Point:** this picture book story is told not from the point of view of the soldier's or sailors, but from a convict child's perspective. Would Elisabeth's memories be of bravery and heroism, or of fear, loss and persecution?

**Discussion Point:** How would you describe bravery? What brave people do you know? Why do you think they are brave?

**Discussion Point:** What would you have done in Elisabeth's situation when Tom was starving?

### Friendship

Friendship is often forged in the most unlikely of circumstances and between people who might ordinarily never meet. An orphanage is a great

leveller. Children from different classes and educational and ethnic backgrounds live and work side by side, thrown together by fate.

**Discussion Point:** The relationship between Elizabeth and Tom is suggested in a few brief words early in the story. Identify the passage of text and discuss.

**Discussion Point:** What symbol has mark used in the story to represent this friendship.

## Further Topics for Discussion & Research

In industrialized England in 1787, Elisabeth works 15 hours a day in a steam driven cotton mill. Discuss the industrial revolution and the role child labour played in it.

Through the children's experiences, we also learn of the sense of hope the little fleet carried with it for the future. Research and discuss what became of the people of the first fleet after they landed in the new colony.

## Conclusion

This work should encourage students to read more widely about the First Fleet and the 'women and children' convicts aboard the Lady Penrhyn. It also reveals a lot about the lives of ordinary people in England in 1787-88. It also highlights how children at that time were used as cheap (slave) labour. Through Elizabeth's and Tom's experiences, we also learn of the sense of hope the little fleet carried with it as it sailed for Botany Bay.

## About the Author/Illustrator

Mark Wilson was born in Brunswick, Victoria. He took to drawing from a very early age, and also loved comics, particularly *The Phantom*. He went on to spend most of his teenage years in rock bands and trying his hardest to sing like John Lennon).

He studied mural design and painting at C.I.T. (now Monash, Caulfield Campus). He also did National Service, serving with Training Command Headquarters in Sydney, followed by a Diploma of Education at Hawthorne Teachers College.

In the early seventies, he became designer and illustrator for *The Education Magazine* and *Pursuit Magazine*, and also started illustrating for various publishers including Penguin, Rigby and Brooks Waterloo. In 1981 he held his first solo exhibition of paintings and drawings.

Recently, he has focussed on writing and illustrating children's books and also picture book presentations in schools and at literature festivals. His recent books include *The Last Tree* (2007 Whitley Award for Children's Picture Books), which deals with the effect deforestation has on the creatures that inhabit our forests, and *Journey of the Sea Turtle*, which highlights the fragile existence of sea turtles. *Angel of Kokoda* and *My Mother's Eyes-The story of a Boy Soldier* (CBCA Honour Book, 2010) are the first two stories in the Children and War Trilogy, published by Hachette Australia.

Mark's web site; [www.markwilson.com.au](http://www.markwilson.com.au)



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