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Judy Johnson

Judy Johnson is an award-winning writer with a special interest in bringing little known aspects of Australian history to life. She has written five poetry collections and a novel. Her awards include: The Victorian Premier's Award for Poetry, shortlisting in the Western Australian Premier's Awards, the Melbourne University Wesley Michel Wright Prize (twice), and the Josephine Ulrick, Val Vallis, and John Shaw Neilson prizes. Her verse novel *Jack* was on the syllabus of both Melbourne and Sydney Universities. She is co-editor of a twenty-five-year retrospective of Australian verse: *Contemporary Australian Poetry*.

Previous poetry collections by Judy Johnson

Books

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Stone Scar Air Water (2013)

Chapbooks

Light and Skin (2002)
Exhibit (2013)
counsel for the defence (2016)

Judy Johnson
**Dark
Convicts**

**Ex-slaves on
the First Fleet**

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For all the descendants
of Randall and Martin.

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Author's Note:

It is a little known fact that eleven black convicts arrived on the First Fleet. Two of these ex-slaves are my ancestors. What follows is a poetic response to that aspect of Settlement, specifically, the life and times of my ex-slave forebears.

The black First Fleeters were emancipated by the British in the 1770's American War of Independence, in exchange for joining the Loyalist army to fight George Washington's Patriots. By the time Washington won the war in 1783, over 8000 fugitive slaves had defected and were fighting for the English. Many were taken to a new life in London, at that time overcrowded and, in the lower orders, poverty-stricken. The availability of (albeit inadequate) charity was limited to the white poor. As a result, some of these black men turned to petty crime.

My two-tiered ancestry from this time begins with John Martin, listed on the First Fleet records as a negro, who stole a bundle of clothing and was sentenced at the Old Bailey on 3rd July 1782, to transportation for seven years. He spent three years in the notorious Newgate Prison and was sent to the *Ceres* hulk in the Thames for a further two years, before being transferred to the First Fleet ship, *Alexander* in 1787, for transportation to New South Wales. At the time of landing at Botany Bay, Martin technically had only eighteen months of his sentence left to serve. Because of the lack of documentation forthcoming from London, it wasn't until 29th November 1792 that he was finally given his freedom, along with a grant of 50 acres at the Northern Boundary Farms, now known as Parramatta.

John Martin married the daughter of his best friend, John Randall, another ex-slave. Randall had probably been a drummer with the Loyalist troops in America after running away from his owner, prominent Patriot, John Randall of New London. Black Randall was sentenced for seven years transportation at Manchester Quarter Sessions on 14th April 1785 for stealing a steel watch chain. He was also sent to the *Ceres* hulk, and the *Alexander*. That circumstantial proximity is perhaps how the two men became friends.

When Randall reached New South Wales, he was appointed one of the Governor's three game shooters. On the same day that Martin received his 50 acre land grant, Randall received an adjacent grant of 60 acres.

The descendants of Martin and Randall, black on both sides (as I am) as well as black on the singular Randall side, now number some 25,000. Many of them probably do not yet know of their slave ancestry.

As this is a poetic narrative, with a distinctive slant, I have chosen to emphasise the flavour of the life and times of my two ancestors, rather than attempt to create an inclusive historical document. In some poems I've mentioned the other black convicts, singularly or as a group. One of these was the notorious John Caesar, who caused more trouble to the white authorities than any other convict. He went on to become Australia's first bushranger.

When Aboriginal references appear, it is because they are integral to a scene. For instance, there were several episodes in the documentation that bring together black convicts and members of the Eora tribe. I do not attempt any broader representation of the Aboriginal experience, as I do not feel qualified to do so. That aspect has already been comprehensively and sensitively covered by many historians.

The progression of the poems is for the most part linear, but where I have seen a thematic pattern, I put poems together in which the subject matter may not perfectly align in time.

I wish to thank the Literature Board of the Australia Council for a New Work Writer's Grant which allowed me to carry out relevant research, and to carve out the time to write this book. Thanks also to the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre, where some of these poems were written during a month as Established Writer in Residence. I also wish to thank my late sister, June, who did much of the hard research work to uncover the truth of our ancestry.

Italics within these poems are taken from quotes from various journals and books I have consulted. Many are from the writings of First Fleet officers. A list of source material appears at the end.

After much experimentation, I have settled on a thirteen spoken-syllable line to explore this subject matter, as it gave me the conversational tone, rhythmic sense of the time, and a structure that I felt the material needed.

For a further, comprehensive reading of the history of the black convict experience, I direct you to Cassandra Pybus' book, *Black Founders*.

VIRGINIA
(1775)

George Washington's Lost Slave Villanelle

We must resist the British. We will assert our rights.
Or else be subjugated much like the slaves we own.
The crisis has arrived Lord please hear our worthy plight.
Liberty or Death we'll not give up the noble fight.
British beguiling splinters the slabs of wood we hone.
They'll rally blacks to riot. We must enforce our rights.
Nothing's more ungrateful than a negro full of spite.
How can they just ignore all the mercies we have shown?
Your son's own skin was white Lord don't shun our decent plight.
What shameful days when feeding hands feel a savage bite.
They're wooing slaves to shoot their guns and embrace their throne.
If they steal our property we'll execute our rights.
Make no mistake runaways still wear our brand skin-tight.
We'll pardon the faithful who resist urges to roam.
Your stick-and-carrot justice Lord don't ignore our plight.
In the end the ties that bind will surely pull in tight.

They will know their childish souls are happiest at home.

What black who knows his place in life would insist on Rights?

Free to starve on London's streets how does that serve his plight?

LONDON
(1782)

Dumped Shop-Soiled

When you buy a man as a slave. When you brand him as
chattel no different to a donkey. When you name him

John or Thomas or something heroic as hot piss
in the face like Caesar or Hercules. It won't then

wipe off the stain if you give him back to himself when
you're finished. He'll still be damaged goods second-hand shop-
soiled from the maulings of you his previous owner.

For the most part there was no defence counsel and no character witnesses for the lower classes accused at trial in Georgian Britain. Therefore prisoners, white and black in the dock, were forced to defend themselves. As a mandatory death sentence by hanging applied to the theft of goods over the value of 40 shillings, the few words they were allowed to say on their own behalf could literally be a matter of life or death, and resulted in some inventive and impassioned speeches.

* * *

Counsel for the Defence

(a miscellany)

Your Honour Sir as the Good Lord is my witness I did not nick those things but instead picked them up from where they lay under a hedge. *I was taking that bundle of linen to be washed, Sir.* **We was promised those slabs of wood on account of mending that gentleman's shoes.**

I never knew where my companion got them clothes. 'George' says I 'George! why are you so handsomely rigged?' *I had no more plan of taking those garments Sir than I have to dance a jig this very minute.* **He said to me**

which weren't true: 'You infamous hussy you got my watch.' So I called him a snotty little monkey I'll be bound afore (and yes Sir skating at the edge of the law) I confess Affront and I knocked him to the ground.

He was an old codger Sir with nothing on him but a flick so as God is our witness me and Bradley never pulled out the knife or stick on him. *Please Sir have*

mercy for my little ones at home on whom I dote. I swear I don't know how those tablecloths and aprons got under me petticoat. **I thought them bridles was**

rubbish Sir that the Gentleman were throwing away. He were always throwing away worn out things. He were ...

always drunk your Lordship ... I ain't never seen him be sober he had me black in blue with bruises. He was abusive on account of the misunderstanding about that missing scrap iron which weren't called for. **'God damn**

and blast your bugging soul' said he. He tried to way-lay me a law abiding man with persuasion to

crime. 'If you say a word I'll take the time to knock your brains out.' And ... 'I'll spill your guts you hairy bugger' he menaced twice when I refused to join him in his vice.

'I'll give you a good hiding' said he 'for going through my pockets you bloody lice-ridden whore.' I was scared for my life in that room your Honour Sir ... and he would not let me past ... 'Before this day is over' growled he

'I'll warm your thieving arse.' **Never a word has been said against my good *Caricter* before this day Sir and**

I implore if it please God to restore me to my distressed Father and Mother then I swear to return all ill-gotten gains and never in this life again come to the attention of your most merciful law.