

Jonathan King. *Mary Bryant*. Simon & Schuster Australia, 2004.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Mary Bryant was a first fleet convict who, in the company of 8 men plus her two young children, stole an open boat and escaped from Port Jackson, rowing and sailing all the way to Timor. There, betrayed by one of the men, they were sent back to England in chains. About half of them, including Mary, survived the perils of the voyage and all were eventually pardoned.

Mary and her adventure have been the subject of at least seven books, including this one by Jonathan King published in 2004. The media release claims that this book, unlike all the others, 'brings the story...vividly to life.' This very phrase is also used on the back cover of another book about Mary Bryant by American author Carolly Erickson, called *The Girl From Botany Bay*, also published last year. Unfortunately, bringing Mary 'vividly to life' is just what Jonathan King's book doesn't do.

Over the last few years I've reviewed several books in this 'historical biography' genre, and not one of them has made very satisfactory reading. I can only conclude that it is exceptionally difficult to write this kind of book. This one is not the worst by any means. There are few anachronisms, and apart from the coy use of 'lying with' as a universal euphemism for sexual relations, the language is direct and unaffected. The problem arises when the writer ventures from facts, known or imagined or reconstructed, to feelings. Perhaps the fact that they are dealing with real historical people constrains writers from attributing to their characters any but the most predictable, superficial and fleeting emotions. On the long voyage home, Mary loses her husband and both her children to disease. All King can produce to describe her reaction is that 'she cried until she had no more tears.' OK the first time, the second time it becomes formulaic.

King's Mary is brave, resourceful and reasonably honest. Her crime is highway robbery, with two other women. She was the one who held the gun. For the Mary that King wants us to

believe in, this has to be represented as something she did not choose to do, so he cooks up an appropriate story – she only did it because she was desperate to buy food for her dying mother – and anyway she wasn't going to shoot. She was sentenced to death, but the sentence was transmuted to transportation. Out of reverence, perhaps, King avoids ascribing any but the most respectable emotions to Mary: including a desire for freedom which allows her, in his account, to set aside her existing attachment to the man she left behind, to conceive one child by one of her jailers and then marry Will Bryant, by whom she had another child. And of course in King's account there had to be some element of injustice. But he doesn't quite reconcile the fact that she was an armed robber. It's hard to imagine someone in her position being pardoned these days, when the mere fact of travelling vast distances in a leaky boat is regarded as no reason for mercy.

All the accounts of Mary Bryant rely on an unpublished Memorandum written by one of her crew mates. A more interesting project might well have been to edit this document for publication, rather than rehashing the few known facts and grafting onto them a veneer of mawkish sentiment.