

essential
VIEWING

The Floating Brothel

NFSA

STUDYGUIDE
ROBERT LEWIS

A dramatised documentary



THE EXTRAORDINARY TALE OF THE
LADY JULIANA AND THE UNLIKELY
FOUNDING MOTHERS OF MODERN AUSTRALIA



Overview

The *Floating Brothel* is a 55-minute dramatised documentary based on the book of the same name by Siân Rees (Hodder, Sydney, 2001). It tells the story of the *Lady Juliana*, one of the ships of the Second Fleet. We see three modern-day Australians finding out about the stories of their ancestors who were aboard the ship. As we share in their discoveries the film reveals the background of the female convicts who were on the ship, the nature of their crimes, the society in which they committed those crimes, the hardships and surprising benefits of their voyage to Australia, and finally the impact of this 'human cargo' on the new society.

ABOVE: ANGLICAN MINISTER HELEN PHILLIPS – A DESCENDANT OF PROSTITUTE RACHEL HODDY – ON THE RIVER THAMES IN LONDON WITH CREW FROM *THE FLOATING BROTHEL*. DIRECTOR MARK LEWIS IS STANDING THIRD FROM LEFT. INSET: HELEN PHILLIPS WITH AUTHOR SIÂN REES. PHOTOS BY BRIAN J. RITCHIE © NFSA

YOUNG MARY WADE WAS TRANSPORTED TO AUSTRALIA ON THE FIRST FEMALE CONVICT SHIP IN 1789. ALL PHOTOS IN THIS GUIDE BY JOHN TSIAVIS UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED. PHOTOS © NFSA



Curriculum applicability *The Floating Brothel* is relevant to a study of Australian history and early society at middle and upper secondary levels, as well as English and Media. The film could be used in the classroom to help students:

- Develop knowledge of the origins and transportation of the early convicts
 - Consider arguments about the effects and impacts of transportation on Australia
 - Challenge stereotyped images of the convicts
 - Develop empathy for the experiences of the convicts
 - Understand the nature of evidence in history
 - Critically analyse representations of history
 - Analyse ways of presenting information to varied audiences.
- Note: The film has received an M classification (recommended for mature audiences), with the consumer advice: moderate sexual references.

A suggested classroom approach

The *Floating Brothel* is the story of one non-typical aspect of Australia's convict origins, but it can be used as a starting point for a study of the system of transportation. By exploring the nature of this unusual example, students may be more ready to respond to the more typical examples in a less accepting way.

A possible classroom approach would be:

- 1 Brainstorm to establish students' existing image of the convict and transportation systems.
- 2 Watch the film as a continuous experience, or with occasional breaks, to suit individual class needs.
- 3 Have students answer and discuss the variety of questions about the film – exploring knowledge, understanding, empathy and critical analysis. It would be appropriate to provide them with the historical background document to help them at this stage.
- 4 Have students return to their original brainstorm ideas, and create a new statement about the early convicts – a new hypothesis.
- 5 Students can now continue their traditional way of studying convicts, but with a new awareness and inquiry in mind.



Historical Background

At the turn of the 18th century, London in England was both a bustling metropolis and a dark and desperate place. With a population of 800,000 people, London was the largest city in Europe and home to the wealthiest subjects of the British Empire, but it also contained a large population of poor and indigent citizens who sought to eke out a living on the city's mean streets.

In the 1780s, many poor Londoners were confined to the city's overflowing jails under Georgian England's 'Bloody Code', which created some 250 capital statutes that were punishable by death or 'transportation to lands beyond the seas'. When the English crown lost America to the revolutionaries under 'Mad' King George III, it lost more than political power and the New World's valuable resources – it also lost an important dumping ground for English convicts.

As its prisons continued to fill beyond capacity, Britain was forced to seek a solution to the problem of its overflowing jails.

The overcrowded prisons, and then the rotting ships (called hulks) in which many prisoners were now kept, were a source of potential disease. Alternatives had to be found. Many places were investigated during the 1780s, but New South Wales was finally chosen.

There are other reasons why New South Wales appealed. Some in government were worried about the possibility that the French might claim the area; others believed that a settlement at Botany Bay would be a base for shipping New Zealand pine trees for and flax for sails back to England. Some saw New South Wales as a good base for trade with China. These were all possibilities, but the main imperative was to get rid of some of the convicts.



WRITER/DIRECTOR MARK
LEWIS ON SET.

The arrival of the *Lady Juliana* at Sydney Cove

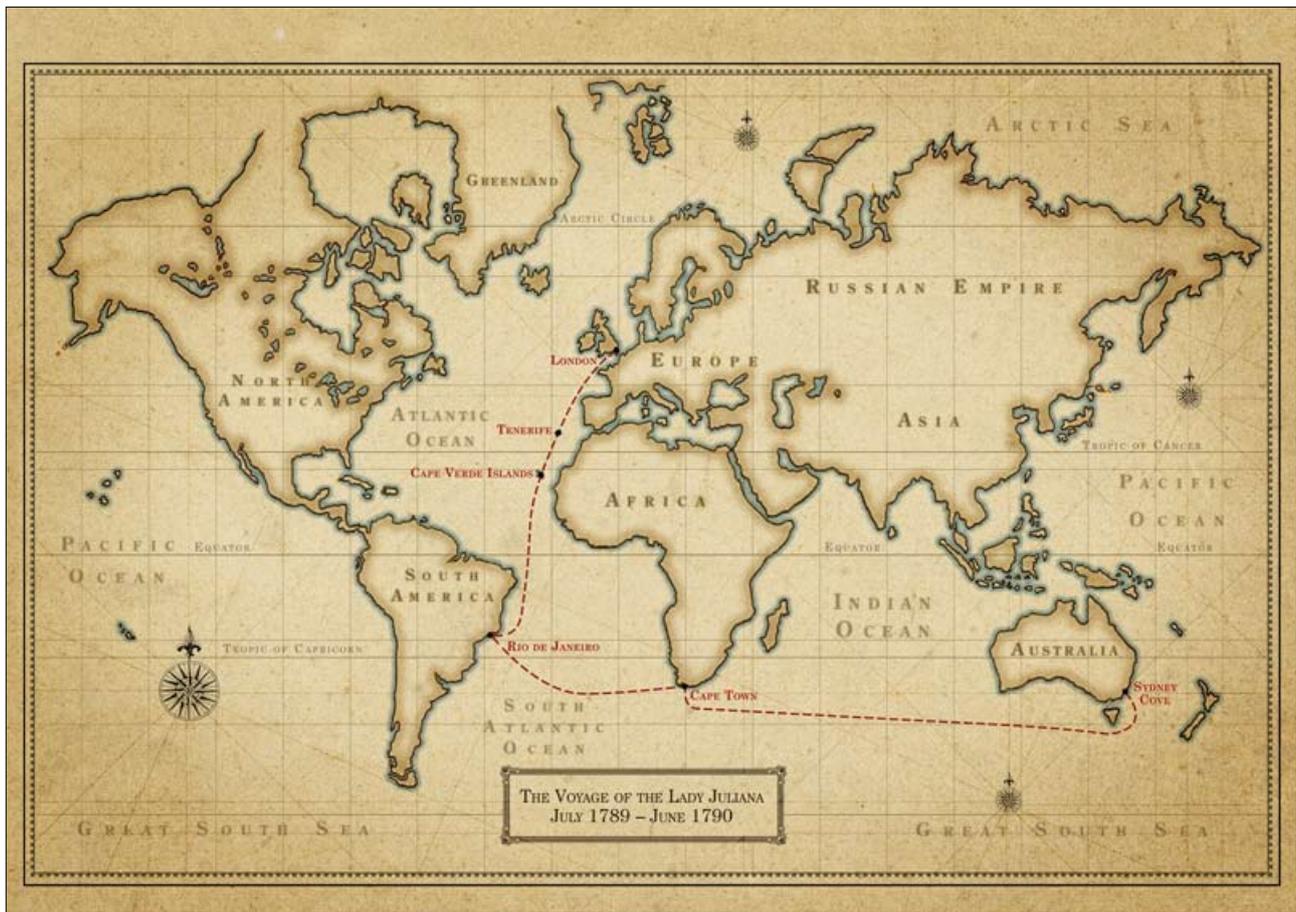
In 1788, British Home Secretary Lord Sydney shipped the 'First Fleet' under the command of Governor Phillip – some 759 convicts and 13 children of convicts along with marines, seamen, merchants and officials as well as sheep, cows, and seed – to Australia to create Botany Bay penal colony in present-day Sydney. Upon arrival, Governor Phillip found that Botany Bay lacked both green fields and a water supply. It was also too exposed for ships. So he sailed up the coast into Sydney Harbour and settled at Sydney Cove. The cove had a much bigger, natural harbour and it had its own water supply.

The new colony struggled from the start. Diseases like scurvy and dysentery had taken a toll on the settlers even before they had arrived, and food rations quickly began to run low. To make matters worse, the settlers were inexperienced farmers and lacked sufficient labour so their crops were meagre and they lost much of their livestock.

When the British Government received a letter from Governor Phillip saying the provision of more women was 'absolutely necessary', the official in charge of the project, Evan Nepean decided that, in order for the new colony to prosper, it would need more than just increased provisions and supplies – it would need the stability created by more women, children, and families. To this end, Nepean

ordered a shipment of female convicts to be part of the Second Fleet being prepared to sail, and immediately to be sent to Sydney Cove – and 'upon landing, promote a matrimonial connection to improve morals and secure settlement'.

In response to Nepean's command, about 225 female thieves, prostitutes, con-artists, and approximately five infants were rounded up from prisons in London and the British countryside to be shipped off to the failing Sydney Cove colony aboard the *Lady Juliana*. For the English government, the female convicts were to serve two purposes: to prevent the starving and isolated male colonists from engaging in 'gross irregularities' and to act as a breeding stock for the troubled settlement.



The *Lady Juliana* left the shores of England on 29 July 1789. Its ten-month journey would take it through the Canary Islands and to Cape Verde, then on to Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town before finally arriving at Sydney Cove.

The women slept in the orlop deck just above the ship's bilge, which contained the ship's holding water, human waste and remnants of food. Despite such adversity, the ship's conditions may have seemed preferable to many of the women compared with those they had left behind in London's prisons. For some of these women, the journey to Sydney Cove itself offered an opportunity for them to better their position. Women who became 'wives' of crew members aboard the ship could get access to better provisions and sleeping arrangements. Some women, like Elizabeth Barnsley – a wealthy and successful shoplifter convicted of theft

– used their money and influence to procure better lodging and even to create business opportunities on the ship. Prostitution was also not unusual in Georgian England or within the shipping industry, and the *Lady Juliana* soon became something of a 'floating brothel'. Crew members and, possibly, some of the ship's female cargo profited from the sex trade in various ports of call, and food or money earned from prostitution could in turn be used to gain influence on the ship or upon arrival at Sydney Cove.

After ten months at sea, the *Lady Juliana* arrived at the desperate, starving Sydney Cove colony. They did not receive a warm reception. The colonists had expected food and supplies – not a cargo of over 200 women and as many as seven newborn infants – and they made their disappointment clear to the women of the *Lady Juliana*. However, the *Lady Juliana* had brought

enough supplies to stave off disaster and the colonists' ire eased after the supply ship *Justinian* arrived in Sydney Cove just days after the *Lady Juliana*. Within three weeks three more ships carrying over 700 convicts arrived, again putting strain on the colony's food supplies; but the breaking of the drought in 1791 and the harvesting of the first crops soon followed, and the colony soon was producing enough food to feed itself.

For their part, many of the women convicts experienced a newfound sense of freedom at Sydney Cove. Freed from the strictures of traditional society and class, these women saw their new home as a chance to create a new life for themselves – a life filled with unprecedented opportunities.

(*Secrets of the Dead*, www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/case_courtesans)



Before Watching

Everyone has an idea about the early convicts, their crimes, and what happened to them in Australia.

- 1 Brainstorm and record your ideas. Summarise your ideas under these headings:
 - What were the earliest convicts like?
 - What sort of crimes did they commit?
 - Were they hardened criminals, or victims of the harsh society of the time?
 - What would the voyage to Australia have been like for these transported convicts?
 - What happened to the convicts in Australia?Keep a record of these ideas, as you will be able to return to them after the film and see if you would change any of them.



RACHEL HODDY, ANOTHER OF THE CONVICTS TRANSPORTED TO AUSTRALIA ON THE *LADY JULIANA*. INSET: MARY WADE – COLD AND LONELY IN NEWGATE GAOL, ENGLAND.



Responding To The Film *The Floating Brothel*

provides information on aspects of the early colonial period in Australian history. It also raises some interesting ideas and issues. Watch *The Floating Brothel* and discuss the following questions.

Gaining Knowledge

Crime in England

- 1 The film talks about the convicts aboard the *Lady Juliana* as ‘the true founding mothers’ of Australia. What does this phrase mean?
- 2 What impression do you get of social conditions in London from the dramatic reconstructions in the film? Why would there be so many criminals in this society?

Who were the convicts?

- 3 Summarise the details of Meagen Benson’s ancestor, Mary Wade, and her crime.
- 4 We learn about two convict women from Helen Phillips’ visit to London – Rachel Hoddy, Helen’s ancestor, and Rachel Turner. Summarise the details of those two women and their crimes.

- 5 We meet the third modern Australian, Delia Dray, and her ancestor, Ann Marsh. Describe Ann Marsh and her crime.
- 6 What do you conclude about the nature of the convicts aboard the *Lady Juliana* and their crimes?

Attitudes to punishment

- 7 Why did the British Government decide to transport convicts to Australia?
- 8 Do you think the crimes deserved the punishment of exile to an overseas jail for at least seven years? Explain your reasons.

The trip

- 9 We see some reconstructions of life aboard the convict ship and learn about aspects of the voyage. Describe what the journey would have been like. Was it a negative

or a positive experience for the convict women?

- 10 Was this a typical convict ship voyage? Explain your answer.

Outcomes

- 11 What was the reaction to the women when they arrived in Australia? Why was there this reaction?
- 12 What impact did the three women convicts that are the focus of the film have on the new colony?

Ideas and Argument

The Floating Brothel provides you with information about the convicts aboard the *Lady Juliana*, but it also presents ideas and arguments about their place in Australian history.



SOME OF THE MALE CONVICTS.

dying colony. Two centuries later their descendants will unearth the story of the women who crossed oceans to save a colony and redeem themselves. This is the extraordinary tale of the Lady Juliana, the floating brothel, and the true founding mothers of modern Australia. [They] crossed the world to rescue a dying colony. But ... the women of the Lady Juliana ... gave Sydney and the nation of Australia something much more. A future.

- 8 This is a strong claim in the film. Argument has to be based upon evidence. What evidence does the film present to support this argument? Look in particular at the letter written by Nepean in response to news from New South Wales, and what happened to the women in Australia.

Here are two more pieces of evidence. Look at each, and answer the questions that follow.

A: A statistical analysis of the age of the female convicts aboard the *Lady Juliana*

- 51 were between the ages of 10-19
- 116 were between the ages of 20-29
- 40 were between the ages of 30-39
- 15 were between the ages of 40-49
- 8 were 50 or over

B: The role of the *Lady Juliana*

The *Lady Juliana*, while it travelled alone, is generally classified as part of the Second Fleet. Taken together, the Second Fleet set out with 928 male and 304 female convicts (including the approximately 225 on the *Lady Juliana*). The First Fleet set out with 582 male and 193 female convicts.

- 9 Work out the percentage of female and male convicts in each of the fleets. Does your answer support or challenge the film's claim? Explain your ideas.
- 10 Does the age of the women on the *Lady Juliana* support the film's idea or not? Explain your reasons.
- 11 Discuss other evidence that historians might look at today in deciding if they agree with the film's claim or not.

Ideas

The Floating Brothel presents you with many ideas.

One of the historians featured in the film, Professor Marilyn Lake, suggests that we can have the wrong impression of convicts – as being only victims. She says that we need to see them as active characters in their own story, as 'rational opportunists'.

- 1 What does she mean by this?
- 2 Do you agree that it helps us to understand the convict experience by seeing them as active participants rather than passive sufferers? Explain your ideas.
- 3 Professor Lake also says that knowing about these convicts challenges our stereotypes about convicts, and especially female ones and their role in early Australian society. What is a 'stereotype'?
- 4 Do you agree that knowing about the *Lady Juliana* convicts chal-

- lenges the stereotype? Explain your ideas.
- 5 Look back at your original image of the convicts. Has this now changed?
 - 6 How could you test your image or ideas about what the convicts were like further?

Argument

The Floating Brothel also presents a very strong argument.

- 7 Look at the following quotation from the film. Put the argument it is presenting in your own words.

Within days of their arrival, the new settlers [of the First Fleet in 1788] were battling to survive. Stranded in an alien world, wracked by starvation and disease, the settlement was in dire need of rescue. But help would come from an unlikely quarter – a motley collection of whores, shoplifters and canny con-artists would breathe life into the

Table 1: Understanding Evidence

Type of evidence	Example from <i>The Floating Brothel</i>	Strengths	Limitations
Trial records			
Ship lists			
Official letters			
Memoirs			
Experts			
Newspapers			
Genealogical records			
Dramatic reconstructions			
Paintings			

Understanding Evidence

The Floating Brothel is not just a resource for learning the story about what happened with the *Lady Juliana*.

We can see it dealing with a key question in history: *How* do we know what we know? What evidence do we have that enables us to build up our knowledge and understanding of the past?

Types of evidence

A variety of different types of evidence is presented in the film.

- 1 Look at each type in Table 1, and give an example of each from the film. Summarise beside each what its main strengths or values are as evidence, but also what its main weaknesses or limitations are. For example, you might decide that

- an official letter tells us just what a person was thinking at the time, but it is the point of view of a particular person, and may be biased or not represent what the ordinary person was thinking.
- 2 Whose 'voice' is most lacking in the film? Why might there not be much evidence of that 'voice'?
- 3 Helen Phillips goes to London to research her ancestor, Rachel Huddy. How might visiting the spot where events occurred more than two hundred years earlier help her do this? What sort of knowledge and understanding might she get which might not otherwise be available to her? Add this type of evidence at the bottom of the list.

Interpreting evidence

We not only have to have evidence, we have to make sure we use it fairly. Sometimes people have different ideas about the same evidence. Look

at the part of the film where Meagen Benson discovers the records of her ancestor, Mary Wade.

- 4 How does Meagen Benson describe Mary and her crime?
- 5 How does Siân Phillips, the author of the book on which the film is based, describe it?
- 6 Why do the two women have such different interpretations of and reactions to Mary and her crime?
- 7 What is your decision about Mary Wade and her crime – 'childish prank' or 'a little thug and a bully'?

To help you answer this last question you could actually go to the record of Mary Wade's 1789 case at http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/html_units/1780s/t17890114-58.html

You will find some interesting information that is not stressed in the film that might influence your conclusion!

Decision	How it is included in <i>The Floating Brothel</i>	How another filmmaker might have done it differently
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

Table 2: Representing History



MRS ELIZABETH BARNSELY, DOYENNE OF THE LONDON CRIME SCENE.

Representing History

The Floating Brothel is a representation – it is somebody’s version of what happened. That version is created by the author or filmmaker choosing what to include, what to keep out, and how to arrange and present what is kept.

The film therefore presents one representation of the story of the *Lady Juliana*.

- 1 What image of the *Lady Juliana* story does it present?
- 2 How is this image presented? Consider all the elements that have been included (the narration, the dramatic reconstructions, the music, the way the images are edited together, etc.), and how they influence you. Look at the following comments by the film’s writer/director, Mark Lewis. They explain how he approached the story.
- 3 There are seven decisions that are underlined. Draw up a table like Table 2 (on page 10) to identify an example of that decision as it

appears in the film. Then beside each discuss how a different filmmaker might have done the same thing differently – and would therefore have created a different representation of the same story.

Mark Lewis’s comments

- I picked up Siân Rees’s book – The Floating Brothel, on which this film is based – about five years ago in the Hyde Park Barracks museum shop in Sydney. A day later I had read it cover to cover. It read like a novel: a great bawdy romp with a gripping narrative and characters that leapt off the page. I have been making docu-dramas for some*
- 1

years and it’s rare to find a story that ticks all the boxes: a tale that has all the ingredients of a rip-roaring yarn and has something intelligent to say about a nation’s history. I knew it would make a wonderful film.

- 2 The problem was how to make it relevant to a modern audience. Australians used to shun their convict past; today many embrace it and that seemed to me to be the key. There is a thirst not just for cultural identity but also for a more deep-seated understanding of one’s own roots and what it can tell us about ourselves. I was pretty sure that finding the descendants of the feisty women of the *Lady Juliana* would give us a modern-day connection to the story and, if



we were lucky, a glimpse of the old family spirit. We weren't disappointed.

- 3 The three descendants we found – Meagen Benson, Helen Phillips and Delia Dray – displayed an extraordinary empathy with their forebears of two centuries ago. They truly felt a connection that we as filmmakers never expected and could identify traits of their ancestors in their female relatives. Resourcefulness, tenacity and the need to soldier on whatever the crisis are the characteristics that run high in their families today.

- 4 The next challenge was to pull off the drama component of the film. This was not a feature film budget and we would never be able to fly our actors all over the world, so

- 5 we always knew we would have to 'recreate' not just the Sydney Cove of 1788, but Georgian London street scenes, the Thames estuary, the orlop deck of the ship, Newgate Gaol and even Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The women of the Lady Juliana went on an incredible journey that hauled them out of the horrors of prison to a liberation of sorts in Australia. We had to pull every trick out of the hat to create a variety of different worlds for our characters.

- 6 We scouted for the very best locations we could find – Old Sydney Town (near Gosford, an hour from Sydney), Manly Dam (a reservoir a few kilometres from the city centre) and Sydney Harbour itself for Sydney Cove. You would think that filming Georgian London would be the difficult one, but Melbourne has loads of Gothic arches and old stonework, so Melbourne doubled for London.

- 7 We pumped a lot of resources into art direction, using Hogarth illustrations and eighteenth century paintings to provide authenticity. We then invested heavily in telecine grading to make those locations look and feel as different as possible. And finally – with a judicious use of CGI (computer generated imagery) – we were able to give the locations a sense of scale, whether it was popping St Paul's Cathedral into the back of our Melbourne location to create old London or the volcanic mountains of Tenerife into seascapes we shot in Sydney Harbour.

It is testimony to the fact that if you bring the right people and the right skills together in a film – camerawork, art department, location scouting and CGI – you can pull off almost anything.



History As Heritage

One of the important aspects of *The Floating Brothel* is that it shows how *history* (what happened in the past) is also *heritage* (something from the past that is still a part of us).

At one point Helen Phillips says: *I'd be interested to know what was their character like, what was their nature like, because I wonder are there bits that get handed on? Does it help us understand who we are today, because we have a little bit of an insight into the generations that have come before us?*

Delia Dray says: *I can understand with my mother's generation and in her family and probably her parents, that there would have still been a lot of social stigma associated with being, you know, descended from a convict: tainted blood, all that sort of thing. I don't think it matters today, but I think a lot of people are interested about the hardship that those people faced.*

- 1 Why do you think many people used to see it as shameful to be connected to a convict past?
- 2 Why do you think this attitude has changed?
- 3 Is heritage important to you? Discuss this, and try to identify what aspects of heritage are most important – is it people, places, ideas, possessions or some other elements?



ONE OF THE KEY IMAGES USED TO MARKET *THE FLOATING BROTHEL*.

Marketing A History Film

The makers of a film have to attract distributors to accept and show it, and for people to watch it.

Filmmakers have to publicise their film. Here is a synopsis of the film provided by the filmmaker. Read it, and answer the questions that follow.

Three women uncover the rags-to-respectability tale of their ancestors – the feisty convicts who became the unlikely founding mothers of modern Australia. This is the rip-roaring tale of the Lady Juliana and the boatload of streetgirls, thieves and con-women who sailed to the ends of the earth to breathe life into a dying colony.

In 1789, the fledgling British penal settlement in Sydney was crippled by disease, hunger and depravity. But help would come from a most unlikely quarter.

Welcome to the startling, shocking and stinking world of Georgian London! Meet Rachel Hoddy, the mischievous prostitute; little 11-year-old street urchin Mary Wade; Ann Marsh,

convicted for stealing just a bushel of wheat, and last but not least, the doyenne of the London crime scene, Mrs Elizabeth Barnsley.

With more than 200 other women they are rounded up from England's most notorious prisons and herded aboard the first all-female transport ship to be sent out to Australia. For the Lords of the British Empire they will serve not just as good breeding stock, but a sure way of keeping the male convicts from 'gross irregularities'.

As the ship criss-crosses the oceans for almost a year, at each port of call the women turn the boardwalks into catwalks and transform the ship into a floating brothel. They will do what it takes to survive the voyage and doing business is in their blood.

These are canny, spirited, resilient women who – as their descendants discover – are able to turn their sense of enterprise into a passport to suc-

cess in a harsh new world. Together, they would give the young colony hope, civilisation and something much more – the promise of a future.

- 1 Do you think this is a fair description of the film?
- 2 Do you find it a persuasive description?
- 3 Imagine that you have been asked to prepare two advertisements to persuade people to see the film. One is for teachers, to buy the film and show it to students. The second is for people with an interest in convict history.

Design those two advertisements. Remember to consider your market in deciding on the nature of your appeal, and to use words and images appropriate to that audience.

- 4 Write your own review of *The Floating Brothel*.

References & Further Resources

Further reading

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Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997

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Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia*, CUP, 1996

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Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia*, Penguin Books, 3rd edn, 2002

Websites

The Proceedings of the Old Bailey www.oldbaileyonline.org A searchable, digitised collection

of all surviving editions of the Old Bailey Proceedings from 1674 to 1834. Includes a glossary, historical background, transcripts and original images of the proceedings.

Voyage of the Courtesans – Secrets of the Dead, PBS. This includes an interview with author Siân Rees. (Note: This was the name given to *The Floating Brothel* dramatised documentary for its US release.) www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/the-lady-juliana-and-the-new-world/165/

The Victorian Dictionary www.victorianlondon.org/prisons/newgate.htm Primary accounts and drawings of Newgate Prison and the Old Bailey.

The Newgate Calendar www.exclassics.com/newgate/ngcontc.htm Descriptions of some of the criminals executed at Newgate. Originally published as a book children were expected to read because it was believed to inculcate principles of right living.

The Newgate Prison Death Row Education Society (NPDRES) http://umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/bonifield/home.html History and virtual tour of the infamous prison as told through primary accounts, images, and maps.

The New South Wales Government's Archives and Records Management Authority <https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/> New South Wales Government's index and links to state archives and record

keeping since 1788.

Convicts to Australia www.convictrecords.com.au/resources Use this site to search chronological lists of con-vict transports sent from England to Australia and alphabetical lists of prisoners on board.

Ann Marsh Biography www.australian-english-genealogy.com/Ann%20Marsh.html Biography of Ann Marsh, a convict aboard the *Lady Juliana*, written by a descendant.

A Google search will also take you to many other genealogical sites of convict descendants.

The Floating Brothel

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Narrator: Wendy Hughes

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