



A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution

Emma Christopher

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Since Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore*, the fate of British convicts has burned brightly in the popular imagination. Incredibly, their larger story is even more dramatic--the saga of forgotten men and women scattered to the farthest corners of the British empire, driven by the winds of the American Revolution and the currents of the African slave trade. In *A Merciless Place*, Emma Christopher brilliantly captures this previously unknown story of poverty, punishment, and transportation.

The story begins with the American War of Independence, until which many British convicts were shipped across the Atlantic. The Revolution interrupted this flow and inspired two entrepreneurs to organize the criminals into military units to fight for the crown. The felon soldiers went to West Africa's slave-trading posts just as the war ended; these forts became the new destination for England's rapidly multiplying convicts. The move was a disaster. Christopher writes that "before the scheme was abandoned, it would have run the gamut of piracy, treachery, mutiny, starvation, poisonings, allegations of white women forced to prostitute themselves to African men, and not least several cases of murder." To end the scandal, the British government chose a new destination, as far away as possible: Australia.

Christopher here captures the gritty lives of Britain's convicts: victims of London's underworld, rife with brutal crime and sometimes even more brutal punishments. Equally fascinating are the portraits of Fante people of West Africa, forced to undergo dramatic changes in their role as intermediaries with Europeans in the slave trade. Here, too, are the aboriginal Australians, coping with the transformation of their native land. They all inhabit *A Merciless Place*: a tour de force and historical narrative at its finest.

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