

CONVICTION POLITICS ARC PROJECT: UNSHACKLING CONVICT HISTORY 2022-2025

TONY MOORE

Professor Tony Moore (Monash University) gives us an update on what is currently happening with the international digital history project 'Conviction Politics'...

Conviction Politics is a digital history project funded by the Australian Research Council and industry partners as part of the Linkage scheme. The NSW Teachers Federation, through its Centre for Professional Learning, is a major Partner Organisation in this project joining with the ACTU's Trade Union Education Foundation, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the UK Trades Union Congress.

Our project re-conceptualises convict transportation as one of the great forced global labour migrations of history, continuous with the slave trade, used to build settler capitalist colonies in Australia. It flips the narrative of a downtrodden criminal class by revealing the agency of the coerced workforce in collectively resisting this system. At the same time its focus on the transported political prisoners reveals Australian colonies vitally connected to the revolutions, ideas, movements and media innovations sweeping the Atlantic world. Harnessing the latest data mapping technologies, *Conviction Politics*, reveals how from the earliest days of settlement, Australia's first work force resisted exploitation through inventive solidarity in the face of coercion, while a vanguard of transported rebels, liberal pamphleteers, industrial protesters, trade unionists, Chartists, Irish independence fighters, and radical agitators changed the political direction of the colonies.

What follows is an update *Conviction Politics'* achievements and activities since our last article for the Journal of Professional Learning. [Click this link to Tony's Semester 1 2022 article](#)

NEW BOOK UNFREE WORKERS REVEALS EXTENT OF CONVICT RESISTANCE

Chief Investigators Professor Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (University of New England) and Emeritus Professor Michael Quinlan (University of NSW) researched and published a new book that engages a key focus of Conviction

Politics: Unfree Workers: Insubordination and Resistance in Convict Australia 1788-1860 (Palgrave Macmillan, London): <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-16-7558-4>

It explores the role that penal transportation played in the development of capitalism in Australia as well as exploring the many ways in which the active resistance of convicts shaped both workplace relations and institutions. Drawing on two unique 'big datasets', the book provides both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of convict-worker resistance from the moment of their embarkation on ships bound for the Australian colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land to their arrival and deployment into various categories of state and private employment.

The book reveals the terrain and scale of resistance by convicts. Between 1788 and 1860 there is evidence of over 11,000 collective protests (including strikes, mass absconding, go-slows and riots). Michael and Hamish conservatively estimate that in excess of 43,000 convicts participated in these actions. Using data for the entire nineteenth-century, the book places the scale of dissent by convicts in the context of later non-union and union organised industrial action by free workers.

It demonstrates that convicts dominated workplace dissent prior to 1850. This included the 1804 Castle Hill rebellion in which nearly 10 percent of the transported workforce participated. The book also reveals a marked prolonged crisis of dissent that occurred between 1822 and 1834. This was a direct response to the abolition of convict wages and the introduction of more intense work regimes in road gangs and on rural estates. The book argues that this wave of resistance eroded the cost-savings that accrued to those who sought to hire unfree labour over free, contributing to the demise of convict transportation.

Michael and Hamish show the extent to which convict actions informed subsequent struggles over working hours and other conditions of employment by free workers. Nothing in Australian history comes close to matching this activism until the titanic maritime and pastoral strikes of the early 1890s.

BRITISH IRISH/DOCUMENTARY SHOOT 2022

The ending of Covid lockdowns allowed Roar Film's Steve Thomas and Lead Chief Investigator Tony Moore, assisted by our man in London Paul Smith, to embark on an extensive interview, location and archive shoot of the UK and Ireland in 2022.

Interviews included Trade Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary Paul Nowak, in London; Secretary South West TUC Nigel Costley (head of the Friends of Thomas Muir) in Glasgow; Dr Tim Causer from the Bentham Centre at University College London; convict author Katharine Quarmby; and leading Irish, Scottish and English historians. With help of freelance documentary crews, we captured locations across the British Isles associated with convict transportation or where democratic and labour movement activism occurred, and digitally photographed the rare collections of the People's History Museum in Manchester.

This overseas field trip climaxed in a special presentation on *Conviction Politics* led by Tony Moore at the Menzies Australia Institute, Kings College London chaired by its Director Dr Agnieszka Sobocinska, and smaller presentations on the project at University College Cork and sat the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival summer school.

MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY SHOOT 2021-23

The *Conviction Politics* team (Roar's Steve Thomas and Aaron Wilson, Tony Moore, and Kyle Harvey) undertook extensive shoots in Melbourne and Sydney in 2023, making use of stunning locations provided by our collaborators, including Trades Hall in Melbourne, Unions NSW 'banner' museum in Sydney, the Hyde Park Barracks, and Cockatoo Island UNESCO convict heritage site on Sydney Harbour. Sydney interviewees included Geoff Gallop, Tom Keneally, Noelene Timbery, Margaret Vos and John Dixon from the NSW Teachers Federation, Peter Lewis from Essential, John Jeremy (former CEO of Cockatoo Island dockyard), Libby Bennett (Sydney Harbour Trust), Warren Fahey from Larrikin Records, Neal Towert from Unions

NSW and Prof. Nick Carter from Australian Catholic University.

Melbourne interviewees included economist Alison Pennington, Steve and Andrew Vizard, Research Fellow Dr Monika Schwarz, PhD student Daisy Bailey, and Profs. Gordon Pentland, Mark Andrejevic, Judith Brett and Andrew Reeves.

NSW TEACHERS FEDERATION - FRIDAY FORUM AND OTHER PRESENTATIONS

The discoveries and media by the Conviction Politics project were unveiled on the evening of May 5, 2023 at the Federation's Friday Forum, opened by the union's General Secretary Maxine Sharkey, chaired by Margaret Vos with closing remarks by Kate Ambrose. This full house heard from Tony Moore, Steve Thomas, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Monika Schwarz, about the project's reconceptualising of the convicts as an unfree workforce that collectively resisted exploitation and impacted both the development of Australian democracy and the early labour movement.

The audience was treated to a sample of the project's short documentaries, its online Hub, and heard how these resources can be deployed in the classroom.

Tony's opening speech on the project's significance can be read here: (See Appendix One - 2023 *Friday Forum: Introductory remarks by Tony Moore*)

Other Project presentations include:

- The ACTU Congress Fringe Festival, June 2024
- Moreton Bay Bicentennial Symposium, Brisbane, September 2024
- The MEU National Congress, Opening, October 2024. Listen to MEU Podcast interview with Tony Moore here: <https://meu.org.au/podcast-how-convicts-made-australia-fair/>
- The official opening of IndustriALL, the international congress of 1,000 trade union leaders from around the world, held at Sydney's Darling Harbour Convention Centre from 4 to 7 November 2025.

CANADIAN RESEARCH TRIP 2023

The *Conviction Politics* team of Tony, Monika and Daisy

presented papers and documentaries at the International Association for Media and History conference (20-22 June 2023), which was held at Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada.

The team hosted a panel discussion and screened microdocumentaries in a communal conference space. The panel demonstrated the transnational history of a shared struggle to advance democracy across various parts of the British Empire, and how the ambitious linking of digitised and analogue archives through international institutional partnerships has revealed the political agency of prisoners who had long been obscured as recidivists in individual records.

Tony then embarked on a road tour with Canadian-Australian filmmaker Deke Richards, researching and photographing sites of the Canadian revolutions of 1837-38. Deke has made a major documentary *Land of a Thousand Sorrows Revisited* about the Québécoise rebels transported as political prisoners to Sydney, in the early 1840s.

They also met with museums in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto and the Australian High Commission to commence discussions about Canada potentially hosting a tour of the *Conviction Politics* exhibition.

In 2022 Tony had joined Deke and the Canadian Consul-General André François Giroux, and Marie-Anne Alepin, President of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society of Montréal, in the unveiling of a series of plaques to the Canadian prisoners at the burial sights of those who did not return to their homeland, including the Dapto grave of revolutionary Joseph Marceau, who married a local girl and became a farmer and grocer in the Illawarra.

CONVICTION POLITICS HUB – CHECK IT OUT

With over 80 short documentaries, combined with long and short reads, original songs, timeline, podcasts, songs, data visualisations and rich image archive the Conviction Politics Hub is now live to the public and available for use in schools and by our Partner Organisations. Go to: <https://convictionpolitics.net/>

A trailer about the Conviction Politics documentaries can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/1082055405/ce800a71d5?ts=0&share=copy>

The Hub was test driven with the help of the Centre for

Professional Learning. Under the guidance of Margaret Vos, in 2024 teachers undertaking the CPL course *Teaching Conviction Politics* learned from Steve Thomas and Professors Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Tony Moore about the project's academic discoveries. They also discovered how the Hub could be used in the classroom as a resource for parts of the NSW History syllabuses. During the course, in real time, Roar Film garnered valuable feedback from teachers that helped us tweak the Hub ahead of it doing public.

Please explore the Hub and provide any feedback directly to Margaret Vos at cpl@nswtf.org.au

CONVICTION POLITICS' UNSHACKLED EXHIBITION LAUNCHES IN HOBART

'Unshackled: The True Convict Story' is Conviction Politics' culminating research output, that launched on the 12th of March 2024 at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). It had over 40,000 visitors in its four month run. Unshackled is a ground-breaking, multi-modal experience melding traditional museum presentation with engaging storytelling, short documentaries, data-visualisation, innovative technology, original music and soundscapes with traditional museum objects. The creative approach and visitor experience has been described as 'surprising, immersive and moving'. Its video trailer can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJwFXLNa3t0>

It features curated collections of key objects and images including selections from the magnificent Dempsey portraits of British working-class women and men, a collection of radical tokens, reproductions of radical posters and cartoons from Britain, Ireland and Australia.

A highlight of the exhibition is a life size reproduction of the portable solitary 'box' used on the female convict transport ships. Interactive screen-based media, large projections and augmented reality lead the visitor through the exhibition themes: **Repression, Exploitation, Resistance & Redemption**. These media installations are complemented by real objects to provide a truly unique museum experience.

Unions Tasmania hosted a Workers Day at the Unshackled exhibition in June featuring presentations by union activists, and the Conviction Politics Team. Here is a video of event: <https://player.vimeo.com/vid->

[eo/953006465?h=5b0138214c](https://ros-ie.hastie.photography.pic-time.com/By8398ltXJOWN)

Please see here the professional photographs of the Unshackled exhibition and launch provided by Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery available at this URL: <https://ros-ie.hastie.photography.pic-time.com/By8398ltXJOWN>

Here's link to the exhibition web app visitors use on their smart phones while at the exhibition that provides more information about the solid objects, accesses the short documentaries by theme that appear on screens in the exhibition, and provides images and information on characters and events, including AI generated talking portraits: <https://exhibition.unshackled.net.au/themes>

The exhibition shows how one of the nineteenth century's largest forced migrations of unfree workers was preserved in time by a remarkable set of records and demonstrates that far from being a downtrodden, suppliant workforce, convict men and women fought back against tyranny and exploitation and changed Australia for the better.

Unshackled is designed, curated, and built by the project through its principal exhibiting Partner Organisation, Roar Film, working closely with TMAG. Thanks Steve Thomas, Matt Daniels Tony Moore, Daisy Bailey and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart. As well as the generous support to the project from NSW Teachers Federation and the ACTU, the exhibition has been made possible by generous sponsorship from the Mining and Energy Union, its Mineworkers Trust and Maurice Blackburn Lawyers, with the later becoming a new partner of *Conviction Politics*.

The exhibition generated extensive media

Here's the link to podcast Late Night live interview with Philip Adams: <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/unshackled-true-convict-stories/103583600>

A review on Arts Hub's must-see museum blockbusters of 2024: <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/features/major-new-museum-show-unshackles-convict-stories-from-myth-2709586/> and a feature article on ABC Online: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-30/forgotten-political-history-of-australia-convicts/103621728>

A travelling 'pop up' version of *Unshackled* that can be assembled in a day has also been produced, and the plan is for it to be assembled at the NSW Teachers Federation building in tandem with a suitable conference

event in 2026.

Unshackled will tour from 2025-2027 to Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Queensland's Bowen Basin, the Hunter, Illawarra, North Tasmanian and overseas to Dorchester, London and Cork.

A STITCH IN TIME

A different bespoke exhibition focused on resistance by Tasmanian female convicts called a '*A Stitch in Time*', was created by *Conviction Politics* research fellow Monika Schwarz and was launched at the Penitentiary Chapel in Hobart in June 2023. The exhibition features 18 'data embroideries' created by Monika of 21 convict women chosen for their participation in protest and resistance, especially in the Female Factories.

This project uses data embroidery, a new form of data physicalisation, to display historical life courses of Australian female convicts. The source of the data includes the female convict records of Van Diemen's Land kept by the British Bureaucracy, including their trial and voyage, their colonial offences and sentences, their marriages and births or their official status like receiving a Certificate of Freedom. These data tidbits inspire the sketches for the data embroideries, focusing on acts of resilience or resourcefulness. The data is integrated in the form of a lifeline with the inspiring data points highlighted in colour. The embroideries try to capture moments where the women's personality is shining through the records, showing that these women weren't so different from us. Here are two examples.

DAISY BAILY AWARDED DOCTORATE

In early 2025 *Conviction Politics*' Monash PhD student Daisy Bailey submitted her Thesis: *Emotions of Activism and Exile: A study on Chartist and Young Ireland political prisoners* transported to the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century

The work was praised for its originality, discoveries and writing by the two examiners, and accordingly passed by Monash. The project congratulates Dr Bailey and looks forward to the thesis being published as a book.

UNSHACKLED: THE CONVICT MEMORIAL

In partnership with the National Trust of Tasmania, Professor Hamish Maxwell-

Stewart, Steve Thomas and Roar Film's creative technologist Matt Daniels installed the digital convict memorial in Hobart Penitentiary Chapel Historic Site in October last year. Sharing the brand name *Unshackled*, the memorial links to, and visualises, the UNESCO Heritage Listed Tasmanian convict records held by project partner Libraries Tasmania.

Powered by the Digital History Tasmania convict dataset, the digital memorial tells the stories of 75,000 convicts through a four-metre interactive obelisk that performs a role not unlike the honour wall of a war memorial. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart reports that "feedback from data visualisation, tourism and heritage experts has been overwhelmingly positive and the descendants of convicts report that the experience is respectful and deeply moving."

NEW FUNDED ARC PROJECT: MAKING CRIME PAY

Building on, and enhancing, the memorial this new 2023 project includes Monash academics Prof. Jon McCormack (SensiLab), Prof. Tony Moore and Research Fellow Dr Monika Schwarz who worked on Conviction Politics, as well as Dr Jenny Wise, Associate Prof. David Roberts and Prof. Martin Gibbs from the University of New England. The project aims to create digital tools to allow visitors to experience Australian convict sites and historical big data in new and novel ways. The successful grant awarded to *Making Crime Pay* enables further analysis and public engagement with convict records and colonial history, the longevity of *Unshackled* and the continued collaboration with Roar Film and National Trust Tasmania.

APPENDIX 1 – 2023 MAY 5 FRIDAY FORUM: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY TONY MOORE

Thanks Margaret Vos, Kate Ambrose and Maxine Sharkey and the NSW Teachers Federation for inviting us.

The NSW Teachers Federation has been a generous and energetic partner in this project, and shares with our other union partners (the ACTU, TUC and the AMWU) a commitment to retrieving the contribution of the convicts to the early development of democracy and the labour movement in this country. Also Principals Conference.

What the project is

Conviction Politics is a digital history project funded by the Australian Research Council and industry partners as part of the Linkage scheme. It investigates how Britain's Australian colonies – beginning as some of the most unfree and unequal jurisdictions on earth – became some of the first polities to give all working men the vote by the 1850s and in quick time earned a reputation as the social laboratory of the world.

The answer is to be found in newly digitised convict records, which reveal a very different story of the empire-wide struggle for political and human rights and the unlikely victory of Britain's reformers and radicals in their place of exile. Harnessing the latest data mapping technologies, *Conviction Politics*, reveals how from the earliest days of settlement, Australia's first work force resisted exploitation through inventive solidarity in the face of coercion, while a vanguard of transported rebels, liberal pamphleteers, industrial protesters, trade unionists, Chartists, Irish independence fighters, and radical agitators changed the political direction of the colonies.

Our project re-conceptualizes convict transportation as one of the great forced global labour migrations of history, continuous with the slave trade, used to build settler capitalist colonies in Australia. It flips the narrative of a down-trodden criminal class by revealing the agency of the coerced workforce in collectively resisting this system. At the same time its focus on the transported political prisoners reveals Australian colonies vitally connected to the revolutions, ideas, movements and media innovations sweeping the Atlantic world. To put it in Star Wars terms, there's not just an evil empire, but a rebel alliance too, and its exiled leaders and foot soldiers make quite a mark in Australia and back in Britain and Ireland. The project reveals this new take on convict Australia through an array of media that we will sample tonight.

Indigenous People:

Notwithstanding the role of convicts in the seizure and occupation of the First Nations' land in Australia, there is also a shared experience here, between Indigenous people and the transported convicts. Unrest in Britain, Ireland, and throughout the empire was triggered by capitalist commodification, land enclosure, colonialism within the British Isles and the destruction and disenchantment of traditional ways of life. The invasion of the Australian continent brought the same dislocating

forces to bear on the Indigenous people of Australia, who fought against this dispossession, with many internally exiled into the convict system, from where they continued to resist. There was violence and death, with convicts used to dispossess. Indigenous land was stolen for the land hungry of Britain and Ireland, that helped the rulers avoid a revolution back home. However, our project reveals some remarkable acts of recognition and solidarity between Indigenous people and European convicts.

Developing the project's application, we took heart from the Sally McManus' comments in March 2017 that sometimes it is necessary to resist unfair and unjust laws. It is a key proposition of *Conviction Politics* that political and social democracy was not simply ceded to the Australian colonies by a caring mother country, but had to be fought for by brave, principled and persecuted people, first in their home countries and then again as convicts.

The project looks at 2 groups. At least 3600 protestors, reformers, radicals and revolutionaries sacrificed their own liberty, and sometimes their lives, for the freedoms and rights we take for granted. Meanwhile the 160,000 convicts who composed our first workforce undertook collective action to resist exploitation of its unfree labour through insubordination, absconding, uprisings, refusals to eat, strikes, and forming union-like combinations from at least the 1820s. *Conviction Politics* examines both these groups.

So often in the period we're examining we find that it was new laws buttressing a new economic system that created the crimes. While many such as the United Irishmen took up arms in revolution against the Crown, both at home and then in Castle Hill, Sydney, others were transported simply for what they wrote, said or published. So many British workers, known to history by colourful names like Luddites, Swing Rioters, Tolpuddle Martyrs and Daughters of Rebecca, smashed the machines that were taking or automating their jobs, or demolished the tolls and turnpikes that heralded the privatization of the roads and commons they had travelled free for centuries. Still others were transported simply for coming together in a trade union.

Conviction Politics puts into practice the powerful injunction of media scholar Raymond Williams that drawing a new line with the past can inform contemporary social

change. To that end, the scholars and partners in this project mobilise history to speak to our present moment. We consider the persistence from the colonial period of problems that drove our convicts to resist: precarious, insecure, and coerced work; decline in wages; our current cycle of automation; privatisation; our use surveillance and facial recognition; threats to freedoms in speech, media, and assembly; and the ease with which we incarcerate the marginalised. Most importantly we look at the unfinished work of decolonisation in Australia, not just for Indigenous people, but of us all.

We will now watch the first of our short documentaries about the Indigenous Convicts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Tony Moore is Professor of Communications and Media Studies at Monash University and former Director of its National Centre for Australian Studies. Tony is author of the critically acclaimed *Fringe to Famous: Cultural Production in Australia After the Creative Industries* (Bloomsbury 2024) *Dancing with Empty Pockets: Australia's Bohemians since 1868* (2012), *Death or Liberty: Rebels and Radicals Transported to Australia 1788 – 1868* (2010), adapted as an ABC TV documentary (2015) and *The Barry McKenzie Movies* (2005). Tony is lead investigator on the ARC the ARC Linkage Projects Conviction Politics: the convict routes of Australian democracy (2019-2025): <https://www.convictionpolitics.net> and Comedy Country: Australian Performance Comedy as an Agent of Change (2022 – 2027)

Tony was specialist consultant on the major exhibition Bohemian Melbourne, held at State Library Victoria 2014-15 <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/galleries/bohemian-melbourne>

He is a former ABC TV documentary maker and commissioning editor at Pluto Press and Cambridge University Press and worked in youth policy and advocacy for the Education Commission of NSW, International Youth Year and Youth Affairs Council of NSW. His documentaries include Bohemian Rhapsody: Rebels of Australian Culture, TimeFrame history of ASIO, Lost in Space: Australians in their Cities and Nobody's Children.

Get *Death or Liberty* book here: <https://www.murdochbooks.com/browse/book/Tony-Moore-Death-or-Liberty-9781741961409>

Rent or purchase *Death or Liberty* documentary here: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/deathorliberty>

