

Death or Liberty: Rebels and Radicals Transported to Australia 1788-1868 by Tony Moore

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Death or Liberty: Rebels and Radicals Transported to Australia 1788-1868

by Tony Moore

Sydney: Murdoch Books, Pier 9, 2010. 432 pages. \$34.95 AU softcover. ISBN 978-1-741961-40-9 (www.murdochbooks.com.au)

Touted by media release announcements as “the first narrative that brings together the stories of political prisoners sent as convicts to Australia from all parts of the British Empire,” it sounded as if Tony Moore’s *Death or Liberty* might be a new resource to put into context my long-time research interest in North American political prisoners who were transported to Van Diemen’s Land in 1839-40.

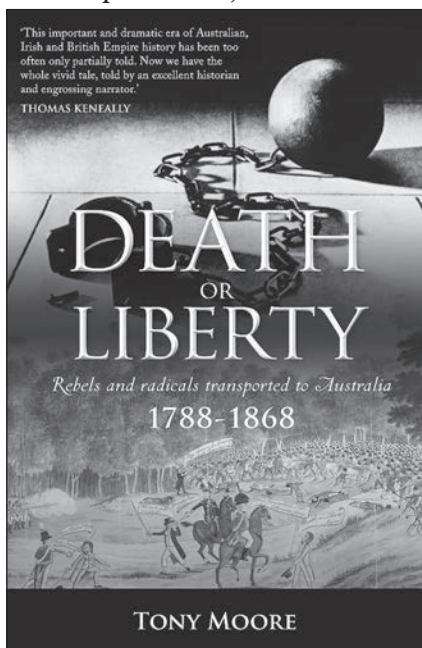
In Chapters 1 through 3 and in Chapter 5 one learns about late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political enemies of the British government who were banished to the shores of Australia. Sent as convicts to the other side of the world, these political prisoners included liberals, democrats and republican machine breakers, food rioters, trade unionists and Chartists, radical journalists and intellectuals, Irish revolutionaries and Scottish Jacobins. All suffered the same fate. In the eyes of the British law they were collectively transported as criminals and traitors to a distant land, even though many were viewed as martyrs and heroes in

their own communities. In some quarters they were even revered as freedom fighters and patriots, progressive thinkers and crusading reformers.

Their exile to the Australian colonies performed the dual role of a terrible place of banishment with which to deter other would-be rioters and unionists and a safety valve for discontent in the mother country. Included with these prisoners from Britain were rebels from an uprising in Lower Canada and sympathizers, Canadian and American, apprehended while trying to assist those in Canada whom they saw as fighting for freedom from British domination. Upper Canadian rebels who were to join them were luckily spared a similar fate by legal maneuvers during their detention in England.

This being said of the positive aspects of Moore’s narrative, I must turn to the more perplexing and troubling aspects of his work related to the North American political prisoners. Rebellions erupted in Lower Canada in November 1837 and in December in Upper Canada, but were soon put down by loyalist forces. However, a second attempt to spark rebellion, originating in the United

States and fought by Canadians and American sympathizers, took place in 1838. Major raids into Upper Canada occurred in February-March in the Detroit border area, in June in Niagara, in early November along the St. Lawrence River, and back in the Detroit region at Windsor in Decem-



ber. A number of English-speaking patriots were taken captive in these raids and subsequently some of them were transported to Australia

From the outset, the author makes factual errors about these events. In the introduction (p. 9), Moore mentions North American rebels of 1837 and 1839. The rebellions and border raids took place in 1837 and 1838. In Chapter 1 (p. 27), the author states that “North American freedom fighters from Upper and Lower Canada (focused on Toronto and Quebec).” During the Canadian rebellions more incursions and battles took place in other places and the focus was not on the two cities named. Chapter 4, entitled “North American Patriots vs. the Empire,” raises more concerns. Moore begins his comments about the 1838 Lower Canadian rebellion. This is confusing as the first rebellions occurred in the Canadas in 1837. On p. 221 Moore has prisoners from the Battle of the Windmill near Prescott being moved to “nearby Fort Henry.” Fort Henry, which was the final destination of these captured Patriots, is in Kingston, a community nearby 100 km away. Also on p. 221, the author states, “the Battle of the Windmill was the climax of a year of raids on Canadian soil by American insurgents.” In fact, the Battle of Windsor, which took place on 4 December 1838, was the last armed invasion of the Upper Canada. On p. 224 the author states that the English-speaking North American prisoners transported to Van Diemen’s Land came from three raids. In reality prisoners came from four incursions. It would have been useful for the author to provide some details about the numerous incursions related to the 1838 Upper Canadian rebellion, which numbered ten.

Moore heavily relies on research done more than thirty years ago by George Rude

(1978) and more recent writing by Cassandra Pybus and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (2002). This severely limits his access to other important information about the North American political prisoners published in research studies by Stuart Scott, R. Alan Douglas, Tom Dunning, John Thompson, Ian Brand, Thomas Gunn, F. Murray Greenwood, Beverley Boisserry, Chris Raible and Robert Sexton, to name only a few. Unpublished diaries of Aaron Dresser (at the Library and Archives of Canada) and Elijah Woodman (at the University of Western Ontario), along with the translated journal of Lower Canadian Patriote Francois-Maurice Lepailleur, are also absent from reference in Moore’s book.

Other factual errors occur in Chapter 4, of which space allows only a small sample to be mentioned. Samuel Lount and Peter Mathews (sic) were not hanged “at the crossroads of Bloor and Yonge Streets in Toronto” (p. 243), but instead were executed at the Toronto gaol at the north-west corner of Church and King streets. There is no evidence that any of the Patriots captured at the Battle of Pelee Island were actually transported to Van Diemen’s Land (p. 257). A Lower Canadian uprising took place at Sherbrooke, not Sheerbrooke (p. 264).

In conclusion, what is presented concerning North American prisoners seems pretty much a synthesis of what has been written previously, and perhaps could be viewed as a re-tread of Rudes’s work. If *Death or Liberty* is to go into a second printing, then more judicious editing is recommended along with the correction of factual errors and omissions. This would make it a much better resource in the study of political prisoners transported to Australia.

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