Whisper Me Your Secrets

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Preface

Whisper me Your Secrets is 'faction'- a fictional work based on fact. It is also a genealogy, tracing the lives of eight generations of Australian women from the same genealogical line over three centuries.

The book has been a process of researching and unraveling eight generations of family secrets and bringing together a vast amount of research and literature already produced by other historians. I have tried to tease out the secrets that were never exchanged – secrets that have been lost or forgotten as families changed and disbursed across this vast continent.

The work is as far as possible an authentic representation of facts. Where they are available, birth and death certificates for each of the women are included in their chapter. These certificates provide important historical and genealogical evidence and information. It should be noted however, that some information is not necessarily correct. Literacy and numeracy levels were low so names and dates are sometimes incorrectly recorded in official records. When birth and death certificates are used in conjunction with other historical databases that record the date and place of the birth (and death) of children, it is possible to trace the geographical movements of the women and authenticate the dates for the various events in their lives.

Such data, while important in itself, is somewhat bland, uninspiring and meaningless - until it is associated with the real life experience of the event. Unfortunately, in most families, the real life stories are either endangered or have been lost. This work attempts to preserve those that are still available and to reconstruct those that are not.

The reconstruction of stories long forgotten is the fictional part of this work. What would these women say if I asked them to whisper their secrets? We cannot know how they felt about their lives; we can only surmise the way it might have been.

Many books of an historical nature have been written by and about Australian women, a minute proportion of which is listed in the Bibliography of this book.

This book differs from most other works in that the women who are the subject of this book are all related and direct descendents of the first woman, Elizabeth Rimes, who was transported to Australia on the second fleet.

The women in this book were ‘ordinary’ women, mostly uneducated, illiterate pioneers who lived in isolated rural districts of New South Wales.

The book does not have a conclusion, intending to be a perpetual work that allows for contributions by successive generations of women.

From the story of Elizabeth Rimes, who came to this country as a fifteen-year-old convict, through to Rene who exemplifies the emotional consequence of abandonment and loss of identity, these women have left their indelible stamp on the lives of their descendants. Knowing something of their lives helps us to know more clearly who we are.

These stories illustrate how for rural women, some things have not changed. Their lives are still dictated by the intersection of climate, landscape, family, the rural economy and access to appropriate services. For many urban women there is still a long way to go in providing appropriate support and services.

If this book is about anything, it is about the courage, tenacity, faith, caring and compassion of women. These enduring qualities are the legacy they have handed us.

Sydney Cove, 26 June 1790

Elizabeth Rimes stood clutching the salt encrusted rails of the *Neptune* as it lunged slowly into Sydney Cove. Trying not to faint, she fixed her gaze on the turquoise water below as the sails slapped and snapped like angry ghosts above her and the wind sung a mournful song through the rigging. Behind her, snatches of the malicious voice of Captain Traill floated on the wind.

"Ah, 'tis a grand day to be landing on the shore of ye new country," he shouted to the wretched passengers assembled on the deck.

"Grand for the likes of you," Elizabeth muttered, "but there's many a one that never lived to see it, thanks to yer murderous ways." She leaned heavily against the railing, surveying the horrendous scene around her. Over the past eight months, she had become accustomed to the worst of human suffering and depravity and it no longer shocked her. Rows of near dead convicts, whimpering and groaning, huddled together on one side of the schooner. Others, too weak to stand, slumped in pathetic clumps of human misery. From the cramped and filthy quarters below they were thrust into blinding daylight, hair and backs covered with lice, their cadaverous appearance testimony to their experience.

Amid the stench of death, disease and rotting flesh, Elizabeth retched. When a group of mariners nearby ripped the filthy rags from corpses, dividing up the pickings and slinging the emaciated bodies over the side with a brutish jest, she could only mutter, "Nothin' on God's earth could be worse than what has 'appened since we left Portsmouth. Them's that died at the beginnin' was the lucky ones and there's more than one left who wished we'd sunk."

For the greater part of the last eight months she had been imprisoned below with other women, on bedding that was encrusted with salt, faeces and vomit. In an area of about six feet square, with only six feet of headroom, the air and light came from the hatchways. A thick grille caged them like animals, their only relief from the hellhole being allowed on deck for exercise, or to work in the galley or laundry.

Despite the conditions, Elizabeth was a favourite among the women.

Her Cockney humour was a bright moment on the long and brutal voyage, her youthful spirit and the resourcefulness she'd learned in the slums of London sparing her the fate of many. "Ar Lizzey, me girl," they would say, "yer gunna be oright."

As they fell ill with dysentery and disease, it was Elizabeth who begged and bargained with the mariners for poultices and medicines. As fellow prisoners realised their end was near; they would quietly pass their rations to her. Many deaths were concealed by women contriving to get others' food allowance. Elizabeth colluded, sleeping beside the corpses until the mariners noticed, and the rations would decrease once more.

She wondered how many survived. She heard 499 convicts boarded in Portsmouth but only 341 were alive at last muster and now there would be less. She remembered the one long month they stayed in Rio, caged below deck, out of sight of the townsfolk, before they set sail for Cape Town. Through the grimy porthole Elizabeth saw Captain Traill and the mariners selling off some of the government stores and supplies of food and clothing and belongings confiscated from the prisoners. "I could forgive 'em if they was needin' it," she decided. "But they's just greedy."

She turned her attention to the high, ragged, sandstone cliffs, sentinels at the entrance to the harbour. So this is to be home, she thought. She studied the biscuit coloured cliffs as they glided by. Great rolling waves crashed and thundered into them, clawing at their face. Massive chunks of rock had fallen away and lay scattered at the base. At the top of the cliff a thick mat of green-grey vegetation leaned away from the wind in a crazy backward slope.

A pair of huge sea birds launched themselves from a craggy outcrop and circled, joining the flock of seagulls screaming at the intruders below. She raised her hand to protect her eyes from the sharp light. Never had she seen a sky and sea as blue as this.

Ahead of the *Neptune*, were *Surprise*, *Lady Juliana*, and the *Scarborough* wallowing through the turquoise water. On their decks the remainder of the 1300 convicts of the second fleet, the most barbarous in the history of transportation, also assembled. Elizabeth nudged a woman beside her.

"T'wern't so bad for some. Them Macarthurs came on board with their airs and graces, complained about everythin'.

'Ad a cabin to their selves, but when delicate little Elizabeth and the baby gets sick she blames the stink from our rotten quarters. Every time I went past with the slop bucket she'd complain. Good thing they got transferred to the *Scarborough*…"

"An look at Miss Molly Morgan … she's 'ad a good trip too, sellin' 'erself to the 'ighest bidder. An' Catherine Crowley, expectin' as she is with 'is Lordship Doctor D'arcy Wentworth's child. Wouldn't know either of 'em was convicts, they've done so well on this voyage. 'Is Lordship went down for highway robbery an' would 'ave 'anged but for his rich family – an' if 'e 'adn't agreed to be a surgeon in the New South Wales Corps…" She sighed. "But then I'm still 'ere because I used me wits and made friends with the right people too…"

Before her trial a prostitute who shared Elizabeth's cell in Newgate had advised her: "Get transported if you can Lizzey. You'll meet with every indulgence from the humane officers and sailors during the passage, and if you survive that, I hear tell that you'll live and dress better and easier than you ever will here."

Elizabeth remembered her words and begged the guards to find her work above deck. She volunteered for scrubbing, cleaning and working in the ship's laundry where she could at least wash herself while she washed the officer's clothes. Knowing the value of a protector, she cultivated friendships whenever she could, trading favour for favour with the mariners and the officers. She also learned to be careful, for it was her association with a man she thought to be her friend and protector, John Moore, which landed her in this sorry state.

Eight months before, on the 28th of October 1789, 15-year-old Elizabeth stood in the dock at the Old Bailey and heard the fateful words: "It is therefore ordered and adjudged by this Court, that you be transported upon the seas, beyond the seas, to such a place as His Majesty, by the advice of His Privy Council, shall think fit to direct and appoint, for the term of seven years."

At the time of her conviction, she lived in a rented room in the inn at 5 Rose Lane in Spitalfields with John Moore. Three weeks after moving in, without money to pay the rent, she stole a sheet and blanket from the bed and pawned it for the sum of seven shillings. Her sentence was one year for every shilling she received.

Notes on Chapter 1.

1 A description of the arrival and condition of the prisoners of the Second Fleet is well documented in Captain Tench and Governor Philip's Dispatches to the Secretary of State.

2 Elizabeth and Matthew's trials are documented in Old Bailey Sessions' papers.

3 Elizabeth and Matthew's visit to Governor Philip is documented in his letter to Shepherd reproduced in *The Matthew Everingham Letterbook*.

4 Matthew's oath to Elizabeth is based on his letter to Shepherd.

5 The poem Matthew read to Elizabeth is Shakespeare.

6 The series of floods and droughts along the Hawksbury and their impact on the settlers is documented in the Tench Diaries.

7 Birth details for Elizabeth and Matthew have never been located, despite extensive searches by Australian descendants who believed Matthew was the son of Earl Everingham and heir to the Everingham Millions (see Valerie's Ross's book *Matthew Everingham.*