

COMMUNITY HISTORY 1:**The Other Side of the Island:****An Oral History of Rottnest****by Jan Gothard****EDITORS' NOTE**

The following article was transcribed from a radio broadcast produced by Murdoch University students and staff in August 1987. The programme was part of an oral history of Rottnest Island, a project undertaken by Murdoch's History Club and co-ordinated by Murdoch post-graduate student, Jan Gothard. The taped interviews, photographs and memorabilia collected by students have been stored in the Battye Library and in a special deposit in the Rottnest Museum.

JACK O'DONOGHUE

I was three weeks old when I first started my life on Rottnest and my memory starts off from about six years old. I can remember Rottnest as a total black prison. My father was chief warden of the jail and there was five warders, a jailer and also a superintendent of Rottnest Island. The jail comprised black prisoners, some 'civilised' and others not so 'civilised', and they were put to work on various jobs such as gardening and jobs like that.

JAN GOTHARD

Hello and welcome to the History Show. I'm Jan Gothard. Today's show is the second in our series on Community History and you've been listening to Jack O'Donoghue, one early resident of Rottnest Island who has been interviewed by members of Murdoch University's History Club for the Rottnest Island Oral History Project.

Jack was born in Fremantle in May 1894, and at the age of three weeks, went to Rottnest, where he lived until the early 1920's. His father John O'Donoghue was chief warden of the Aboriginal prison from the mid-1890s until its closure. Jack was one of five children: two sisters, a younger brother and one other brother who died aged ten weeks. Incidentally, Jack's brother's grave is the only one in the old Rottnest cemetery with an original headstone and railing. Jack's father made the railing and the headstone was carved by the lighthouse keeper.

Rottnest is best known nowadays as a leisure island and its history as a holiday resort extends back to the mid-nineteenth century when Governor Charles Fitzgerald expressed an interest in residing there. Dr W. Somerville, a former member of the Rottnest Island Board, wrote of Rottnest, 'No wonder that we in Western Australia refer to Rottnest as "The Island," for she holds those who come to her ever captive to her charms'. In fact Rottnest, isolated from the mainland by 18 kilometres of Indian Ocean, had a far more compelling way of holding people captive. The programme today will explore aspects of Rottnest as a fortress and prison.

One of Rottnest's earliest settlers, Robert Thomson, appreciated the potential of Rottnest's isolation when he left his holding of 1000 acres on the Swan in 1831, to take up 100 acres on Rottnest, apparently seeking some security for his family from the Aboriginal resistance fighters on the mainland. Ironically in 1838 it was decided to convert Rottnest into a natural prison for those same 'hostile natives', despite Thomson's protests. After some conflict concerning 'native' prisoners who attempted to escape in Thomson's boat, Thomson and his family were finally forced to relocate, leaving the island to the prisoners and their guards.

The island remained some form of prison for nearly a century. The last Aboriginal prisoners left the island in 1922; the last white prisoners did not return to the mainland till 1931.

Jack O'Donoghue recalls some aspects of life on Rottnest at the turn of the century.

JACK O'DONOGHUE

I also remember the 'natives' were allowed out on Saturday afternoon and Sundays. Saturdays they had a little camp just on a hill near the jail and they used to make their spears and woomeras and boomerangs and so forth, and Sunday morning they were allowed out all day and they had to be back by sunset. And they used to go out and they'd get dry wood out of the bush and make a big fire out around Baghdad, which is the west side of Geordie Bay; and they'd make their fires and they'd go away and they'd spear a couple of quokkas and fetch them out and singe all the fur off them and bury them in the ashes. Then they'd go down to the rocks and catch herring - you could catch fish anywhere off the island in those days - fish and crayfish - and they used to fetch the fish and put them on the ashes and roast them. And we boys, we used to go with them and we used to take a little bit of salt and pepper in a bottle and we used to really enjoy life with the natives. Matter of fact I used to watch them making spear heads, glass spear heads, and I could do it myself. And making boomerangs, how they used to cut the boomerangs and make one side, the low side, oval, and the top side flat so that it would spin properly, you see. And I used to...we boys used to use the boomerangs.

JSG

Evelyn Roberts Macnamara was a teacher on Rottneest in 1921, and she too has recollections of the Aboriginal prisoners, notably King Billy who used to empty her garbage bin in return for cakes. She also recalled a particular incident with one of the Aborigines.

EVELYN MACNAMARA

When they went out on the Sunday to the west end of the island - to do fishing you see, then the warder brought them home...whether he had a roll call or not I wouldn't know but anyhow one didn't come - and I don't know what his idea was but he didn't come with the others. But I know I was in bed and I had my arm out and of course I suppose he got as big a fright as I did, he touched my arm and that woke me up, and I sat up in bed; and there at the foot of the bed, all I could see was his blue shirt and the black, his black head you see. I had matches then, I didn't have a torch or a candle or anything - I don't know whether torches were in vogue then or not but I didn't have one - but I know that I struck the match and it burnt down and burnt my finger; then I'd light another one trying to make out what it was, you see, and it suddenly dawned on me that it was a 'native'. The window was open and I suppose it would be as high (course, I couldn't do it now) - it'd be as high as three foot high - I jumped over that and ran out. Mr Storey was going on duty you see, it must have been after midnight...and I told him there was a 'native' in my room. 'Oh, there's no 'native' there', he said, 'you must have had a nightmare'; and 'no I haven't', I said, 'he was at the foot of the bed'. And anyway he came over but of course he couldn't find him. But I should imagine...therew was a piano in the schoolroom and perhaps he was hiding behind that you see, because he went in the schoolroom and he didn't see anybody.

JSG

After this incident the school teacher moved out of her solitary quarters at the school house to a room with friends.

In 1914 on the outbreak of war, Rottneest once again seemed a natural choice for the prison for German nationals in Western Australia. By this stage the dismantling of the native and the white prison had begun although prisoners still provided labour on the island. Jack O'Donoghue spent some time as a guard of the prisoners of war before departing for France in 1916. He describes their life in the camp.

JACK O'DONOGHUE

They didn't do much; only had to look after their own camps and that; and they used to be allowed to go on the rocks just near Bathurst Point there, fishing and swimming down around there, you see. They had a guard from the settlement part, you see, around the bungalows and down to the beach. That was their area, in there.

And they had three German boats, commercial boats they were, in Fremantle. There was the Griswald, the Torrington(?) and the New Munster, I think it was, they were the three boats. And they had the officers and crew of those boats on Rottnest. The officers, they were up in what you call the Lodge today, they were up there in rooms there, and they were allowed to roam about as they liked - they were on their best behaviour. But those officers were allowed there and Dad was very friendly with them...One German captain, when he came into Fremantle and they told him his country was at war with Britain and his boat was a prize of war, he said 'Oh mein Gott, what's going to become of my country?'

JSG

By 1931 the last white prisoners had left the island but within a decade the lovely island became home once again to a group of men and women many of whom would rather have been elsewhere. Captain Bill Holder was a gunnery instructor on Rottnest during the latter part of the war, and he explained to interviewer John Dunlop why Rottnest was chosen as the site for a battery of guns in the mid-1930s

BILL HOLDER

Well, a decision was made to upgrade the coastal defences for defended ports - there have always been coast guns at defended ports from way back - and the function of coast guns was to defend the port against bombardment and interference by enemy ships. Not to protect the country against invasion, to protect the port. So a decision was made in Australia in the 1930s to modernise and improve the defences for defended ports, and of course Fremantle was a very strategic port on the west coast, so the decision was made to improve and modernise the coast defences for the port of Fremantle.

JSG

After 1942, military strength on the island reached a maximum, with about two and a half thousand personnel there, including up to sixty women from the Australian Army and Navy, who worked as signallers and plotters associated with the guns. Though the guns never fired a shot in anger they had to be fully manned and operational at all times. Despite the setting and the island's natural recreational facilities the Rottnest posting was not necessarily a happy one. Thomas Colvin and his wife Mena Colvin recalled their feelings about his posting to Rottnest in 1942.

TOM COLVIN

Dull, isolated, dreary. The thing is the permanent force -

such as myself - we were breaking our necks to join the AIF. At this stage we weren't allowed to, because we were joined up before the war and our job or duty was to be here, on the homeland. Eventually each week there'd be a ballot and two or three names would be drawn out and those personnel would be allowed to join the AIF and be transferred to a regiment and go overseas. Eventually we were all allowed to join the AIF.

But Rottnest really, it was a dull, uninteresting place. But at the same time the guns were always fully manned because we didn't know what was going to come next. It had its interests of course, the fishing was quite good, and I'm a fisherman; but really it was quite dreary.

MENA COLVIN

Yes he always wanted to go into the AIF. I could see his point of view. He had two brothers, the older brother was in the army, in Tobruk, and he had a younger brother in the air force who was with the occupation forces in Japan, and he wanted to join them - he was a soldier, and I should also say that even relations and a lot of people made snide remarks about him having a nice cushy job here when others were away getting themselves killed. He was an instructor, he was teaching others how to get killed but not getting killed himself. So he wanted to go away and do his bit but it just didn't work. He was all ready...to join the army when the Japanese surrendered.

Over at Rottnest he used to come home once a month for a weekend, and there was an old sailor called Gus Jansen - a Norwegian - and he would take the boat over, his little boat - he'd take it over no matter what the weather was like, it didn't make any difference, he'd have a bottle of beer in one hand and a corned beef sandwich in the other, and everybody else'd be hanging over the side being violently ill. But he'd come home on the Friday evening and he'd be still seasick and unsteady on his feet, and he'd just be beginning to recover when he had to go back on the Monday morning! So it was never really a very wonderful leave because they always felt so terrible.

JSG

Despite the flattening of Phillip Rock with explosives, which was deemed necessary to give an unobstructed sweep to the army's search lights, the army had a vested interest in preserving the island's landscape, as Bill Holder explains.

JOHN DUNLOP

What effect did the military occupation of Rottnest Island have on the island?

BILL HOLDER

Generally for the better, from several aspects. One of the most important ones which is often overlooked is the environmental one. The army did not damage the environment. They were practising conservation long before it was even thought of. But for military reasons. When the railroad was built, ... every embankment and cutting was carefully replanted, covered with brushes to regenerate the growth and so on, so there was very little environmental damage to the island. If a soldier drove a truck off a track he got into trouble. You had to use tracks not drive through the bush - for military reasons, camouflage. And in so doing they protected the environment, and it's very interesting to note that at the present time in the Kingstown Barracks area, where the Kingstown Barracks are, the army was in occupation a long time, there has been less damage done there to the environment and to the natural bird life than anywhere else on the island. And that's not generally realised. But let's be fair - it was for military reasons, and the fact that it was being done for military reasons protected the environment.

JSG

Eventually the men and women of the armed forces did leave Rottneest to the quokkas and to the tourists, though it was not until 1984 that the Barracks at Kingstown were finally vacated. They now function as an Environmental Education Centre and have become temporary home for thousands of West Australian school children who are being taught to view the island's history and environment with sympathy and understanding, and to participate actively in programmes of reafforestation and environmental protection designed to counter the thoughtlessness of a century. Their activities and the love for the island which is shared by most West Australians may provide a more optimistic note for the island's future than Jack O'Donoghue allows. Despite having witnessed some of the darker sides of the island's history, Jack retains a great love for the island and some fear for its future.

JACK O'DONOGHUE

As far as I'm concerned, Rottneest I would say is spoiled because it's too commercialised today. They've commercialised the island. I'd change the name myself from Rottneest to Commercial Island. It's not... it's not the same holiday place as it used to be. When they first started camping over there it was quite a real free holiday, but today there's too much restriction and it costs you more money to go there and more money to stay there and that. In the old days you went over there and it was a lot cheaper. You could go and you could get a bungalow or that for a pound a week. Now Geordie Bay and Longreach have got all these huts and that there, all the

flats, you see, and it's too commercialised. It's not a real holiday where you can go and have a free holiday. See it's too much like the city, commercialised you see, and you go there to the hostel - I still call it the hostel, the Lodge they call it today - and you go in there and they've got a swimming pool and lounges and all that - well you can do that here in the town. You're going out of the city into the city.

JSG

That was Jack O'Donoghue having the last word. This has been the History Show, produced by Jan Gothard using interviews conducted by Murdoch History Club students Gerry Varang, John Dunlop and Vicki McFadyen, speaking with Jack O'Donoghue, Mena and Tom Colvin, Evelyn Macnamara and Bill Holder. Next week's show will feature an interview with Ronda Jamieson from the Battye Library's oral history programme.