

## Captive Body, Free Mind:

### John Mitchel in Bermuda and on the *Neptune* 1848-1850

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*In May 1848 the Irish revolutionary nationalist John Mitchel was convicted of treason-felony and sentenced to fourteen years transportation to the hulk convict station at Bermuda, where he remained from June 1848 until April 1849. He then spent another tortuous eleven months on the convict transport the Neptune. He wrote about his experiences in his famous Jail Journal, a classic in the literature of the prison. This writing had therapeutic value and helped Mitchel cope with his captivity while held on the accommodation hulk the Dromedary, what he called his 'seaweed state'. The mental anguish of being incarcerated on the Dromedary and being unable to fight for Irish freedom drove Mitchel, the archetypal man of action, close to madness. The Jail Journal gives a vivid view of incarceration from the point of view of an educated insider, but is here analysed in depth for the first time. Like other captivity narratives, it is rich and revealing not only about Mitchel's own feelings on death, madness, mental decline, suicide, and loss of freedom and family, but also about his fellow convicts, his guards and the transportation system itself. Above all it demonstrates the triumph of the human mind over the physical and mental adversity of shipboard incarceration.*

IN his biography of the Irish nationalist and writer John Mitchel, published in 1888, William Dillon described Mitchel as 'the greatest man of letters' that Ireland had produced since Jonathan Swift.<sup>1</sup> In addition to his political journalism for *The Nation* and the *United Irishman*, Mitchel's best known published work was the *Jail Journal*, begun in 1848 after his conviction for treason-felony. It dealt with his confinement at the convict station at Bermuda and on the convict transport the *Neptune*, his life in the penal colony of Van Diemen's Land and ended with his arrival in New York in November 1853.

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Parts of the *Jail Journal* have been praised for different reasons. At the collective level, it became, argues literary academic Barry Sloan, ‘a symbolic statement of Irish determination and defiance’.<sup>2</sup> According to Padraic Pearse, leader of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, it was ‘the last gospel of the New Testament of Irish Nationality’.<sup>3</sup> At an individual level, suggests Irish literature specialist Michael Kenneally, Mitchel’s ‘introspective self-analysis’ demonstrates the ways in which ‘humour, self-mockery and pure courage save him from the depths of despair and self-pity’.<sup>4</sup> Another Irish literary scholar John Brannigan places the *Jail Journal* in the tradition of the literature of Irish nationalism from the 1790s. Such ‘narratives of penal discipline’ produced their ‘own mythology of martyrdom, sacrifice, protest and regeneration’.<sup>5</sup> Mitchel’s narrative ‘represented the dark, solitary confines’ of an English prison as the testing ground of ‘the spirit and determination of Irish nationalism’. In the literature of the prison it had ‘no equal’, pronounced the Irish journalist and politician Arthur Griffith, who himself had been imprisoned in the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Acclaimed Irish poet W.B. Yeats attributed the influence of Mitchel’s writing mainly to his style ‘that is also a form of power, an energy of life’.<sup>7</sup>

This paper expands on Griffith’s assessment and examines how Mitchel coped with his confinement on the prison hulks at Bermuda from 21 June 1848 to 22 April 1849. This

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<sup>1</sup> William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel* (London: K. Paul Trench and Co, 1888), vol. 1, x; for a more recent biography of Mitchel concentrating on his American life, see Bryan P. McGovern, *John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist, Southern Secessionist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Barry Sloan, ‘The Autobiographies of John Mitchel and Charles Gavan Duffy: A Study in Contrasts’, *Eire-Ireland* 22 (1987): 37

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in John Newsinger, ‘John Mitchel and Irish Nationalism’, *Literature and History* 6 (1980): 199

<sup>4</sup> Sloan, ‘Autobiographies’, 31

<sup>5</sup> John Brannigan, ‘“On England’s Doorstep”: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Carceral Liminality in Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*’ in *Colonial and PostColonial Incarceration*, ed. G. Harper (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 206

<sup>6</sup> A. Griffith, ‘Preface’ in John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1913), xv.

experience tested him mentally and physically. Finally, his asthma, exacerbated by the damp and variable climate, became so bad that to save his life he had to be moved via the *Neptune* to Van Diemen's Land. While physically captive by the British and his asthma, Mitchel's mind roamed free and in a direct and confronting way Mitchel provides powerful insights into aspects of confinement such as loss of identity, mental decline and suicide that are rarely evident in writings by convicts.<sup>8</sup> Some 224 pages out of a total of 363 pages in the 1913 edition of the *Jail Journal* deal with his experiences in Bermuda and on the *Neptune*, yet those pages have not been given sustained analysis in their own right as a prison narrative.

In his *Jail Journal* Mitchel gave different reasons for keeping a record of his confinement. One was to prevent the British authorities from telling 'official falsehoods' and using his imprisonment for their own propaganda.<sup>9</sup> He probably wanted to shape how the outside world saw his captivity. Mitchel also decided to 'record anything, whether good or bad, that may have occurred to my mind—if one may use so strong an expression as *mind* in this seaweed state'.<sup>10</sup> He later revealed that he wrote the *Jail Journal* 'that there might be some record of me for my wife and children if I should happen to die in the hands of Philistines'.<sup>11</sup> Mitchel did raise the issue of whether any man 'would and could tell the whole truth and no more than the truth' in an autobiography.<sup>12</sup> He concluded that no one can write 'the perfect or ideal autobiography' because those 'whose inner life is best worth revealing—whose souls

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in T. Flanagan, 'Rebellion and Style: John Mitchel and the Jail Journal', *Irish University Review* 1 (1970): 2.

<sup>8</sup> For a sample of the different kinds of convict narratives see L. Frost and H. Maxwell-Stewart (eds.), *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 60, (emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> Mitchel to Mrs. Williams, 27 July 1850 in *Clyde Company Papers Volume VI 1846-50*, ed. P.L. Brown (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 505.

have soared highest and deepest ... will never make a confidant of the discerning public'. What a man records will not be 'in the name of the Ego, but by way of adumbration'.

As far as can be determined, Mitchel gave, writes prison historian Sean McConville, an 'accurate account of his treatment' in the *Jail Journal*, even though in a letter published in November 1853 he claimed that he was more harshly treated than he actually was.<sup>13</sup> This article analyses what Mitchel, the archetypal man of action, tells us about how he coped with the ordeal of imposed confinement, 'the lived experience of punishment', a history from below not a history of what prison reformers and administrators thought from above.<sup>14</sup> If we accept Knowlton's view of Mitchel as a nineteenth century liberal who 'believed the citizen had a right to be free of state control', especially of British control, then clearly his confinement in Bermuda must have tested his resilience and brought his spirit close to breaking-point.<sup>15</sup> American historian R.C. Doyle suggests that there are five responses to captivity: resistance, assimilation, evasion, escape and survival.<sup>16</sup> Writing his journal helped Mitchel to survive and transcend 'the personal stress' of his captivity. As Mitchel wrote, 'books and writing are the only occupation I can think of in my solitude'.<sup>17</sup> He wrestled with the question commonly asked in prison literature: 'how does [the] mind break free?'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> S. McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922: Theatres of War* (London: Routledge, 2003), 51n25.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Anderson and John Pratt, 'Prisoner Memoirs and Their Role in Prison History' in *Punishment and Control in Historical Perspective*, ed. Helen Johnston (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 179.

<sup>15</sup> S. Knowlton, 'The Politics of John Mitchel: A Reappraisal', *Eire-Ireland* 22 (1987): 40.

<sup>16</sup> R.C. Doyle, *Voices From Captivity: Interpreting the American POW Narrative* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 3, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Carnochan, 'The Literature of Confinement' in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. N. Morris and D.J. Rothman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 427.

As we will see, the Bermudan hulks were a dangerous place to be incarcerated due to the climate and the violent prisoners sent to them.<sup>19</sup> Prison reformers from the later eighteenth century such as Cesare Beccaria, John Howard and Jeremy Bentham had advocated a better managed and regulated prison system, which enforced silence, hard work and religion on prisoners.<sup>20</sup> There was a move to classify and categorize deviant groups and to apply specialized forms of treatment to deal with their specific problems. Another shift in policy and practice was to move away from inflicting bodily pain as a punishment towards punishing the mind of prisoners. The separate system of confinement was designed to stop contamination from other prisoners and by imposing silence and solitude to contribute to self-reflection on past wrongs and hopefully the rehabilitation and moral reformation of the prisoner. By the 1840s such a system had been unevenly introduced into English prisons, with Pentonville most directly advancing the ‘symbolic drama of guilt and repentance’ and seeking to place prisoners under greater surveillance.<sup>21</sup>

Garland argues that we should not assume that the theories and ideas of prison reformers were uniformly adopted and advocates examining the histories of different agencies and the different strategies they applied on their own terms.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, the ideas of the reformers seem hardly to have touched the hulk establishments in faraway Bermuda, where the convicts generally endured hard labour and brutal discipline to

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<sup>19</sup> A. Brown and C. Maxwell, ‘A Receptacle for the Worst Convicts: Bermuda, the Chatham Riots and the Transportation of Violence’, *Journal of Caribbean History* 37 (2003): 233-55.

<sup>20</sup> R. McGowen, ‘The Well-Ordered Prison; England 1780-1865’ in *The Oxford History of the Prison*, 79-105; W.J. Forsythe, *The Reform of Prisoners 1830-1900* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> M. Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1978); M. Ignatieff, ‘State, Civil Society and Total Institutions: A Critique of Recent Social Histories of Punishment’ in *Social Control and the State: Historical and Comparative Essays*, ed. S. Cohen and A. Scull (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), 92.

keep them in order.<sup>23</sup> But Mitchel did not identify with ordinary criminals. He shared the view of Irish political prisoners that associating with ordinary criminals was an ‘indignity’.<sup>24</sup> He denounced transportation as a waste of time and money and wanted robbers, burglars and forgers hung instead of housing them in more comfort than the honest hardworking poor could afford.<sup>25</sup> He dismissed the idea that imprisonment could reform offenders as proposed by prison reformers like Beccaria, Howard, and Samuel Romilly. Mitchel thought that imprisonment undermined the chances of reformation and made ‘the casual offender an irreclaimable scourge of mankind’.<sup>26</sup> For reformation to occur, gaols should be ‘places of discomfort’ and ‘the “sanitary condition” of miscreants ought not to be better cared for than the honest, industrious people’. These are the views of an elitist, who would never want to endure the same conditions as ordinary convicts or to rub shoulders with them.<sup>27</sup>

Although Mitchel was separated from other convicts and was closely watched, overall he was treated more leniently and experienced better conditions than other convicts at Bermuda for various interrelated reasons.<sup>28</sup> One reason was his class and education. In

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<sup>22</sup> D. Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 285-6.

<sup>23</sup> S. McConville, *A History of English Prison Administration: Volume 1 1750-1877* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 203, 393-4.

<sup>24</sup> McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 124-5.

<sup>27</sup> This is a typical theme of nineteenth century prison memoirs written by middle-class gentleman convicts, Monica Fludernik, “‘Stone Walls Do (Not) a Prison Make’: Rhetorical Strategies and Sentimentalism in the Representation of the Victorian Prison Experience’ in *Captivating Subjects: Writing Confinement, Citizenship and Nationhood in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason Haslam and Julia M. Wright (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 150-51, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Since early modern times, educated prisoners had been generally well treated, see T. Freeman, ‘The Rise of Prison Literature’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72 (2009): 145; see also Fludernik, “‘Stone Walls Do (Not) a Prison Make’”, 144-5.

New South Wales, educated or ‘special’ convicts were ‘deliberately segregated’.<sup>29</sup> They were seen as ‘a distinct class within the convict population’ and complicated ‘the principles and policies of convict management’. They were given ‘extraordinary treatment’, including exemption from hard labour, and ‘acquired liberties that were ... incompatible with a state of punishment and reformation’. They were regarded as dangerous because they were more likely to be seditious and had the potential publicly to ‘embarrass governments through their wealth, connections and peculiar ability to articulate and publicise their grievances’. Mitchel was ‘the only prisoner in his class’ at Bermuda, where he received superior accommodation and plentiful food and was treated with deference.<sup>30</sup> This relates to a second reason why Mitchel was treated differently from ordinary convicts at Bermuda. He was a political prisoner whose banishment to Bermuda had caused a stir and the British authorities did not want to make him more of a martyr than he already was by mistreating him. The third interrelated reason was his poor health. His asthma was exacerbated in Bermuda and the British authorities exempted him from hard work lest the added strain caused his death. This gave him more time to read and write about his experiences and thoughts while in captivity.

Despite being a valuable contribution to an understanding of how an individual coped with confinement, Mitchel’s time in Bermuda has been neglected by scholars studying prisoner or captivity narratives. In his book *Victorian Prison Lives*, Philip Priestley analysed some two hundred prison memoirs by mostly well educated, articulate and affluent prisoners, famous and not so famous, sent to English prisons for various

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<sup>29</sup> D.A. Roberts, “‘The Valley of Swells’; “Special” or “Educated” Convicts on the Wellington Valley Settlement, 1827-1830”, *History Australia* 3 (2006): 11.2-11.4, 11.6; see also S. Blair, ‘The Felony and the Free? Divisions in Convict Society in the Penal Era’, *Labour History* 45 (1983); 2-5, 13.

offences. Perhaps because the hulks did not loom large in Priestley's narrative, the *Jail Journal* is missing from his bibliography and also missing is a distinctively Irish voice. Nevertheless, Priestley provides a moving, multi-faceted and often disturbing insider view of the inflexible discipline, arbitrary punishment, enforced silence and separation, lack of privacy, and regimentation that increasingly characterized the Victorian prison system from the early nineteenth century. He analyses the various illnesses that affected inmates, not least those driven to insanity and suicide by 'the malevolence of individual warders' or 'the intractability of the system as a whole'.<sup>31</sup> Priestley stresses how crucial the knowledge and sympathy of prison doctors were to the welfare of a physically and mentally damaged prisoner.<sup>32</sup>

Like most of Priestley's prison memoirs, Mitchel's highly literate *Jail Journal* offers insightful, ironical, evocative, witty and often heart-wrenching commentary on his life aboard a prison hulk.<sup>33</sup> Although his journal was later serialized in his first American newspaper the *Citizen*, it was written without any certainty of publication and with the possibility that it could be confiscated and destroyed by his British gaolers.<sup>34</sup> A journal written at the time provides a 'more contingent, accidental and vulnerable' account than 'retrospective autobiographies'.<sup>35</sup> Like other captivity narratives, the *Jail Journal* is 'rich and revealing' about Mitchel's own feelings and his 'struggle to maintain identity

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<sup>30</sup> S. McConville, 'Gentlemen Convicts, Dynamitards and Paramilitaries: the Limits of Criminal Justice' in *Ideology, Crime and Criminal Justice: A Symposium in Honour of Sir Leon Radzinowicz* ed. Anthony Bottoms and Michael Tonry (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2002), 63; Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> P. Priestley, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography 1830-1914* (London: Methuen, 1985), 181

<sup>32</sup> Priestley, *Victorian Prison Lives*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> One of the best analyses of Mitchel's style is in Flanagan, 'Rebellion and Style', 1-29.

<sup>34</sup> Sloan, 'Autobiographies', 31.

<sup>35</sup> Sean Ryder, "'With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind": Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Autobiography', in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. L. Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 30.

without autonomy in an inimical environment'.<sup>36</sup> As Colley argues, 'captivity narratives were *always* disturbing texts at some level' because all captives were dragged across culturally, socially and politically defining lines.<sup>37</sup> Although he felt aggrieved at an unjust sentence, at being unable to fight for Ireland's freedom, at being taken from his beloved family, and at dying a slow death from asthma, Mitchel renounced the possibility of suicide and dreamed of regaining his freedom. This paper will explore how a free spirit like Mitchel came to terms with his captivity and renewed and strengthened his desire to fight for his beloved Ireland. First we will consider the events that led to his transportation.

### **Mitchel's Life Before 1848**

Born near Dungiven in County Derry in 1815, Mitchel's father was a Unitarian minister and a United Irishman. In 1823 the family moved to Newry, where Mitchel was educated before entering Trinity College Dublin in 1830. In 1837 Mitchel eloped with the sixteen-year-old Jane Verner and they married on 3 February. Mitchel practiced as a solicitor in Banbridge, County Down, where he became sensitized to the problems experienced by the Irish poor. He began reading the writings of the romantic nationalist group of Young Irelanders and in 1843 joined Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association, formed to free Ireland from British control.

When the Irish patriot Thomas Davis died in 1845, John Mitchel, a rural solicitor and member of the Repeal Association, accepted Charles Gavan Duffy's request to replace

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<sup>36</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 15; D.E. Williams, *Liberty's Captives: Narratives of Confinement in the Print Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Colley, *Captives*, 16, (emphasis in original).

Davis as editor of the *Nation*, organ of Irish nationalism and the Young Irelanders.<sup>38</sup> From October 1845 until December 1847, when Ireland was in the grip of famine, Mitchel edited the *Nation* and became increasingly disaffected with British rule. He rejected Duffy's plan to combine the classes and supported James Fintan Lalor's idea of encouraging and organising the peasantry to overthrow the British. When the Irish Confederation voted against his policy, Mitchel founded a new newspaper, the *United Irishman*, to write 'violent and abusive tirades against the government' and incite agrarian-led revolution.<sup>39</sup> There he advocated stopping the harvest, paying no rent or poor rate, boycotting anyone who did, resisting distraint and eviction, boycotting anyone who bought distrained goods or took evicted farms, and arming the people against the evictors and harvest-takers.<sup>40</sup> Mitchel hoped this policy would save the people from starvation and lead to insurrection.

The Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Clarendon, agitated by the exaggerated reports of the spy J.D. Balfe and by revolution in Europe, feared that, unless Mitchel's provocative articles were stopped, armed rebellion would ensue.<sup>41</sup> On 13 May 1848 Mitchel was charged with treason-felony under the Treason Felony Act 1848, a new crime that increased the penalties for writing seditious publications and was aimed directly at him; this charge strengthened his hatred of the British Government, but not its people.<sup>42</sup> The trial, held on 25 May, was a farce. By the evening of 27 May the jury had found him guilty. Mitchel alleged that the Whig Government had packed the

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<sup>38</sup> J.N. Molony, 'Thomas Davis and 1848' in *Ireland and Tasmania 1848: Sesquicentenary Papers*, ed. R. Davis and S. Petrow (Sydney: Crossing Press, 1998), 7-18.

<sup>39</sup> McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 457.

<sup>41</sup> S. Petrow, 'Idealism Betrayed: John Donnellan Balfe, Supergrass of 1848' in *Ireland and Tasmania 1848*, 70-95.

jury to ‘crush’ him, although this was officially denied.<sup>43</sup> Although according to English law he was guilty of the offences with which he was charged, he regarded his conviction as illegal and a travesty of justice. If he had been granted ‘a fair trial’, then he felt sure that he would have been found not guilty. But Irishmen were ‘slaves’ in their own land, not citizens, and were ruled by force. They had no choice but to do the bidding of their English masters.<sup>44</sup>

Mitchel was sentenced to fourteen years’ transportation and consigned to Bermuda, which had been a hulk convict station since 1824; from the late 1840s until the early 1850s the average number of convicts confined there was 1300.<sup>45</sup> The ‘warm, moist climate’ of Bermuda exacerbated health problems like tuberculosis and West Indian yellow fever killed many hulk inmates.<sup>46</sup> The hulks were ‘grounded in thick mud, insufficiently ventilated’ and ‘swarming with cockroaches and vermin’. As most convicts were ‘intractable’ and violent criminals, discipline was strict and the chances of escape slim, with the American mainland hundreds of miles away.<sup>47</sup> One inmate, William Sydes, painted a very unflattering picture of the demoralization and unnatural vice on board the hulks during his incarceration between 1838 and 1845.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 230; for the trial see James Dunkerley, *Americana: The Americas in the World, Around 1850 (or ‘Seeing the Elephant’ as the Theme for an Imaginary Western)* (London: Verso, 2000), 57-98.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 5-6; Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 237-43; see also House of Commons Debates, 21 July 1848, vol. 100, cc. 665-96.

<sup>44</sup> The legality of Mitchel’s trial was still being contested in 1875, House of Commons Debates, 4 March 1875, vol. 222, cc. 1273-6.

<sup>45</sup> McConville, *A History of English Prison Administration: Volume 1 1750-1877*, 201-3; C.F.E. Hollis Hallett, *Forty Years of Convict Labour: Bermuda 1823-1863* (Bermuda: Juniperhill Press, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> W. Branch-Johnson, *The English Prison Hulks* (London: Christopher Johnson, 1957), 165-66.

<sup>47</sup> Branch-Johnson, *English Prison Hulks*, 168-9; Charles Campbell, *The Intolerable Hulks: British Shipboard Confinement 1776-1857*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bowie: Heritage Books, 1994), 142, 147.

<sup>48</sup> William Sydes, ‘Account of Life on the Convict Hulks by William Sydes, alias Jones, One of the Prisoners’, *Bermuda Historical Quarterly* 8 (1951): 28-39.

After the verdict had been delivered Mitchel was returned to his cell and when the door closed, he ‘broke into a raging passion of tears ... of wrath, pity, regret, remorse—but not of base lamentations for my own fate’.<sup>49</sup> He soon regained his composure and prepared himself for his fourteen year ‘ordeal, and for whatsoever the same may bring me—toil, sickness, ignominy, death’. Although he had been branded a criminal, he felt no ‘disgrace’ because he did not recognise English laws.<sup>50</sup> He felt it preferable to be a transported convict than ‘a quiet slave, or a complaisant accomplice’ in the murder of his fellow Irishmen.<sup>51</sup> On the day he was moved from Dublin, 28 May 1848, Mitchel began to write his *Jail Journal*, which helped him cope with his period of captivity in Bermuda and on the *Neptune*. We should never forget that Mitchel was removed not just from his country, but also from his family and who can say what loss he felt more deeply?

## **Bermuda**

Mitchel was sent to Bermuda on a man-of-war steamer called the *Scourge*. A sentry was placed outside his cabin, but he could request to go on deck at any time. While he was well fed and found his cabin satisfactory, he soon found the routine of shipboard life monotonous and spent most of his time reading books from the officers’ library.<sup>52</sup> He fretted about his ‘scanty’ wardrobe and was desperate to hear news about his family. He was ‘full of nervous anxiety’ about the fate of his family and spent ‘hours in

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<sup>49</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 14-15.

<sup>51</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 19.

imagining a thousand evils that may happen them, and wondering what on earth is to become of them'.<sup>53</sup>

After he reached Bermuda on 21 June 1848, Mitchel continued to be treated well. He was placed on one of the three hulks, the *Dromedary*, was allowed to wear his own clothes, and was not required to work.<sup>54</sup> The superintendent of convicts declared that he would not be treated severely if he obeyed “the rules”, which included not indulging in “public affairs, or politics” or communicating with, let alone inciting, the other prisoners. Mitchel readily agreed because his isolation made it difficult to participate in public affairs and he had no desire to talk to his fellow hulk in-mates, common criminals with whom he had little in common.

Mitchel recorded typical middle-class views on criminals. He thought that the transportation system was ‘a portentous evil’ and the hulks were schools of ‘unspeakable iniquity’, where young boys were trained to be ‘utterly desperate and incurable villains’.<sup>55</sup> Most convicts seemed intent on cramming ‘as much brutal obscenity and stupid blasphemy into their common speech as it will hold’. A convict was ‘respected and influential’ amongst his colleagues ‘in direct proportion to the atrocity of his language and behaviour’. Gambling was common and money was acquired by stealing. In one of his few charitable moments, Mitchel commented less acerbically about his fellow convicts. Although some convicts had ‘evil countenances and amorphous skulls’, being burglars and swindlers ‘from the womb’, he found that

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<sup>53</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 276.

<sup>54</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 122.

most prisoners had ‘good and well-conditioned faces’, but he had no desire to consort with them.<sup>56</sup>

Mitchel was enraged that the many ‘starved Irish’, who took sheep or poultry to keep their families alive during the Famine, were transported to Bermuda, where they lived in ‘a style of comfort they never knew before even in their dreams’.<sup>57</sup> These honest, desperate folk were ‘initiated into mysteries and profound depths of corruption that their mother tongue has no name for’. Amazed by the high quality and plentiful food, they wrote home to ‘tell their half-starved friends how well a felon is fed’ and tempted their countrymen into crime so they could enjoy the benefits of transportation. In too many cases English families had been ‘hulked for three or four generations’ and Mitchel was worried that soon hulking would become as popular ‘a profession’ in Ireland as it was in England.

Fearing that the firebrand Mitchel would try to incite the other convicts, he was placed on the *Dromedary* in a separate room, better than other convicts experienced but far from ideal. He described it as a kind of ‘cavern’, not much bigger than ‘a dog-house’ or ‘dog-hutch’.<sup>58</sup> Measuring about six feet square, he could not stand upright and he shared his quarters with many large cockroaches, which ‘almost turned me sick’. Even so, he was relieved that he had not been placed with the other convicts and felt ‘a *freer* man ... than any Irishman living at large’. He bathed ‘luxuriously’ in the sea and walked on the deck, admiring the view. He determined to do as he was told ‘at once and without remark’, which surprised his ‘keepers a little’.<sup>59</sup> With a reputation for

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<sup>56</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 67.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 123-4.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 39-41 (emphasis in original).

<sup>59</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 42.

turbulent behaviour and insubordination, the authorities became suspicious that he was so subdued and expected an attempt at escape, something that only a few convicts ever managed to do.<sup>60</sup> Three prisoners who pierced the tight security were caught and flogged with the cat-of-nine-tails.<sup>61</sup> After receiving sixty lashes each, the men were ‘half-dead’. Mitchel heard their ‘horrid screams’ and paced his cell ‘gnawing my tongue’. In his case the deterrent worked and thereafter he regarded flogging as ‘objectionable and degrading’.<sup>62</sup>

Securing satisfactory accommodation made Mitchel’s convict life bearable. Within a week of arriving in Bermuda, he was placed in a much bigger and cleaner cabin with a table, chair, basin stand, a barred window, and bookshelves.<sup>63</sup> This was ‘a great improvement upon the dog-house’. But suddenly on 29 June Mitchel was moved to the hospital-ship the *Tenedos* because of his health. As he suffered from asthma and had had a fit on the *Scourge* on the way to Bermuda, the British Government wanted to take no chances with their celebrity convict. This new cabin had two windows without bars and he was well fed. When rumours circulated that some New York Irish supporters would seek to rescue him, Mitchel was returned to the *Dromedary*.<sup>64</sup> It was not until April 1849 that he realised an American rescue was ‘a pretext from the first’, allowing his gaolers to keep him under close guard.<sup>65</sup> The chief mate locked the cell door at night and unlocked the door in the morning.<sup>66</sup> At 10 pm and three more times before morning, he looked in on Mitchel to ensure that he was still in his cabin. If Mitchel

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<sup>60</sup> Four convicts did escape and make it to the American mainland, S. MacCall, *Irish Mitchel: A Biography* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1938), 232-3.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 95-6.

<sup>62</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 274.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 42-3.

<sup>64</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 126.

seemed to be asleep, a light was shone in his face to verify his presence. Guards checked the passes of anyone approaching the ship. Discipline over the other prisoners was also tightened.

Although willing and feeling able to work, Mitchel was not sent to the quarries with the other prisoners partly because of his health and partly because together they might hatch a plan to escape.<sup>67</sup> He noted how other convicts in prison garb were ‘marched in gangs, some of them in chains’, to work in the quarries or on the new government buildings.<sup>68</sup> Some injured their eyes due to ‘the glare of the white rocks’. Some were kept in irons and others were flogged for some trivial infringement, such as being cheeky to the guards, who provoked the outburst by their ‘imperious, insolent tone and manner’. The ordinary convicts had to take off their hats when speaking to ‘the pettiest guard of the ship’ and had to make ‘a low obeisance’ before setting foot on the quarter-deck.<sup>69</sup>

Mitchel suffered no such treatment. Safe in his own cabin, served his meals regularly, able to wear his own clothes, free to go on deck when he liked, he was spoken to, ‘not only without haughtiness, but with respect’, because he was ‘supposed to be (though I never said I was) *a gentleman*’.<sup>70</sup> Mitchel could keep his hat on when speaking to the guards, who touched their caps to him. The British Constitution would not allow a gentleman to mix with ‘the swinish multitude’. The gentleman convict ‘must have deference and accommodations, and attendance and literary leisure’. But the poor, in

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<sup>66</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 56-7.

<sup>67</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 53-4 (emphasis in original), 66.

the hulk as in the rest of their lives, had nothing but ‘the hard word and the hard blow, and unremitting, ill-requited toil, and fetters for the limbs, and a scourge for the back’.

Mitchel heard other convicts talk irately about his special treatment and freedom from work, but he did not blame them.<sup>71</sup> He puzzled why someone who had been convicted of seeking to bring down the social order, breaking the law, and destroying the government should receive more indulgences than other prisoners.<sup>72</sup> He thought that this reflected the British Government’s acknowledgement that he had not committed a crime at all: his lenient treatment reflected the shame felt by the British at his conviction. If he was not a felon, then the British Government must be, he reasoned. Mitchel expected the British Government to use his good treatment for publicity purposes.

More serious questioning of his treatment came from the Admiral in charge of the Bermudan hulks, who was displeased upon finding out that he had not been treated like a common convict while on the voyage to Bermuda and had consorted with the ship’s officers.<sup>73</sup> Mitchel claimed that the commander of the *Scourge*, Captain Wingrove, was ‘severely censured’, but in fact the British authorities thought Wingrove had generally ‘acted up to the tenor and spirit’ of his instructions to treat Mitchel well.<sup>74</sup> Other questions were asked in the British Parliament—in the Commons usually by Orangemen—about the treatment of ‘Convict Mitchel’.<sup>75</sup> Some government members

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<sup>71</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 66-7.

<sup>72</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 12, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 136; McConville, *History of English Prison Administration*, 202; House of Commons Debates, 7 June 1848, vol. 99, c. 471, 6 June 1849, vol. 103, cc. 251-2; House of Lords Debates, 12 March 1848, vol. 103, c. 537.

<sup>74</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 136; *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 26 March 1849.

<sup>75</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 288; MacCall, *Irish Mitchel*, 231; House of Commons Debates, 25 August 1848, vol. 101, cc. 528-9, 1 September 1848, vol. 101, cc. 757-60.

alleged that he had been treated leniently either because he was a man of ‘station and education’ or because of his ‘*delicate*’ health, but Mitchel complained that he had never sought special favours for either reason.<sup>76</sup> As far as Mitchel was concerned, when the British Government convicted him of crime and sentenced him to transportation, ‘*they did their worst*’. Neither the government, nor their servants, neither their ‘severities’ nor ‘indulgences’, could ‘aggravate’ or ‘mitigate that atrocity’.

Mitchel led a comfortable life, far more comfortable than he could have expected.<sup>77</sup> He had books to read, opportunity to exercise, plenty of food, and pen and paper for writing.<sup>78</sup> He tried to convince himself that it was possible to spend his fourteen years this way and recalled the names of men in the past who had survived more rigorous treatment for longer. These included the Genoan Major John Bernardi, who spent forty years in Newgate prison, dying there in 1736 and the French writer Jean Henri Latude, who spent almost as long in the Bastille and other prisons. Mitchel wished for more prison biographies to read ‘for encouragement to myself if I should hereafter chance to need it’. At times he felt pangs of guilt about his special treatment and questioned whether he should look his ‘black destiny so placidly in the face?’<sup>79</sup> He considered making ‘oppression bitter’ and ‘lashing’ himself into a ‘suitable rage’, but decided that this would be a futile gesture and that he had ‘nothing to do but keep myself alive and *wait*’.<sup>80</sup> He realised that he could not kill time for fourteen years and so decided ‘to

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<sup>76</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 138 (emphasis in original).

<sup>77</sup> E. Montégut, *John Mitchel: A Study of Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Mauseel, 1915), 33.

<sup>78</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 46-7.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 44, 47 (emphasis in original).

cultivate friendly relations with Time—a thing to be done by *working* only—to get old Time on my side instead of living *against* him'.<sup>81</sup>

Left alone in the darkness and silence, Mitchel realised that a prisoner's 'intellect would soon be extinguished' and 'idiocy would ensue, or raving madness'.<sup>82</sup> Long-term confinement in the same cell with no 'human' contact except felons and guards caused 'the intellect' to 'stagnate, starve, and grow dull, for lack of needful food and exercise'. The prisoner needed something to 'help imagination and memory to take the place of the senses and of human converse, furnishing occasion and stimulus to thought'. Mitchel tried to deal with his solitude and keep his mental powers in a fit state by reading. He left Ireland with books that meant something to him, namely by Homer, Rabelais, Shakespeare and Plato's Dialogues and he translated Plato's *Politeia*.<sup>83</sup> Initially, he criticised the available reading matter, which included paltry London novels reprinted in America or "useful reading", which included 'vile compilations' called 'Family Libraries' or 'Cabinet Libraries'.<sup>84</sup> These were 'dry skeletons of dead knowledge', which misused 'scientific language'. Superintendent Hire, the governor's deputy, lent him 'many books', but they were not enough and he found the lack of stimulating reading 'very emaciating'.<sup>85</sup> Mitchel found most relief in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Prisoners, captives, the sick, and all 'heavy of cheer' should pray for Scott's 'soul'. The man in solitary confinement had an excuse to read 'exceedingly bad books', which helped 'keep the soul from devouring itself'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 62 (emphasis in original).

<sup>82</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 121.

<sup>83</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 64, 97, 119.

<sup>84</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 61-2.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 95, 125.

Officially not allowed to read newspapers, Mitchel was at first starved of news from Ireland and Europe. Anyone who gave him newspapers faced solitary confinement, irons, and flogging.<sup>87</sup> But from time to time he recorded in his *Jail Journal* that he had been supplied anonymously with newspapers and periodicals.<sup>88</sup> He followed with interest events in Europe and was buoyed to discover that Ireland still cherished ‘a spirit of disaffection’. While this news lifted his heart, it also caused him to lament his confinement even more and yearn to take part in events in which ‘kingships and nationhoods are lost and won’. He felt frustrated that he sat ‘panting here behind an iron grating’ or even worse that he would ‘die an old hound’s death, and rot among Bermudan blattae’.<sup>89</sup> Apart from newspapers, he heard news about Ireland and his colleagues from leaks ‘percolating through the strangest capillary tubes’.<sup>90</sup>

Writing in a journal helped greatly to break the tedium of confinement. At first, Mitchel felt that he would have nothing to write about because each day was the same as every other day.<sup>91</sup> He had to be careful of his subject matter, as there was always the chance of his journal being seized and handed over to the British Government, thus further injuring his chances of release. Finally, Mitchel decided that writing had great therapeutic value and became consumed by the need to write as he had done for so many years. His subject matter included ‘the atmospheric phenomena’, his views on the books he had been reading, and any subject that came to mind. His journal became an *aide de memoire*, preserving ‘the continuity of my thoughts, or *personal identity*, which, there is sometimes reason to fear, might slip away from me’. He found that

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<sup>86</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 122.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 55.

<sup>88</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 74, 110, 131-2; Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 272.

<sup>89</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 79.

<sup>90</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 57.

<sup>91</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 59-60 (emphasis in original).

writing ‘a vicious tirade’ was a great relief, and helped him ‘to think, and use reason aright’. He believed that ‘a good rant, like the canter on the back of a brisk horse’, increased his appetite. He hoped to write his own book, ‘a task which I have long lusted after, and often wished for leisure to set about’.<sup>92</sup>

Mitchel dealt with the problem of identity loss and the need for ‘self-definition’ in interesting ways.<sup>93</sup> This included acknowledging, as Ryder has argued, that ‘the fluidity of identity, while deeply unsettling’, was ‘also inescapable, often pleasurable and sometimes necessary for survival’. At one point, after hearing of the failure of the 1848 rebellion led by William Smith O’Brien and the arrest of his best friend John Martin, Mitchel split himself into two antagonists, ‘The Ego’ and ‘Doppelgänger’, who conducted ‘a half-serious, half-comic dialogue about the apparent inconsistency of his politics’.<sup>94</sup> ‘The Ego’ expressed a desire ‘to abolish and demolish and derange’ and concluded that ‘destruction *is* creation ... the revolutionary Leveller is your only architect’, thus confirming Mitchel’s ‘revolutionary policy’ and his ‘humourless fanaticism’.<sup>95</sup> Towards the end of the dialogue, the ‘Doppelgänger’ asks whether the desire of ‘The Ego’ to plunge his country ‘into deluges of slaughter arises out of philosophical considerations altogether’.<sup>96</sup> ‘The Ego’ replied: ‘Entirely; I prescribe copious blood-letting upon strictly therapeutical principles’. At the end of their discussion the ‘Doppelgänger’ is persuaded to adopt extremist tactics and both protagonists drink a toast to ‘Arterial Drainage’.

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<sup>92</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 62.

<sup>93</sup> Ryder, “‘With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind’”, 24-5.

<sup>94</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 79-93; Ryder, “‘With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind’”, 25.

<sup>95</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 91; Dermot Fahy, ‘Moore and Mitchel in Bermuda’, *The Dublin Magazine* 14 (1939): 51.

<sup>96</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 92-3.

One positive product of his confinement was that his memory of the past improved and became stronger: ‘the impressions of the past’ grew ‘vivid as the soul shuts itself from the present’.<sup>97</sup> While his mind worked ‘at less than oyster-power, many scenes of my hot youth, scenes long forgotten—have arisen fresh and clear, almost with the glow of present action and passion’. Despite his methods of coping and the positive side of confinement, Mitchel realised that long-term confinement might have a deleterious impact on his mental state. After ten months he wondered if he could for the rest of his sentence ‘keep Despair and the Devil at bay [for] so long?’<sup>98</sup> But a month before he left Bermuda, he told his sister Matilda that it was ‘good for a man to be *compelled* to retire for a time within himself’ and consider his life, especially for someone, who was ‘ever looking forward and rushing headlong, without time, literally, to bless myself’.<sup>99</sup> No doubt captivity was ‘a bitter draught, and sickness, and pain, and sleepless nights in captivity are worse still’, but they were ‘nothing and less than nothing to a man unless they *conquer* him—and they shall not conquer me’.

Mitchel implied in his writings that death was a possibility and early on in his confinement he considered the possibility of suicide. At the start of his confinement he knew that in the coming fourteen years that he would experience ‘many a dreary day, many a weary night; and sickness and deadly *taedium* will fall heavily upon my soul’.<sup>100</sup> He knew that ‘long years in a lonely dungeon are no light thing to the stoutest heart’. He knew that the years could not be ‘made to pass merrily as marriage-bells by any system of jesting, or moralising, or building up of sentences, philosophic or jocular, for one’s private edification or ghastly solitary laughter’.

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<sup>97</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 134.

<sup>98</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 128.

<sup>99</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 280-81 (emphasis in original).

<sup>100</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 47 (emphasis in original).

As a way of escape, Mitchel admitted that suicide ‘will be always near me and often tempting’, but he determined not to be tempted for various reasons.<sup>101</sup> First, to die a felon would be to conspire with the British authorities and to ‘send my children scandalised to their graves, as the children of a self-convicted criminal and despairing suicide’. Second, to commit suicide would be ‘a mean and cowardly confession’ that he could not bear the consequences of his actions. Third, to kill himself would ‘undo all I have done’. He believed that at times ‘to *suffer* manfully is the best thing man can *do*’. While he was known to live in ‘vile sinks of felony’ because of a ‘sham trial’, he was sure that ‘the mind of the young Irish generation will not easily settle down and acquiesce in the sway of the foreign enemy’. If he died, he would ‘soon be forgotten’. If he killed himself, he will have ‘confessed that England’s brute power is resistless, and therefore righteous—at any rate that I for my part am a beaten man’. Instead of being ‘an example’ of resistance, he would become ‘a warning’. On the other hand, Mitchel thought his achievements would never ‘perish or fail’: they will ‘stand and bear fruit, even though we may be lying in foreign graves, our bones mixed with the unclean dust of unspeakable rascaldom for ever’.<sup>102</sup> This was related to Mitchel’s fourth reason for not committing suicide: the thought of being buried in the convict cemetery with the other convicts he so despised made his body shiver and his flesh creep.<sup>103</sup> Finally, as a devoted parent he wanted to preserve the chance in the future of bringing up his children and discharging his ‘domestic duties’.

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<sup>101</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 47-9 (emphasis in original).

<sup>102</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 77.

<sup>103</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 45, 49.

With these and other considerations in mind he decided to ‘live on’ and ‘even economise my health and strength’.<sup>104</sup> Then when he was released at the age of 46 he would not be ‘a decrepit old man, but may have some stamina and spirit left to *begin the world* upon over again’. At the same time, Mitchel defended the morality of suicide. He did not believe that suicide was ‘a bad act’. If a person had no ‘clear duty to live’, then it was his ‘clear right to die’. After long and impartial reflection, if a man found that ‘the burden of his life is heavier than he can bear, and that his death, or manner of his death, will injure no one’ and if he had left no engagements ‘undischarged’ or duties ‘undone’, then, ‘calmly, and in all good humour, in no spirit of impious defiance of heaven or stupid scorn of mankind’, suicide was justified.

Mitchel had no truck with the argument that a man was obliged to exercise his ‘faculties, for the good of himself and others, to supply those wants and develop those sympathies and affections, and so become and continue ..., a good and useful member of society’ until God ended ‘his task’.<sup>105</sup> No man was obliged to “benefit his species”. Each man must choose his own reasons for living or for committing suicide. Mitchel listed, not altogether seriously one feels, a few possible reasons. Anyone who felt bilious or melancholic or was tired of ‘seeing the sun rise every day’ should ‘thrust a sharp instrument into your dyspeptic stomach and let your disagreeable soul rush forth into the air’. Others might commit suicide because they were ‘despised’ by the woman they love and suffered from a ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ heart. Mitchel implied that he did not think these reasons justification enough and preferred himself to ‘stay and see what this life is and what it is good for’. He admitted that his writings on suicide consisted of ‘*words* mainly, or even echoes of words, with shadows and ghosts of meaning’. He told

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<sup>104</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 49-50 (emphasis in original).

<sup>105</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 50-52 (emphasis in original).

his sister Matilda that he had decided that he had ‘much to live for, many duties undone and responsibilities left undischarged’.<sup>106</sup>

Long before he was transported, Mitchel had to face another ‘enemy’ and that was his asthma.<sup>107</sup> He had hoped that the new climate would exorcise this demon, but Bermuda exacerbated his asthma.<sup>108</sup> For two months, he wrote on 23 November, he had ‘very constant and severe asthma, especially by night’.<sup>109</sup> He was often forced ‘to sit on a chair all night through—and that in the dark and cold. I am grown ghastly thin, and my voice weak’. Night after night he sought sleep but it would not come. When he looked in the mirror, his eyes had ‘the wild fearful stare’ of the eyes of ‘a hard-hunted hare, couched and gasping in her form’; his cheeks were ‘shrunk and livid’; and his fingers were like bird’s claws’.<sup>110</sup> Mitchel believed that his enforced idleness and lack of exercise had helped the illness to sap his strength.<sup>111</sup> He gained some relief by smoking, but worried that he was becoming ‘a confirmed smoker’.<sup>112</sup> Smoking his pipe for an hour at night helped him sleep and dream ‘pleasant dreams of the past, and even weave bright visions of the future’. But this highly literate man admitted that ‘I would give all the books I ever read for a pair of lungs that would work’.<sup>113</sup>

In early December 1848 the medical superintendent Dr. James Hall reported that Bermuda was ‘notoriously and excessively unfriendly to asthmatic persons’ and warned

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<sup>106</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 281.

<sup>107</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 66.

<sup>108</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 278.

<sup>109</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 96.

<sup>110</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 107-9.

<sup>111</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 113.

<sup>112</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 280.

<sup>113</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 107.

that Mitchel would die if he stayed ‘much longer’.<sup>114</sup> Hall advised him to seek removal to another colony, but Mitchel initially refused to ‘eat dirt’ and break his vow never to ask for ‘any kind of indulgence or mitigation’ or to seek ‘the mercy’ of the British Government. Hall entreated Mitchel to change his mind and finally he did despite the ‘sore humiliation’.<sup>115</sup> Mitchel told Captain Charles Elliot, Governor of Bermuda, of Hall’s prognosis and pointed out that, as he had not been sentenced to death, he should be sent to a healthier climate. Mitchel hoped to be moved to the ‘noble’ and dry climate of the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>116</sup> There with a modicum of freedom and joined by his family, he could ‘actually *live* through my captivity instead of suffering a daily and nightly death-in-life, as I do here’. While the British Government considered his request, Mitchel sat ‘constantly panting and struggling in asthma, both night and day’.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, the decision to remove him came. On 12 April 1849 he was taken to the hospital ship for a few days treatment before his voyage, he supposed, to the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>118</sup> Although his body remained weak, he now felt ‘stronger in soul than ever I was’. Mitchel now resolved ‘to live and to act; to rear my own children, to do my own duties, to act and speak amongst men that which I know to be just and true’. He left his fate to ‘God’s will’, but he found that sometimes God moved in mysterious ways.

### **Voyage on the *Neptune***

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<sup>114</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 108-9; Hallett, *Forty Years of Convict Labour*, 49, 51-2.

<sup>115</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 109, 111.

<sup>116</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 115 (emphasis in original); Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, 279.

<sup>117</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 126-7.

Forced to move Mitchel due to his failing health, the British Government took him and some 300 other convicts (including 200 Irishmen) from Bermuda to the Cape of Good Hope on 22 April 1849.<sup>119</sup> Placed aboard the *Neptune* in ‘a very filthy little cabin’, Mitchel resolved again ‘never to ask for anything, and never to complain of anything’.<sup>120</sup> His resolve needed to be strong because he was treated much more severely than in Bermuda and either incompetent captaincy or wayward weather resulted in the *Neptune* taking much longer to reach the Cape than expected.<sup>121</sup> Food and water had to be rationed and sickness caused some deaths. Mitchel was especially vulnerable, as ‘the close imprisonment’, ‘the suspense’, and the ‘want of exciting occupation’ had exacerbated his asthma and given that ‘foul fiend’ renewed control of his body.<sup>122</sup>

On the overly long voyage to the Cape, Mitchel had time to reflect on the disadvantages of convict transportation. His pessimism about its value became further ingrained from conversations with a man called Stewart, who was ‘the “instructor”’ on the *Neptune* and had been a missionary in ‘the pauper purlieus of London’.<sup>123</sup> According to Stewart, poor, debased Londoners did not view transportation with ‘horror or repugnance’, but as ‘one of the ways of making off life, and, on the whole, as rather a good line of business’. Mitchel retained his belief that transportation was ‘no punishment at all to the criminal population generally’, but ‘a sure and comfortable establishment’. But for ‘the unhardened and casual delinquents’, it was ‘a far too

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<sup>118</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 130-31.

<sup>119</sup> Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 287, 295.

<sup>120</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 141-2.

<sup>121</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 149; Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 288.

<sup>122</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 216.

<sup>123</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 164-5.

severe punishment—far worse than the cruellest death’ and meant ‘utter, final shipwreck of soul and body’.

After a five month voyage to reach its destination, the *Neptune* found that many residents of the Cape of Good Hope were as vehemently opposed to transportation as Mitchel himself and they agitated successfully against dumping the convict cargo onto their soil.<sup>124</sup> It appears that a deputation from the Anti-Convict Association sent a deputation to Governor Harry Smith seeking Mitchel’s acceptance as a free settler but the request was refused.<sup>125</sup>

Unable to send Mitchel to the Cape, the British Government selected Van Diemen’s Land as a suitable destination. In all he had spent ten months at Bermuda and eleven months and seventeen days on the *Neptune*, but was not enthused about his new destination, always regarding Australia with ‘the utmost abhorrence’.<sup>126</sup> He felt it ‘a nauseous and horrid idea’ to live in a penal colony amongst ‘all the loathsome corruptions of London’. Mitchel felt less depressed about his fate when he learnt that his fellow rebels William Smith O’Brien, Thomas Francis Meagher, Patrick O’Donoghue, Kevin Izod O’Doherty, Terence Bellew MacManus, and John Martin had all suffered the same fate and were now in Van Diemen’s Land. He now held his transportation to be ‘a high honour’ and, using irony to advantage, thought that any Irishman who wanted to be considered ‘an honest man, let him straightaway get transported’.<sup>127</sup> Despite remaining a felon, Mitchel was to find life in the healthy

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<sup>124</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 172, 177.

<sup>125</sup> A.F. Hattersley, *Convict Crisis and the Growth of Unity: Resistance to Transportation in South Africa and Australia 1848-1853* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1965), 66.

<sup>126</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 177; Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol.1, 311.

<sup>127</sup> Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, 155-6.

climes of Van Diemen's Land much more palatable than dying a slow death in the confines of a ship's cabin.<sup>128</sup>

## Conclusion

This analysis of Mitchel's experiences in captivity surely goes some way to support Arthur Griffith's contention that in the literature of the prison the *Jail Journal* had 'no equal'.<sup>129</sup> As Griffith argued, Mitchel's spirit manages to banish 'from us the thought of pity for the prisoner' and in its stead allows us to exult 'in him whose free soul no prison may confine—no fate can daunt'. Sympathetic guards and doctors helped Mitchel cope with confinement, but he had to rely on his own resources. To be sure, Mitchel had his low points, seemed on the verge of losing his identity, and at his most despairing even contemplated suicide, but Priestley's book shows that this was a not uncommon feature of the Victorian prison system.<sup>130</sup> Few prisoners, however, can have weighed up the reasons for and against suicide so thoroughly, rationally and intelligently as Mitchel did in his *Jail Journal*. That discussion really distinguished Mitchel's journal from other prison memoirs by middle-class convicts.

Despite plumbing the depths of despair, Mitchel never lost sight of the possibility of serving out his sentence, being reunited with his family and renewing his fight for Irish independence. His desire to struggle against confinement on a British hulk drew sustenance from the continuing struggle of his Young Irelander colleagues and the Irish people against British rule. Reading books and above all writing his journal provided a

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<sup>128</sup> See Stefan Petrow, 'Island Prison: John Mitchel in Van Diemen's Land', *Australian Journal of Irish Studies* 3 (2003): 62-78

<sup>129</sup> A. Griffith, 'Preface' in Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, xv-xvi.

<sup>130</sup> See also Anderson and Pratt, 'Prisoner Memoirs', 187-9.

lifeline for a man used to expressing his aspirations and wrath in words. As a middle-class gentleman, the physical impact of confinement weighed very heavily on Mitchel, but his separation from other convicts, the solitude of such confinement and the freedom from hard labour were huge advantages to a man of letters. Given time and space, Mitchel was able to explore and defend at length his ideas and values in his journal and in a sense rescued his mind from becoming overwhelmed by negative and self-destructive thoughts. While his body remained confined, his mind roamed free.