

Historical context for *The Silver Thread*

“A chance remark by my sister, a curator, provided the inspiration for *The Silver Thread*. We were wandering around the National Gallery in Canberra, where she worked, and she mentioned The Rajah Quilt.

I’d never heard of it and, although I’m Australian, I knew very little about female convicts or transportation. I felt the little buzz of excitement that so often signals the beginnings of a story. At the time, I’d just finished my second novel and I was casting about for an idea for a third.

Although the quilt is not kept on permanent display – it is far too fragile – I asked to arrange a viewing. The minute I saw it, I knew that I had to write about it and that I had found the beginnings of my novel.

The Rajah Quilt is an extraordinary object. It measures more than three metres on each side and, I discovered later, is made up of 2,815 individual pieces of patchwork.

It is the only surviving convict quilt from the transportation period between 1787 and 1868, when one hundred and sixty five thousand people were sentenced to penal servitude in Australia, often after committing petty crimes. Of this number, more than thirty thousand were women, some of whom set sail on The Rajah from Woolwich Pier to Tasmania and NSW on April 5, 1841.

The conditions of their voyage were harsh. The women were at sea for 105 days. But thanks to the tireless efforts of the extraordinary Elizabeth Fry, a Quaker and campaigner for prison reform, the convict women on The Rajah no longer had to wear shackles. The food was still dismal, but, and again because of Elizabeth Fry, they had enough to eat and drink and somewhere to sleep. And so the inscription on the quilt reads:

“To the ladies of the Convict Ship Committee. This quilt worked by the convicts of the ship Rajah during their voyage to Van Diemens Land is presented as a testimony of the gratitude with which they remember their exertions for their welfare while in England and during their passage and also as a proof that they have not neglected the Ladies kind admonition of being industrious. June 1841”

Elizabeth Fry’s Quaker charity, The British Society for Ladies (who were the Convict Ship Committee of the quilt’s dedication) collected donations and off-cuts from London clothiers and mercers. Each prisoner was given a bag of the donated cloth along with needles, thread, a thimble and a Bible.

Several quilts were made on each voyage and those completed by the time the transport ships put in to Rio de Janeiro to take on fresh water and supplies, were sold at the market there. For many convict women, the money earned from the sale of the quilts was the first honest income they’d known.

The Rajah Quilt survives because it was not made to be sold, but as a gift to the Convict Ship Committee. Its design is intricate. It is called a pieced-medallion quilt, because the patchwork pieces are first sewn into long strips and then stitched together

to form concentric rows around a central motif.

On the Rajah quilt, the central motif is broderie perse, cut-outs from chintz that were appliquéd onto plain linen. The motifs are birds and flowers. I was intrigued by this, because chintz was an expensive cloth – one which was unlikely to have been donated by merchants. I wondered where the chintz had come from. This was just one of the many small details and questions about the quilt that led me into my story.

I've always loved cloth and textiles, almost as much as I love stories and story telling. I didn't intentionally combine these two passions when I started to write my first novel, *Tapestry*, based on the eleventh century Bayeux Tapestry, but somehow the textures, colours and sensuality of fabrics continues to find its way into my writing.

There has been a long association between writing and cloth making, from the Greek Fates who spun the warp and weft of time, to fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, where spinning is associated with the arcane and the magical.

It's common to find metaphors such as weaving, threads, stitching and even tapestry, associated with writing and story telling. Even the idea of a story as a quilt is not a new one. Consider the enormous AIDS Memorial Quilt, made in America, that now can be viewed online.

The Rajah Quilt, its charitable beginnings, the needlewomen who made it and its journey to Australia (and then back to London) formed the centrepiece for my story. Along with it came the commercial, cultural and political backdrop against which the Rajah sailed; the first Opium War, early photography and the Victorian cloth trade.

When I started writing *The Silver Thread* I knew something of nineteenth century English and Irish social history, but almost nothing about the colony of NSW. Although I'm Australian, I grew up all over the world because my father's work as a designer took him from country to country.

The more I read about 1840s NSW, the more I realised how mistaken had been my vague idea that Victorian Sydney was an unsophisticated and uncultured place. Of course, there have always been those misinformed souls who think Australia to be such a place even now, but I was ashamed at my ignorance. In fact, Sydney was a wealthy port town in which thrived almost every craft, trade and mercantile to be found in London and Europe. Add to this its equally lively criminal underworld, and I had a vibrant and potentially dramatic setting for a novel with English, Irish and Australian characters, a fast-moving plot, a mystery, a love story and plenty of adventure.”

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