

ESCAPED CONVICTS

Letters from Perth Gazette 1866

IMPROVISATION / READERS THEATRE

Students are on the raised platform of the 1874 York Courthouse and have their scripts in folders. For Readers Theatre the students do not need to know their parts but should be well rehearsed in reading them. Even though the parts are read, students should still make eye contact with the audience. The performers do not look at each other. Students may take on different roles.

Suitability: **years 8 to 12**

Number of Students: **one or more**

Venue:

York Courthouse Complex

The piece could be performed in the 1874 Courtroom or exercise or stable yard

Synopsis:

These two letters from the Perth Gazette were written at the time of Moondyne Joe's 1866 escape. People were concerned about the lack of police resources to capture escaped convicts and about what would happen to them if they were re-captured. Typically, escaped convicts were put in irons and kept in Fremantle Prison. The colonists needed convict labour to build roads. The more convicts there were in prison, the fewer roads were being built.

Costume:

York Courthouse Complex has some costumes available for student use.

Suggested Activities:

- This material could be used as the inspiration for improvised interviews or plays.
- They might be part of a bigger presentation on Moondyne Joe or convicts of the era.
- Compare the different points of view discussed in the letters and put the argument for each –
 - a) employment to help promote growth of the colony
 - b) a volunteer corps to capture or shoot convicts – especially Moondyne Joe.



ESCAPED CONVICTS

Perth Gazette

LETTER ONE 15/9/1866

The pledge that all absconders should be worked in irons has been strictly fulfilled... Of course Magistrates cannot sentence men to work in irons forever and when their sentences expire they must under ordinary circumstances be released. The punishment for absconding has, instead of being reduced, been vastly increased. The men who have recently absconded have been placed in dark cells on bread and water till the medical officer reports they are unable to bear the treatment any longer without danger to their lives and they have afterward to undergo two years in irons.

In several cases the governor has added to the sentence of the magistrate while in others where from the immense number of re-convictions, men were altogether hopeless and consequently reckless, promises of small remissions of their periods in chains as well as of the subsequent hard labour have been made contingent on entire freedom from the slightest offence.

Without such incentive these men could only be coerced through brute force, as offences punishable by short diet alone, additional to the length of sentence being valueless. While flogging would be too heavy a punishment for mere disciplinary offences, independent of its very questionable effect. This system of granting remissions has been in place for years past.

Upon expiration the convict is placed in hard labour gangs now in place in North Fremantle.

It happens that a large number of men must be retained at Fremantle as unfit to go on a work party. Within the last four months a new class has been established, viz men who from their constant absconding are not to be allowed outside the walls of the prison. There is a considerable loss of labour to the colony.

If the road parties are to be kept up they must be re-supplied with re-convicted men selected from these where offences are the least grave. If this is not done half of the road parties must be closed.

If the question were put to settlers whether they will have men working on the roads who have never been guilty of violence but may possibly abscond and steal the means of supporting life for the short time they are at large or whether all re-convicted men should be sent to Fremantle and Perth and the roads abandoned, we think the first alternative, employment on the roads, would be chosen. The only probation and re-convicted men now at large are Moondyne Joe and his companions. The white police and a host of natives are in pursuit and when they are brought in, probably in a few days, they must join the party confined within the walls of the convict establishment.

As for ticket of leave holders, we are informed that they are allowed to wander about from district to district in search of employment, living frequently at shepherds huts while numbers were living in towns without engagements but nominally working on their own account. The police found these men more or less concerned with all the pilfering and petty thieving in the colony. A considerable number had not reported themselves for 12 to 18 months.

The ticket of leave is the convict's passport showing he has the Governor's permission to be at large and should always have the document with him for production to anyone in authority demanding it. If he cannot produce it, a constable can take him away from his employer at considerable inconvenience. Nevertheless, men of the ticket of leave class have been granted the greatest amount of liberty with scarcely any check.

All this is changed. Everyman who cannot show his bona fide must go into the depot and be employed in public works until he can get a fresh engagement. No man is transferred from one district to another unless on an engagement recommended by the Resident Magistrate or because of a greater demand for labour. In the latter case, men who are the longest out of work are collected and transferred by the government. Those men who are reported by the police to be earning their living in an honest means are allowed to work on their own account.

Hereafter every convict or ticket of leave holder must produce his document or be punished. If the convict values the indulgence so little that he does not concern himself with the safety of his documents, the sooner he returns to the depot the better. Recently the Resident Magistrates were asked to send in the lists of those men who could and could not produce their tickets. We know that in some cases the Resident Magistrate sent the constables round to the outstations to procure the information and so long as the Resident Magistrates are responsible for the correctness of the returns we cannot suppose the acting Comptroller chief would inquire how they obtained their information.

Perth Gazette

LETTER TWO 25/9/1866

The unprotected state of our district has caused the question to be mooted: why not reform the Guildford Volunteer Corps? I know that a former officer is confident of the utility of the movement and they are only waiting for the word to enroll themselves under his banner. Although not so young as those who would be the mainstay, I certainly would try to be as active as the youngest in support of the movement. Why do not the authorities put a price on Moondyne Joe's head before they are forced by circumstances to do so and allow the volunteers to take him or shoot him if necessary? Fifteen police don't seem to be enough to catch Joe and his gang. Then outlaw them and let the whole country so to speak, turn out and put a stop to bushranging. There are many settlers and volunteers who would consider it a duty and would not object to such a rifle practice if it would rid the country of dangerous pests.