

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

THE FATAL SHORE

by Robert Hughes
Knopf, 1987
688 pp. \$24.95

The prison, as we know it and depend on it to keep our societies secure, has a recent history. It is about as old as the factory, of which it is a grim, almost parodic counterpart. The first modern penitentiary, built with the intent to reform, opened in Philadelphia in 1790. Sequestering prisoners in closely controlled spaces and scheduling their every activity, it was designed to bring order and right thinking into miscreants'

lives. At about the same time, France began to plan similar correctional institutions, abandoning the chamber-of-horror punishments that had long served the Old Regime. The British, however, had already developed an alternative to either traditional punishment or modern correctional discipline. They had taken to exiling convicted felons—"transportation to a place beyond the seas," as the judge's formal sentence expressed it.

It turns out that the history of transportation, like possession of the America's Cup, is one of the things that Americans and Australians have in common. Until the American Revolution, most British felons sentenced to transportation were shipped to labor-hungry Maryland and Virginia, where they were sold as servants, bound for the time of their sentences. After 1775, the rebellious colonies refused to receive any more of these social outcasts, and soon the London "hulks"—rotting old ships in which prisoners were held pending transportation—were packed with larcenists, burglars, and an assortment of petty criminals.

The British government solved the problem in 1786 by sending shiploads of convicts to Australia, giving rise to a vast penal settlement. The story of Britain's decision, and of the novel society that resulted from it, is the subject of Robert Hughes's masterful overview.

To the telling of his tale, the author, a native of Australia and art critic for *Time*, brings both an intimate sense of his subject and a painterly eye for the revealing detail. Indeed, Hughes is such a spellbinding chronicler that is easy to lose sight of his larger intent. Several American reviewers (including one of Hughes's *Time* colleagues) have given the impression that his book is about a colony-wide jail, equating all punishment systems with prison systems. The penitentiary simply cannot be created on a continental scale. What Hughes shows, in fact, is that Britain, the first nation to develop the modern factory, was also the first to develop an alternative to the prison, and that it did so largely to avoid the expense.

To be sure, the emergence of actual prisons within the penal settlement is an important part of Australia's unfolding history. Hughes tells of such places in some of the most gripping chapters of his book. Norfolk

Island, for example, a wild, green-clad rock out in the Pacific, became a hellhole for incorrigible criminals, known for its floggings, hangings, rampant homosexuality, and suppressed rebellions. Its gruesomeness made all the more impressive the accomplishments of a Scottish penal reformer named Alexander Maconochie, who served as prison commandant from 1839 to 1843. By instituting a system of trust that foreshadowed the modern parole system, he managed to bring peace and order to the prison. Authorities, however, questioned his methods and removed him. They had an additional motive; they wanted Norfolk Island to remain a grim deterrent to all would-be wrongdoers.

But the hellholes were only a small part of the system, as Hughes makes clear. Most transportees were assigned, rather like indentured labor in North America, as servants to farmers and others (ex-convicts, mainly) who were developing the country. With good reason, Hughes claims that "the assignment system was by far the most successful form of penal rehabilitation that had ever been tried in English, American or European history." And he buttresses his claim with excellent recent scholarship on the subject. John Hirst's *Convict Society and its Enemies* (1983), for instance, shows what kind of tradeoffs between work and incentives were made by the assigned convicts and their masters. Portia Robinson's *Hatch and Brood of Time* (1985) uses the 1828 census to establish the uprightness of the first generation of Australia's native-born whites. Long a source of wonder to visitors, this success story resulted from the fact that the ex-convict parents of first-generation whites settled down to responsible family lives and became hard-working yeomen and artisans. This remarkable self-reform contradicted contemporary assertions, repeated in history books down through the years, that convicts were, and always would be, thieves and whores.

In 1868, writes Hughes, "when the last convict ship discharged its Irish prisoners . . . in Western Australia, transportation was part unpleas-



ant memory and part unhealed wound." Ironically, the end of the convict system, like its beginning, was linked to a major development in American history—abolitionism. Those free settlers who wanted to end transportation in order to claim Australia for themselves denounced the system as a "slave system," which it definitely was not. The critics of transportation, as Hughes relates, drew on antislavery rhetoric and imagery to discredit it. And, until the 1980s, those images have largely determined the way early Australian history was presented.

Although he takes full account of the tales of atrocities, Hughes offers a truer picture of the human story of successes, as well as the tragic failures, that were all part of a remarkable penal experiment that gave birth to a new nation.

—*Rhys Isaac '87*

**REVOLUTION
AND THE WORD:
The Rise of the Novel
in America**

by Cathy N. Davidson
Oxford, 1987
322 pp. \$22.95

Central to the formation of the new American Republic was the founders' belief that the ideas that would unite the nation would be diffused to its citizens through the medium of the printed word. But at the close of the 18th century, most Americans had not yet grasped the distinctive nature of printed matter. A goodly number of readers still believed that words delivered orally could be put into print without altering their essential

character. Most such readers had in mind the sermon, by definition an oral performance. Thanks to the printing press, American preachers had long been able to address an audience beyond the walls of the local meeting-house. Similarly, politicians believed, the new nation's expanding printing industry would now make it possible for political ideas to reach beyond the local forum and thus help shape a national citizenry.

The realization that print affected subject matter precisely because it was aimed at a wider, less visible audience was slow to arrive. Benjamin Franklin grasped it before most others. He observed, for instance, that in transcribing legal discourse into books "You must abridge the Performances to understand them; and when you find how little there is in a Writing of vast Bulk, you will be as much surpriz'd as a Stranger at the Opening of a *Pumpkin*." Accordingly, he strove to achieve conciseness without density. Learning from such proto-novelists as John Bunyan, he introduced dialogue, anecdote, and drama into his treatises. This not only made his works more readable but allowed him to address new subjects and issues as well. And indeed it enabled him to reach a new kind of audience—an audience of what he called "leather-apron men," small-tradesmen and artisans.

Chief among the new things that print made possible was the genre