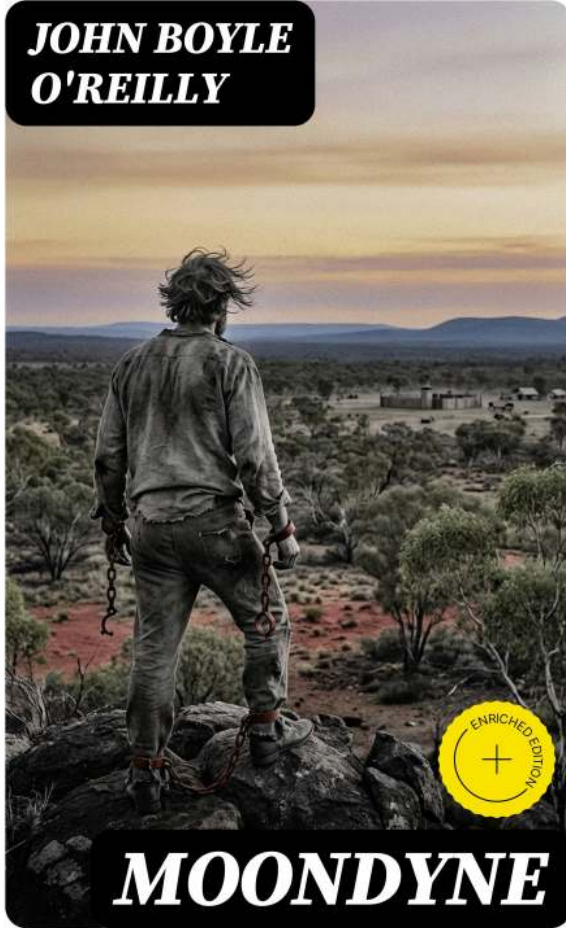


**JOHN BOYLE
O'REILLY**



MOONDYNE

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John Boyle O'Reilly

Moondyne

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gavin Avery

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Introduction

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At the heart of *Moondyne* lies a relentless contest between the machinery of punishment and the human claim to dignity. John Boyle O'Reilly's novel stages that contest across the frontier world of Western Australia, where a penal regime meets a landscape that both conceals and reveals. Without rehearsing outcomes, the book invites readers to watch a man measured by the limits others place around him and by the counterforces of courage, cunning, and conscience. The result is an adventure charged with moral inquiry, pressing questions about what a society owes to truth, mercy, and reform.

Moondyne is a nineteenth-century adventure and social-problem novel set largely in the convict districts and bushlands of Western Australia, composed by the Irish-born writer and political exile John Boyle O'Reilly and first published in the late Victorian era. O'Reilly, who resettled in the United States and worked as a journalist and editor, brought firsthand knowledge of transportation and colonial conditions to his fiction. The book belongs to the era's popular narratives of crime and pursuit while advancing a reformist critique of the penal system. Its pages move between metropolitan courts and colonial outposts, but the colony's harsh expanses dominate its atmosphere.

At its outset, the novel follows a man entangled in a criminal accusation and swept through a rigid legal process whose verdict cannot be undone by character or

circumstance. He is transported to the Swan River Colony and assigned to the hard routines of imprisonment, where survival requires both obedience and invention. In this crucible he acquires the name by which the book remembers him, and he learns to read the country as a map of risks and concealments. The narrative's early movements trace his struggle to define himself against a system that classifies, confines, and misunderstands.

O'Reilly writes in an omniscient Victorian voice that can be brisk and reportorial in one chapter and meditative or lyrical in the next. Courtrooms, stockades, and police stations are rendered with a journalist's eye for process, while the bush appears in wide, atmospheric sweeps that turn space into a psychological ally or enemy. The pacing favors suspense and revelation without relying on gruesome detail, and its texture includes coincidence, masks, and disguises characteristic of the period's sensation fiction. Yet the tone remains earnest and reformist, focusing attention on character, motive, and choice rather than spectacle alone.

Themes of freedom and confinement anchor the book, sharpened by an inquiry into the difference between legality and justice. Class prejudice and institutional convenience shape the lives of prisoners and officials alike, exposing how punishment can drift from its declared aims. The natural world offers both refuge and moral counterpoint, a realm that tests resourcefulness while undermining the pretense of absolute control. Identity and reinvention are persistent questions: names are given, withheld, and remade. O'Reilly also explores loyalty, friendship, and the possibilities of

restitution, proposing that real security rests less in fear than in recognition of shared humanity.

For contemporary readers, *Moondyne* matters as an early, accessible critique of carceral thinking within an engaging narrative of pursuit and escape. Its portrait of bureaucracy, surveillance, and the temptation to treat people as problems instead of persons speaks directly to modern debates about incarceration and reform. The book further captures the dislocations of migration and exile, showing how displacement magnifies questions of belonging and responsibility. Its attention to landscape acknowledges the material pressures of work, scarcity, and distance that still shape frontier economies. Above all, it challenges readers to measure justice by outcomes that heal rather than merely punish.

Approached today, the novel rewards patience with its period conventions—rhetorical flourishes, sudden turns, and emblematic villains—because those devices serve a clear moral and social argument. Readers may encounter language and assumptions typical of its time, yet the story's ethical throughline remains legible and compelling. One can read it as adventure, as social plea, or as the imaginative transmutation of lived experience into narrative form, and each approach reveals a different facet of its craft. By the last pages, the questions it raises about accountability, mercy, and the purposes of law continue to echo past the plot's closing gestures.

Synopsis

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First published in 1879, *Moondyne* by John Boyle O'Reilly is a social novel set across Britain and the Australian convict colonies. It opens with a crime that exposes the machinery of nineteenth-century justice: swift investigation, rigid sentencing, and little patience for circumstance. A capable but marginalized man is condemned and transported, his case illustrating how law may deviate from equity when guided by class bias and institutional routine. O'Reilly establishes a sober framework of courts, gaols, and official paperwork, then pivots to the human costs of punishment, positioning questions of identity, fairness, and the possibility of redemption at the center of the narrative.

The journey to the far side of the world introduces the prison ship's hierarchy and the routines that prepare convicts for colonial discipline. In Western Australia, the new arrival confronts a harsh regimen and a vast, bewildering landscape. His resourcefulness and refusal to be broken mark him out, and his repeated dealings with warders, overseers, and informers sharpen the book's critique of deterrence by severity. As he tests fences literal and figurative, local talk fastens on him a bush nickname, "Moondyne," drawn from the wild country he learns to navigate, and the legend of a near-mythic escapee begins to solidify.

O'Reilly counterbalances scenes of pursuit and confinement with a sustained argument about prison

reform. A humane administrator enters the story, committed to experimenting with trust, meaningful work, and measured liberty in place of chains and isolation. The policy debate unfolds practically, in workshops and compounds, as skeptical subordinates and political overseers watch for failure. The protagonist's conduct becomes a proving ground: can character be restored by confidence and responsibility, or only restrained by force? Through these institutional struggles, the novel maps the broader conflict between public demands for retribution and emerging ideas of rehabilitation within a growing colony.

In a parallel plotline abroad, the narrative opens drawing rooms, law offices, and streets far from the bush to trace an injustice of another kind. Here, reputation, inheritance, and secrecy shape lives as decisively as shackles do in the colony. A missing identity and a buried wrong animate the chapters, with careful withholding that preserves the novel's surprises. O'Reilly uses this thread to show how refined settings can conceal coercion and moral compromise, and to suggest that social standing neither prevents cruelty nor guarantees discernment. The two narrative streams gather momentum separately, their thematic rhymes preparing a later convergence.

The wilderness episodes deepen the portrait of Moondyne as an observer and master of terrain. O'Reilly's descriptions of scrub, heat, and distance are functional as well as atmospheric, explaining how evasion, tracking, and endurance shape relations among convicts, settlers, police, and local guides. Bushcraft becomes a language of freedom, but also a measure of risk: isolation threatens sanity as

surely as the cell. Practical challenges—water, shelter, direction—drive the action while underscoring the novel’s argument that environment and institutions jointly mold behavior. The colony itself emerges as a character, testing every claim the penal system makes about order, labor, and reform.

As the story advances, changes in fortune alter the public face of the central figure and the expectations around him. Past acts, official records, and private vows collide, bringing the questions posed early—about culpability, forgiveness, and proof—into a tighter focus. The reformer’s policies face an exacting trial, and the overseas intrigue moves closer to revelation. Without disclosing key turns, it is enough to say that recognition and responsibility become decisive touchstones. The novel steadily narrows the gap between appearance and reality, inviting judgment not only of individuals but of the procedures that named them criminal or respectable.

Moondyne endures as both adventure and inquiry, shaped by O’Reilly’s firsthand knowledge of transportation and his reformist impulse. It advances a clear critique of solitary confinement and punitive spectacle while insisting that character can be nurtured by trust and purposeful work. Its double setting links colonial and metropolitan societies in a single moral field, suggesting that hidden wrongs and public punishments share roots. By concluding on terms that affirm accountability without sensationalism, the book’s resonance lies in its measured belief that institutions can change—and in its invitation to weigh justice by outcomes for the living, not merely by legal form.

Historical Context

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John Boyle O'Reilly's *Moondyne* (published in Boston in 1879) is set in mid-nineteenth-century Western Australia during the final years of Britain's convict transportation system. The colony, founded at the Swan River in 1829, had by the 1850s become the empire's last destination for transported prisoners. Central institutions in the novel's milieu include the Fremantle Convict Establishment (Fremantle Prison), regional depots, and road parties supplying labor for colonial infrastructure. O'Reilly writes with the authority of a former transportee, using the landscape and bureaucracy of Western Australia as the stage for a study of punishment, authority, and the possibilities of rehabilitation.

Britain transported convicts to Australia from 1788, but most eastern colonies ended the practice by mid-century; New South Wales ceased in 1840 and Van Diemen's Land in the 1850s. Western Australia requested convicts in 1849 to address labor shortages, and transportation there ran from 1850 until 1868. The last convict ship to Australia, the *Hougoumont*, arrived at Fremantle in January 1868. The system combined severe discipline with incentives such as the ticket-of-leave, allowing supervised employment. Work gangs built roads, jetties, and public buildings that shaped the colony, embedding prison administration into everyday civic and economic life.

Penal administration in Western Australia evolved across successive regimes. Early management under Comptroller General Edmund Henderson emphasized order and public works; by the 1860s, Governor John Hampton's tenure (1862–1868) became notorious for stricter punishments and allegations of nepotism when his son, George, acted as Comptroller of Convicts. Fremantle Prison, built largely by convict labor in the 1850s, incorporated solitary cells and a hierarchical classification system reflecting contemporary British penology. Political debate in Britain and the colonies questioned transportation's morality, cost, and effectiveness, and by 1868 the imperial government ended the system, leaving Western Australia to adjust to a post-convict economy.

The figure inspiring the novel's title, the Western Australian bushranger popularly known as Moondyne Joe (Joseph Bolitho Johns), was a ticket-of-leave man whose repeated escapes in the 1860s embarrassed authorities. His nickname derived from the Moondyne area near Toodyay in the Avon Valley. Press accounts dwelt on his ingenuity, and a specially reinforced cell at Fremantle became associated with his notoriety. While O'Reilly's narrative is fictional rather than biographical, contemporary fascination with outlaws and escapees—common across Australian colonies—frames the book's attention to surveillance, punishment, and the precarious status of former convicts seeking legal and social recognition.

O'Reilly's authorship is inseparable from Irish nationalist history. Born in County Meath in 1844, he was involved with the Fenian movement and was convicted by court-martial in

1866, transported to Western Australia the following year. He escaped in 1869 and settled in the United States, where he became a leading Boston journalist and editor of the Catholic weekly *The Pilot*. The transatlantic Fenian network and post-Famine Irish diaspora shaped his politics and writing. Moondyne carries the imprint of these experiences: suspicion of authoritarian rule, sympathy for political prisoners, and interest in the moral claims of the powerless within imperial systems.

The novel emerges amid vigorous nineteenth-century debates over punishment and criminality. British and colonial policymakers weighed deterrence against rehabilitation, experimenting with the separate and silent systems, marks for good conduct, and conditional release. Reformers such as Alexander Maconochie and Walter Crofton influenced practices behind the ticket-of-leave. At the same time, new theories of scientific criminology, exemplified in Cesare Lombroso's 1876 work, promoted hereditarian explanations for crime. O'Reilly's emphasis on character, environment, and humane treatment parallels reformist currents while challenging deterministic views. Western Australia's administrative record—combining hard labor, strict surveillance, and limited pathways to conditional freedom—provides the institutional backdrop.

Western Australia's mid-century frontier was sparsely populated by Europeans outside Perth and Fremantle, with settlements along the Avon Valley and coastal districts separated by difficult terrain. The region was and is the homeland of Noongar peoples, whose dispossession advanced through pastoral leases, fencing, and control of

water and routes. Colonial policing and courts enforced settler claims; a separate carceral regime on Rottnest Island imprisoned hundreds of Aboriginal men from the 1830s onward. This broader colonial context—environmental hardship, distance, and inequitable legal power—shapes the stakes of flight, labor, and belonging that the novel explores within the confines of Western Australian society.

Appearing little more than a decade after transportation ended, Moondyne looks back at Western Australia's convict years to test the claims of deterrence, authority, and redemption. Its settings—prisons, road camps, courtrooms, and bush—mirror the institutions and environments that defined the colony's formative decades. Written from the vantage of an Irish political exile turned American editor, the book participates in transatlantic debates about justice and empire. By dramatizing the fractures of a system that punished harshly yet depended on convicts' labor and reform, O'Reilly offers a critique consistent with rising humanitarian reformism and with retrospective reassessment of transportation's legacy.

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The Land of the Red Line

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Western Australia is a vast and unknown country, almost mysterious in its solitude and unlikeness to any other part of the earth. It is the greatest of the Australias in extent, and in many features the richest and loveliest.

But the sister colonies of Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland are famous for their treasure of gold. Men from all lands have flocked thither to gather riches. They care not for the slow labour of the farmer or grazier. Let the weak and the old, the coward and the dreamer, prune the vine and dry the figs, and wait for the wheat to ripen. Strong men must go to the trial—must set muscle against muscle, and brain against brain, in the mine and the market.

Men's lives are short; and unless they gather gold in the mass, how shall they wipe out the primal curse of poverty before the hand loses its skill and the heart its strong desire?

Western Australia is the Cinderella of the South. She has no gold like her sisters. To her was given the servile and unhappy portion. The dregs of British society were poured upon her soil. The robber and the manslayer were sent thither. Her territory was marked off with a Red Line[1]. She has no markets for honest men, and no ports for honest ships. Her laws are not the laws of other countries, but the terrible rules of the menagerie. Her citizens have no rights: they toil their lives out at heavy tasks, but earn no wages, nor own a vestige of right in the soil they till. It is a land of

slaves and bondmen—the great penal colony of Great Britain.

"There is no gold in the western colony," said the miners contemptuously; "let the convicts keep the land—but let them observe our red line."

So the convicts took the defamed country, and lived and died there, and others were transported there from England to replace those who died, and every year the seething ships gave up their addition to the terrible population.

In time, the western colony came to be regarded as a plague-spot, where no man thought of going and no man did go unless sent in irons.

If the miners from Victoria and New South Wales, however, had visited the penal land some years after its establishment, they would have heard whispers of strange import—rumours and questions of a great golden secret possessed by the western colony. No one could tell where the rumour began or on what it was based, except perhaps the certainty that gold was not uncommon among the natives of the colony, who had little or no intercourse with the aborigines of the gold-yielding countries of the south and east.

The belief seemed to hover in the air; and it settled with dazzling conviction on the crude and abnormal minds of the criminal population. At their daily toil in the quarries or on the road parties, no rock was blasted nor tree uprooted that eager eyes did not hungrily scan the upturned earth. At night, when the tired wretches gathered round the camp-fire outside their prison hut, the dense mahogany forest closing weirdly round the white-clad group, still the undiscovered

gold was the topic earnestly discussed. And even the government officers and the few free settlers became after a time filled with the prevailing expectancy and disquiet.

But years passed, and not an ounce of gold was discovered in the colony. The Government had offered reward to settlers or ticket-of-leave men who would find the first nugget or gold-bearing rock; but no claimant came forward.

Still, there remained the tantalizing fact—for, in the course of years, fact it had grown to be—that gold was to be found in the colony, and in abundance. The native bushmen were masters of the secret, but neither bribe nor torture could wring it from them. Terrible stories were whispered among the convicts of attempts that had been made to force the natives to give up the precious secret. Gold was common amongst these bushmen. Armlets and anklets had been seen on men and women; and some of their chief men, it was said, wore breast-plates and enormous chains of hammered gold.

At last the feeling in the west grew to fever heat; and, in 1848, the Governor of the penal colony issued a proclamation, copies of which were sent by native runners to every settler and ticket-of-leave man, and were even surreptitiously distributed amongst the miners on the other side of the red line.

This proclamation intensified the excitement. It seemed to bring the mine nearer to every man in the colony. It was a formal admission that there really was a mine; it dispelled the vague uncertainty, and left an immediate hunger or greed in the minds of the population.

The proclamation read as follows:

£5.000 REWARD!

The above Reward will be paid for the discovery of the Mine from which the Natives of the Vasse obtain their Gold.

A Free Pardon will be granted to the Discoverer, should he be of the Bond Class.

No Reward will be given nor terms made with Absconders from the Prisons or Road Parties.

By order,

F. R. HAMPTON,

Governor.

Official Residence,

Perth, 28th June, 1848.

But nothing came of it. Not an ounce of gold was ever taken from the earth. At last men began to avoid the subject. They could not bear to be tantalized nor tortured by the splendid delusion. Some said there was no mine in the Vasse, and others that, if there were a mine, it was known only to a few of the native chiefs, who dealt out the raw gold to their people.

For eight years this magnificent reward had remained unclaimed, and now its terms were only recalled at the fires, of the road-making convicts, or in the lonely slab huts of the mahogany sawyers, who were all ticket-of-leave men.

The Convict Road Party

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It was a scorching day in midsummer—a few days before Christmas[1q].

Had there been any moisture in the bush it would have steamed in the heavy heat. During the midday hours not a bird stirred among the mahogany and gum trees. On the flat tops of the low banksia the round heads of the white cockatoos could be seen in thousands, motionless as the trees themselves. Not a parrot had the vim to scream. The chirping insects were silent. Not a snake had courage to rustle his hard skin against the hot and dead bush-grass. The bright-eyed iguanas wee in their holes. The mahogany sawyers had left their logs and were sleeping in the cool sand of their pits. Even the travelling ants had halted on their wonderful roads, and sought the shade of a bramble.

All free things were at rest; but the penetrating click of the axe, heard far through the bush, and now and again a harsh word of command, told that it was a land of bondmen.

From daylight to dark, through the hot noon as steadily as in the cool evening, the convicts were at work on the roads—the weary work that has no wages, no promotion, no incitement, no variation for good or bad, except stripes for the laggard.

Along the verge of the Koagulup Swamp—one of the greatest and smallest of the wooded lakes of the country, its black water deep enough to float a man-of-war—a party of convicts were making a government road. They were cutting

their patient way into a forest only traversed before by the aborigine and the absconder.

Before them in the bush, as in their lives, all was dark and unknown-tangled underbrush, gloomy shadows, and noxious things. Behind them, clear and open, lay the straight road they had made—leading to and from the prison.

Their camp, composed of rough slab huts, was some two hundred miles from the main prison of the colony, on the Swan River, at Fremantle, from which radiate all the roads made by the bondmen.

The primitive history of the colony is written for ever in its roads. There is, in this penal labour, a secret of value to be utilized more fully by a wiser civilization. England sends her criminals to take the brunt of the new land's hardship and danger—to prepare the way for honest life and labour. In every community there is either dangerous or degrading work to be done: and who so fit to do it as those who have forfeited their liberty by breaking the law?

The convicts were dressed in white trousers, blue woollen shirt, and white hat; every article stamped with England's private mark—the broad arrow[2]. They were young men, healthy and strong, their faces and bare arms burnt to the colour of mahogany. Burglars, murderers, garotters, thieves—double-dyed law-breakers every one; but, for all that, kind hearted and manly fellows enough were among them.

"I tell you, mates," said one, resting on his spade, "this is going to be the end of Moondyne Joe. That firing in the swamp last night was his last fight."

25 A watch-grate is a small grilled or wedge-shaped opening in a cell wall or door used in 19th-century prisons to allow warders to observe or speak to prisoners while remaining out of sight and unheard; it provided a limited view into the cell for supervision.

26 A 'man-of-war' is a heavily armed naval warship, especially a sailing warship used by European navies from the 17th through the 19th centuries; the phrase here indicates the policeman formerly served at sea in the navy.

27 A Scripture-reader was a prison official in 19th-century Britain who read the Bible, led prayers, and provided religious instruction to inmates; the role was typically a lay or salaried appointment tied to the prison authorities and often reflected Protestant practice.

28 In 18th–19th century Britain, 'transportation' referred to the judicial sentence of sending convicted prisoners to penal colonies (notably in Australia); the practice was widely used in the late 1700s and through much of the 1800s, with transportation to parts of Australia tapering off by the 1850s and to Western Australia continuing into the 1860s (roughly 1850–1868).

29 Post-nominal letters for Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, a British order of chivalry; in the 19th century it indicated a high-ranking knighthood awarded for distinguished military or civil service.

30 The headquarters of the Metropolitan Police in London (founded 1829); by the 19th century 'Scotland Yard' was commonly used to mean the city's central police force and its criminal investigations.

31 Short for the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, a major British steamship line formed in the 19th century that ran mail, passenger and cargo services and was commonly referred to as P. & O.

32 Refers to the institutions at Lloyd's in London (often called Lloyd's of London), a long-established centre for maritime information, underwriting and shipping business that by the 18th-19th centuries provided ship news, insurance and records used by merchants and shipowners.

33 A character in the novel described as an Indigenous leader of "the Vasse"; the Vasse is a coastal district in southwestern Western Australia (around the Vasse River and present-day Busselton). The personal name appears to be a literary or local designation in the book and is not clearly identifiable with a specific documented historical individual.

34 A 'road' or roadstead is a sheltered anchorage; Portland Roads is the anchorage off the Isle of Portland in Dorset on the English Channel, historically used by naval and merchant vessels (including in the 18th-19th centuries).

35 A binnacle is the waist-high stand on a ship that houses the ship's compass (and often a lamp) so the helmsman can read the compass by night; this was standard equipment on 19th-century sailing vessels.

36 A form of penal or shipboard labour in which prisoners or seamen teased apart old tarred ropes (oakum) to produce loose fibres used for caulking and cordage; it was commonly imposed as punishment in 18th-19th-century prisons and on sailing vessels.

37 The Republic of Liberia is a West African state founded in the 19th century by resettled free Black

Americans and formerly enslaved people under the auspices of the American Colonization Society; it began colonization from about 1822 and declared independence in 1847.

38 “The black vomit” is a 19th-century term for severe hemorrhagic vomiting (dark, blood-streaked vomit) classically associated with yellow fever and other febrile hemorrhagic illnesses, and was taken as a sign of serious, often fatal, infection.

39 A 18th–19th-century maritime burial practice in which a corpse wrapped in sail-cloth was weighted (often with a cannon ball) to ensure it sank when committed to the sea; exact procedures and weights varied by ship and period.

40 An older sailing term for the steady easterly trade winds in the Southern Hemisphere (the ‘trades’), used by sailing ships for navigation; roughly the belt of winds between the equator and about 30°S.

41 A senior administrative official; in 19th-century British and colonial practice the Comptroller-General commonly oversaw convict administration or official accounts, so in this context he is the government officer empowered to review cases and order the release of a prisoner.

42 “Houguemont” is the name of the convict ship in this chapter; historically the 19th-century ship Hougoumont (variant spellings) transported convicts to Western Australia, including a well-documented 1867 voyage often cited as the last such convict transport to that colony.

43 A ‘chain-gang’ refers to prisoners physically chained together while performing hard labor (here, stone-quarry work); such groups were commonly used in 19th-century

penal systems, including convict settlements in Western Australia.

44 A village and civil parish in Lancashire, England (near Preston); in 19th-century fiction and records it is a specific English locality rather than a generic place name.

45 The capital city of South Australia, founded in 1836; in 19th-century colonial contexts it was a principal port and regional centre to which people travelled or returned.

46 An older term meaning the land attached to a manor that the owner kept for personal use (essentially an estate); commonly used in 19th-century descriptions of large rural properties.

47 A poetic reference to the Swan River, the river that runs through the Perth region of Western Australia (the colony was often called the Swan River Colony); here 'mirror-like' describes the river's calm, reflective surface in the scene.

48 A region in southwestern Western Australia (around the Vasse River and the present-day Busselton area) that was opened to European settlement in the 19th century; by the mid-1800s it was known for farming and timber — dates and boundaries are approximate.

49 Refers to Rottnest Island (historically sometimes spelled "Rottenest"), an island off Fremantle in Western Australia; during the 19th century it was used by colonial authorities as a prison and as a military/quarantine station, including the incarceration of Indigenous people.

50 A document issued to convicts in 19th-century British colonies (notably Australia) that granted conditional freedom to live and work before the formal end of their