

2017-18 Joint Winners of the British Commission for Maritime History and Boydell & Brewer Prize: Dr Katherine Roscoe (Leicester) and Dr David Wilson (Strathclyde).

Dr Katherine Roscoe (Leicester)

Island Chains: Carceral Islands and the Colonisation of Australia, 1824-1901

This thesis is about the transportation of European, Indigenous and non-white immigrant convicts to islands off the coast of Australia. It argues that carceral islands were defined not by isolation but by connection. They were part of local, colonial and imperial networks through which people, goods and ideas travelled. Through these connections, carceral islands played a key role in the colonisation of the vast Australian mainland. They acted as sites to remove those who resisted conquest or disrupted settler economies and then convict labour was re-utilised to benefit the colonial project. Using prison records and colonial office correspondence as its primary source material, it shows that islands were systematically used within the Australian convict system to isolate and extract labour from convicts.

The study turns on three case studies – Melville Island (Yermalnear) in the Northern Territory, Rottnest Island (Wadjemup) in Western Australia and Cockatoo Island (Wa-rea-mah) in New South Wales – to demonstrate that carceral islands were vital for the success of colonisation. The first two chapters focus on how officials and magistrates ‘imagined’ these islands as secure, bounded ‘natural prisons’, which they used as destinations for absconders and Indigenous peoples who they deemed to be ‘escape risks’. The second half focusses on how convicts experienced island geographies in their everyday life, examining how proximity to the sea shaped the labour regimes convicts underwent, particularly building maritime infrastructure, and the forms of agency convicts undertook, particularly how they used access to sailors and the sea to smuggle and escape. Collectively the chapters show that islands were ‘differentiated spaces’ that served punitive and economic roles within the broader convict system.

David Wilson (Strathclyde)

Pirates, Merchants, and Imperial Authority in the British Atlantic, 1716-1726

Between 1716 and 1726, there was a surge in piracy in the Caribbean Sea, North America, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. British state, colonial, and local responses to increased reports of piracy differed across these colonial and geographical divides. British mercantile groups with stakes in the Caribbean sugar, Virginian tobacco, and African slave trade lobbied when these markets were impacted by piracy. Likewise, the East India Company exerted extensive influence when piratical operations spread to the Indian Ocean. The British state, moved by these groups, responded with multiple initiatives to stem the impact of piracy on important commercial areas. At the same time, colonial agents both supplied pirates and subsidised local campaigns against piracy. This project explores the multifaceted nature of the suppression of piracy within colonial and metropolitan contexts to explain that multiple participants operating in distant but connected theatres influenced and shaped anti-piracy campaigns. Such an examination challenges current understanding of the war against piracy, while providing novel insight into imperial authority, state-empire relations, and the multilateral Atlantic economy. In this way, both pirate ships and the ships that hunted them are the lens through which to observe and understand the British Atlantic world in the early eighteenth century.