Shifting the shape of Australian history: Convicts, the early colonial period and the making of Australia

Tuesday 15 May 2012 5.30-7pm, followed by a reception in the Coombs extension

Allan Martin 2012 Public Lecture
Associate Professor Grace Karskens FAHA, School of Humanities, University of New South Wales, introduction by ANU Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington

Coombs Lecture Theatre Fellows Road, ANU

For over forty years now, historians have been researching and writing about the economic, social, cultural and biological contributions and legacies of the convicts sent to Australia between 1788 and 1868, and about the key foundational developments of the early colonial period 1788-1822.

Yet so many scholars who write about later periods of Australian history still routinely quarantine the convict era as irrelevant to what happened next in our nation’s history. And in the popular imagination, convicts are still brutal, evil or humorous caricatures, forever shackled, faceless, helpless and hopeless.

Why, in the face of the vast and growing mountain of evidence, have we still got it so wrong? What would it take for the truth to be known? And how would a true understanding of the convict legacy and the early colonial period shift the shape of Australian history as we know it?

Grace Karskens teaches history in the School of Humanities at the University of New South Wales. Her research areas include Australian colonial history, urban history, cross-cultural history and urban environmental history. Grace is interested in promoting historical understandings and awareness to wide audiences and is currently a Trustee of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and the Dictionary of Sydney. Her books include Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood and the multi-award winning The Rocks: life in early Sydney. Her latest book, The Colony: A History of Early Sydney won the 2010 Prime Minister’s Literary Award for non-fiction. Grace was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2010.