

Robert Jordan, [*The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788-1840*](#), Currency House, 471pp, \$39.99, available as a searchable e-book from Amazon, I-tunes, Google Books, Kobobooks and others in a variety of e-formats.

I am not a regular e-book reader preferring hard copy. Therefore this was an interesting exercise as I had to read it on my laptop although I probably could have put it on my Ipad and made it a little more portable.

Originally published in 2002, this e-book is a new, updated edition of *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788-1840* by Robert Jordan. It is an incredibly detailed book (471 pages) at an aspect of early colonial life that few of us have even thought about. What did our ancestors do for entertainment?

There are seven chapters which clearly outline the progress of the book, namely:

- Chapter 1 Britons abroad, the early convicts and their theatrical background
- Chapter 2 Theatre in Sydney to 1809, a chronological account
- Chapter 3 The Sydney Theatre, 1796-1804-07, The Playhouse and Company organisation
- Chapter 4 The Sydney Theatre, 1796-1804-07, actors audiences and others
- Chapter 5 The theatres of Norfolk Island, 1793-1806
- Chapter 6 Convict theatre 1807-1830
- Chapter 7 'Gallant Captains', Hyndman, Maconochie and the fading of convict theatre.

Three appendices are included:

- Appendix A Dramatis Personae, performers and others associated with the Sydney Theatre 1796-1800 (42 profiles)
- Appendix B Longer notes to Chapters 1-7
- Appendix C recorded productions at Robert Sidaway's theatre and recorded productions at Emu Plains.

As well there is an introduction, conclusion, preliminary notes, list of illustrations, notes (detailed references) and a bibliography. Sadly there is no index. I suspect an index would have added quite a few more pages to all already lengthy book. However, as this is a searchable e-book it is easy enough to search for something. However, I still like to browse indexes because sometimes I see something I might not have thought to look for. Indexes also give me an overall idea of what is inside a publication.

The detailed references and clear citations would make it easy to follow up original records mentioned in the text. It is great to see such extensive use of archives, especially State Records New South Wales. The illustrations were interesting and totally fascinating to see those early playbills.

It is very much an academic work and as such, not an easy read. Sometimes I found the story lost within all the detail but it must be said that it is amazing that Jordan did find as much information on convict theatres as he did. Perhaps there should have been two publications, the scholarly reference work and a more light hearted look at the early theatres for those who just want a broader picture.

For anyone who does have ancestors living in Sydney, Emu Plains or on Norfolk Island during this early period it is an eye opener. One of our families was on Norfolk Island during the First Settlement and I am now left wondering did he take his family along to see one or all of these theatrical publications. Although not named in the book, he and his family could easily have been in the audience. After all, what else was there on Norfolk Island in the way of entertainment during the First and Second Settlements.

There is an illustration of the theatre on Norfolk Island in 1796 and I have seen this image by William Neale Chapman before, but I had not realised that one of the buildings was a theatre. The book also describes what it was like inside and this detail allows you to visualise what it was probably like for your ancestor sitting inside and viewing a play.

The length of the book and the incredible detail make it difficult to read but from a research point of view, it is a fantastic reference book which has thrown up another aspect of what life was like for our ancestors on Norfolk Island during the First Settlement. This review is also timely in that I am currently writing the Australian occupations course for the [National Institute of Genealogical Studies](#) and it will make a good addition to the suggested reading list.

As I said at the beginning, I am no expert on using e-books, but I had thought they were cheaper than hard copy books. I have no doubt that the original publication due to its size was expensive to buy and therefore the e-book at \$39.99 is cheaper. For those of us researching our family history, and without a direct connection to convict theatres, might find it easier, and cheaper, to look at the book through a library.

However, anyone with a connection to convict theatres, early Sydney and Norfolk Island will find it a useful addition to their reference libraries. The advantage of being able to search every word also gives the e-book edition an advantage over the earlier print version. Either way, I am really glad that I was given the opportunity to read and review this work by Currency House as it has given me new ideas to follow up in my own family research.

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