

Women Writing Home, 1700-1920

Volume 2: Australia

Sample letter by Margaret Catchpole

Introduction

Born in Suffolk, Margaret Catchpole (1762–1819) was the illegitimate daughter of Elizabeth Catchpole and a farm labourer. A courageous and enterprising young woman as well as an expert horsewoman, she worked as a servant until sentenced to death at the age of 35 for stealing a horse from her Ipswich employer, the brewer John Cobbold. The sentence was commuted to seven years transportation but a dramatic escape from Ipswich jail led to transportation for life. She arrived in Sydney in December 1801 with her heart set on economic independence, social betterment and a complete pardon. For many years she worked as a maid, nurse, cook and a much sought-after midwife, eventually running a farm and then a small store in Richmond Hill, New South Wales. In 1814, after taking care always to mix with those above her socially, namely free people, Catchpole was pardoned by Governor Macquarie. As the letters show, she remained on close terms throughout her life with her former employers, the Cobbolds, who had taught her to read and write. Their son, the Reverend Richard Cobbold, would later write a fictionalized biography based on her letters and writings.⁷ Despite Cobbold's penchant for romanticizing her life (he claims she had a devoted husband and several children), Catchpole never married, maintaining her feisty independence until her death in 1819. With their phonetic spelling and vivid narrative of events, such as terrifying floods, fires, and hailstones as large as pigeons' eggs, the letters included here offer a rare glimpse of a convict woman determined to overcome the stigma of criminality through economic success and upward social mobility.

Margaret Catchpole to her Howes uncle, aunt, and cousins,
Richmond Hill, 2 September 1811

Richmond Hill,
2 September 1811.

My Dear uncle and aunt And Cusones

this Com with my Coind Love to you all and happy to hear you are all well as it Lv me ⁴⁵ at this time thank God for it and with grat joy i received your Letters for i was all moust Lik you for i thought you had for got me. But when i saw the dat thay had Binn wot a long time. thay should a Com in the Dromedary all most 2 years a go. i receved my Box on the 20 of August 1811. it mak me very happy to hear my Dear Cusones are doing so well. a grat Bless and Comfort to you and a saucer happness to me i was very sorrey to hear of my aunt Ledders Being Dead and poor Susey. pray give my Love to my uncle Ledder and tell him i am very sorrey in ded to hear such newes. Giv my Lov to all my Cusones Ledders, i should Be Very Glad to hear from my Cuson Sarah – Giv my Love to Suson if you should see har and tell har i thought she would not a marraid. i am not and all most fiftey year old, nor i do not intend. I hop to see hom onces moor and to see Dear Cuson Charles weay me a pound of tea for me and that fine strong young man Sammall to mak me a par of shoses and poor Lucey to threed my needell, for my eyes are not so good as they wear. But thank God i can do so Well as i do. i reant a Lettell farm a Bout fifteen ackers, a Bout half of it standan timber and the Cleard ground. I hiear min ⁴⁶ to put in my Corn and i work a good deel my self. i have got 30 shep and fortie Goates and 30 Piges and 2 Doges. they tak keear of me for i Live all a Loon, not one in the house. thear is a house within twenty 2 rood of me, i hav a good maney of my frindes that I Goo to see when i think proper, such as i haved nurst when they lay in that Cannot do with out me. i am Looked upon very well, thank God. i hop to git a few poundes to com hom with. the wight frostey mornninges is just laven of us, it hav Binn very Could in ded this wintear, But nothing Lik

your snow that was very shoken in ded. i am very sorrey to hear you have Lorst your frind and i am very sorrey that i have Lorst wothey Good frind as Mrs Sloorgin for she sent me this time 12 yeardes of irish Cloth, 3 yeardes of reben,⁴⁷ 3 Good Bookes and wrigh[ten] paper and this is sum of it. Mrs Cobbold sent me a very hansom present peces for 2 Goundes nine Capes four Last ones and 1 just as it Com of har owen head wich I thought moor of then anen thing. i put it on dyreckly and maney moor thinges to Lang to menchen. my Dear aunt your hair I kiss and Cried over it and will all wayeas keep it and hav the other By me that you sent me. i hop the next time you send you will send me sum of Lucey and Charles hair. Dear uncle you must think i Can walk well for when i heard thear was a Box for me i set of and walked fiftey miles in the 2 Dayes. you Cannot tell the happiness it Giv me and all my frindes wear overjoyed to hear of it. now this will giv me grat hapness for a Long time and i hop Lucey will all wayes Be very Dutfull to her Mother as my Dear aunt must Be a Giften into years for i do not grow young my self. i hav Lorst all my frunt teeth. i can Stur a Bout as Brisk as ever and in good spirites. Dear uncle i hop when you right again you will send me word of all my frindes. i thank you for the newes papears and wich i could a sent you sum But hear is no time, the ship is Going to sail dyreckly so i must Con Clud with my sencer Lov to you and all my Dear Cusones. i pray to God to keep his Bliss upon you all and not for Giting my self.

a Dew⁴⁸

Margaret Catchpole

i am very proud of my Dear Charles Letters and sorrey i had not time to anser it, But i will the next time. James will soon Git a rich man i think if he mind Samell i hop will over tak them By taken keear. this places is a Gitten very plentfull But every thing very Deear, Beef, mutton and pork 15 to 18 pences par pound, wheat from 12 to 15 and 18 shillens par Buchell, Butter five shillens par pound. on March the forteenn is my Barth Day then I am fiftey years.

Editorial Notes

Introduction

⁷ Richard Cobbold, *The History of Margaret Catchpole, a Suffolk Girl*, 3 vols (London, Henry Colburn, 1845).

Sample Letter

⁴⁵ Lv me] leave me.

⁴⁶ I hiear min] I hire men.

⁴⁷ reben] ribbon.

⁴⁸ a Dew] adieu.