

Emma Courtenay Williams
Prisoner 6391
1855 - 1895

Not all Port Melbourne women led the virtuous and worthy lives we find elsewhere in these pages. Although many had to brave misfortune, there were those beset by tragic circumstances above which they could not rise. One of these was Emma Williams, the woman who drowned her child in the Sandridge Lagoon.

Emma Courtenay, born in Launceston in 1855, lived with her mother until at the age of fourteen she fell pregnant to Frederick Williams, 27, and was forced to marry him. Their baby girl was left with Emma's mother while Emma and Frederick moved to the colony of Victoria in search of work.

Another child was on the way when Emma's husband – like many others of that perilous, unsewered period – fell ill with typhoid fever, and died.

It was 1893. In the depth of the great depression, Emma was left alone with a baby boy to support. There was no work to be had. A Port Melbourne man took her in, but he quickly tired of having a child about and sent them both away. Finally she had to resort to the solution adopted by so many other unfortunates in her position – prostitution.

Acquaintances later testified that she was a good mother who did her best to look after her son. But in order to earn money by these illicit means she had to find someone who could take the child so she could work. The older he grew the more he was in the way, and the harder it was to keep him fed and cared for.

Emma found a 'baby farmer' in Ingles Street, a Mrs. Wilson who charged her five bob a week.

Mrs Wilson later testified, *'She appeared to be fond of the child. She was trying to get work and could not get it. She took the child away because I could not keep it any longer. I had the boy eight weeks the first time. She paid for one week. She took the child away. In about a month she brought (him) back, and she herself was also staying with me ... She went away one afternoon and I did not see her, and the child stayed with me for six weeks.'*

Mrs. Wilson found out where Emma was, and forced her to take back her son.

Emma Williams had then agreed to live with a young labourer and petty criminal, William Martin, who had several other aliases and had been in prison three times for vagrancy and intent to housebreak. It was when he came out of jail that he took up with Emma. He became her pimp, which resulted in his taking most of the money she illicitly earned.

Like the other impoverished of South and Port Melbourne they moved constantly from place to place. By 1895 Emma was still trying to locate someone who could feed her son, whom she said was an annoyance to those who shared their house. She tried the Catholic Church, but as he was not a Catholic, they would not take him. She asked the kindly Salina Sutherland to take him in, but Salina said he was too small. Emma's mother in Launceston also refused to look after him.

One day in Rose Lane in South Melbourne, a Mrs Jane Daniels noticed Emma pacing up and down outside, and they fell into conversation. Emma asked her to hold the child (then aged two) while she went to get some things. She never came back. Three days went by before Jane took him to the police, who located Emma and again made her take him back.

Four months later Emma told William Martin she could no longer look after the boy, and was going to take him to the Salvation Army. That she had done so she verified when he arrived home that evening. She told him the Army woman had given the toddler lollies to stop his crying, distracting him so she could quietly get away.

The truth was, she had taken him to the Sandridge Lagoon. There she tied him to a lump of bluestone with some braid torn from her skirt, and threw him into that shallow body of water.

Her crime was quickly discovered when the boy's little body was found the next day. The news made the front page of the evening *Herald*, and when William confronted her she denied any knowledge, and pleaded with him to move with her to a different colony where she'd not be found, as she was innocent. However as she eventually was confessing to him what she had done, the police had identified her boy, and came looking for her. They arrested her for murder.

At the watch house Emma tried to conceal vital evidence by pushing the remaining braid from her skirt up a chimney, but William soon dobbed her in. In the face of the evidence she confessed and signed a statement.

The *Herald*, quick to condemn, used phrases e.g. *Heartless Murder of a Little Child, A Cruel Deed* etc., and pointed out that she had a square chin, '*indicative of a peculiar and quite unfeminine firmness*'. Nevertheless the public did take up her cause, considering her to be a victim of extreme poverty, and suspecting that William had ordered her to get rid of the child and then had informed on her. Hundreds signed petitions and campaigned to try to save her from the gallows.

Emma's trial lasted but a day, the jury convicting within 20 minutes as instructed by a merciless judge, who noted that she just wanted to be rid of the child so she could carry on her acts of immorality and that no blame could be laid upon those institutions that had refused to take him in. He declared that

'Society has not the means to support and maintain the children of all the immoral women that exist in the community'.

Emma was hung on the fourth of November in 1895. Her death mask may be seen on display at the Old Melbourne