



# Closing Hell's Gates: The Life and Death of a Convict Station

*Hamish Maxwell-Stewart*

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*In October 1827, nine convicts who had endured years of unimaginable cruelty at the hands of the system opted for "state-assisted" escape. Five terrified witnesses—their hands and feet bound—were forced to watch as the chained convicts seized Constable George Rex and drowned him in the tannin-stained waters of the harbour. When the sentence of death was pronounced upon them, the condemned prisoners uttered just one word in reply: Amen.*

For 12 long years between 1822 and 1834, Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour was the most feared place in Australia. Clinging to the shores of the wild west coast of Tasmania and hemmed in on all sides by rugged uncharted wilderness, the environment itself formed the prison walls that confined the unfortunate convict re-offenders who were sent there. But the conditions were so brutal that many went mad, or chose death or a very uncertain escape into the bush rather than spend their time in this notorious place. Based on detailed accounts from the time, *Closing Hell's Gates* contains dozens of personal stories of the harsh and unforgiving life that people were forced to lead, both as convict and overseer, and in so doing reveals some startling insights about human nature when it is pushed to extremes.

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