

SECOND FLEET BABY

NADIA RHOOK



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SUSANNAH OF THE SEA

Porter, Susannah (Susan) (c. 1790–1835)

Susannah Mortimer (c.1790–1835), the daughter of convict, Susannah Mortimer, was probably born during the voyage of the *Lady Juliana* from Portsmouth to Sydney in 1789–1790. It is thought her father may have been a sailor on the ship, William Screech. Susannah accompanied her mother to Norfolk Island on the *Surprize* in August 1790 and took her stepfather Thomas O'Brien's surname. Her mother had at least eight more children with O'Brien.

Susannah left Norfolk Island with her mother and stepfather on the *City of Edinburgh* in September 1808. George Porter was also on the ship. Susannah and Porter were married at Hobart on 21 November 1808; both signed the register with their mark. The couple had at least seven children. Following her husband's death in 1828 Susannah continued to work the family farm.

Susannah Porter was buried (as Susan Porter) on 7 May 1835 at Glenorchy, Tasmania. Her age was given as 45 and her occupation as 'settler's wife'.

* information from Michael Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790* (1993), p 448

Life Summary (details)

Alternative Names

- O'Brien, Susannah
- Mortimer, Susannah
- Screech, Susannah

Birth

c. 1790
at sea

Death

6 May 1835
Glenorchy, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Cause of Death

unknown

Passenger Ship

- Lady Juliana (1790)

Occupation

- farmer

Key Events

- Second Fleet (1789-90)

Related Entries in NCB Sites

- Porter, George (husband) 
- O'Brien, Susannah (mother) 
- O'Brien, Thomas (stepfather) 

[view family tree](#)

Citation details

'Porter, Susannah (Susan) (c. 1790–1835)', People Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://peopleaustralia.anu.edu.au/biography/porter-susannah-susan-31632/text39106>, accessed 1 February 2022.

after the First Fleet we made some calculations

versed in the arithmetic of sex

gathered round artisanal tables
we discussed how many is enough to
build a successful colony

the air was tense with possibility

one of us suggested we don't need any
another shook his fist

look! how history trembles when faced with
the undeniable importance of one body reaching for another in the
night

look! how we are prepared to forge an uncertain future
only while doing sums

= the minimum cargo of women

fleet lives

fleet (n.)

from Old English fleotende ‘floating, drifting’
later ‘flying, moving swiftly’

Following the First Fleet, the British government handed the business of convict transportation to private ship owners who had no financial incentive to keep the prisoners alive until the completion of the voyage. The death rate of those transported increased dramatically.

for you

privatisation felt like
handing over a carefully signed contract and
cases bulging with money

sharp-clawed vultures launched from battle-
frayed shoulders
burdens of responsibility eased

for forty percent of this fleet

privatisation felt like
floating toward a new life before
sinking

feeling through currents and through death how
there’s no such thing as peace in the
ocean’s unmarked graves

in university I learnt that history is nothing but context

*the context of this story
is
thick
with criminal women loose
women strategically-beneficial-for-the-colony women
'settler-wife' women*

*women who were free then owned then
free women who dug their heels in against this Act
and that act
women who inherited almost half the world
to sell it to the best-
dressed bidder*

Plymouth

Rio de Janeiro

Eora land

Norfolk Island

North Atlantic

South Atlantic

Indian Ocean

with each port the chains that

kept them below deck

asking

do you want to spread weeds across another

person's carefully tended garden do you

want to jump overboard and

commune with the

dolphins the plankton

they have language

too

listen

by the

time we step onto Eora land the colony

already

rising up to become the saline

solution within

in one corner of her mind

she's lying on slats on a bed rigid and rectangular enough to be a plank to be a technology that lets you slide efficiently from smooth deck to rough ocean she knows how this goes this melting of bone yet as the pressure builds she doesn't expect to be so angry at the ocean how

dare it toss and turn for the sake of tossing and turning how dare it behave so recklessly while part of her wants to throw her life away to give in to this energy that does not care where it pushes life as long as it pushes life she is waiting for the next wave she is all

clammy skin and crowded thoughts hands pressing into her palms hands laid on her knees wiping sweat from her head hands lying pretending this story can only have one ending and when

she's not angry at the ocean she's angry at the doctor not because he's floating around her ankles like a dinghy moored on a serene lake but because he's not angry at the ocean how dare he

float like that how dare he act like he's saving her when she's so busy saving herself she is under the next wave now and not sure which way is up the ocean screaming a string of words that

sounds like north-south-west-east-up-down-north-west-up-east-down and she's saving herself this second and that one the light coming in from every direction she finds a shaft lets the

light dive beneath her body the voices puncture her skin reminding her there's still a membrane a stretchy supple organ separating her life from the rest of life the voices assaulting her ears a voice in her left

ear telling her she can do this she has done it before and a lot of other women have done it too after one hour of this the light diving into her body turning it to

ripples the anger leading her to consider if she's become
anger himself she starts to see the turning and the tossing as God at
a sailors' party chugging down drink after

drink swinging his arms knowing there's hardly a difference
between freedom and flaunting untameable power and almost as
soon as she forgives the ocean she

meets her daughter this bright ball screaming as if
there's no reason to disguise the shock of entering the world with
its doctors and hands and oceans and planks this ship where every
drop of power has been invited where

a woman holds the ocean in one corner of her mind while
dragging life from the seabed to the surface with another

the midwife

in a tent pitched in a corner of the deck

you lit wax candles

soaked sponges with liquor

infused hot water with chamomile and hartshorn

pointed her to the stool

held it still while she

squatted and her

baby, through gravity, dropped, slimy, into your hands

ignoring the burn playing in the space between warmth and

fire travelling along your inner

wrist, you listened to her eyes, lifted water to her lips, pressed

sponge to brow for

centuries, back on land, you'd answered to the church letting them

know if any mother had killed her child or

conducted a heathen ritual with her placenta

here, far from surveillance and steeples, you

helped my ancestor

return to what the doctor would the following day call

a 'natural state of good health' as if

nature might be separate from knowledge from

sponge from tendon

Screech

sprinting through the velvet protections of night to
 hustle a sheep

salivating at the thought of mutton while questioned about the
 scale of your criminal

intent the line between guilt and innocence becoming
 blurrier than a town's silhouette hours into the passage

a daughter you call Susannah Mely Screech sliding into
 life via a surface thinly coated with sweat and
 other invisible remnants of desire

Susannah meaning lily of Hebrew origin
 Mely meaning song, of Hawaiian origin
 Screech meaning a way to express how it feels to

fit a place you've never met inside your abdomen like
 conjuring in your mind the distraction of an exotic flower like

singing a song you love but have never heard like
 squeezing into a single laboured breath the pain of

sudden growth

at some stage in all this you took a second to
 notice how arching your back lends your life a release, the air
 completing the small
 gap between each of your spine's vertebrae this
 strong chain of brittle
 decisions