**One Hundred And Eighty**

by Brenda Proudfoot

April Fool’s Day, 1841. Two dozen Marys, a score of Elizabeths; several Margarets, Sarahs and Janes. They’re part of a consignment of 180 disgraced women drawn from the far reaches of Britain and herded on board the Rajah, bound for Van Diemens Land.

Matron Kezia Hayter, of the Millbank Penitentiary, divvies up the Quakers’ benevolent gift. Yards of cotton material, scissors, needles and thread designed to keep the women meek and occupied during their 105 day voyage.

Nearly three thousand pieces of cotton fabric are stitched together to form an enormous quilt, marked by the pricked fingers of convicts. Seven red and green chintz birds swoop on the delicate garland of flowers embroidered on the central panel. Dozens of squares and triangles form intricate patchwork borders. The precision of seamstresses; the faltering stitches of amateurs distracted by a sailor or the swell of the sea.

Who were these women? Betsy? Grace? Caroline? Their quilt is a mysterious remnant of convict history, a rare artefact in the National Gallery of Australia, its journey through the centuries unknown. This testament to the artistry and humanity of a silenced underclass speaks to us through a time warp of one hundred and eighty years.

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