



historycouncilnsw

## Off the Beaten Track 2009

### Solitude of Sighs

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#### **Abstract**

'We were a miscellaneous lot: murderesses and pickpockets, abortionists and shoplifters, thieves and robbers, drunks and vags'. So wrote Rebecca Ross in 1908, two years after her release from Sydney's notorious Darlinghurst Gaol. Ross was one of handful of prisoners and ex-prisoners who sought to describe their experiences of life inside the NSW prison system in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, using the written word.

NSW began as a penal colony in 1788. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the penitentiary model of the prison had become the dominant form of punishment. At the close the century, sixty prisons had been built around the State, eight of which were classed as major gaols. Six of these were located in regional towns, including Bathurst, Maitland and Berrima.

First-person accounts of prison life, which include letters, memoir, poetry and plays, covered a range of themes. In their writings, prisoners and ex-prisoners like Ross recounted the monotony of daily life and gave detailed descriptions of their cells; they expressed their frustration about their loss of liberty; and offered critiques of the prison system.

This lecture series for Off the Beaten Track expands on scholarly and popular understandings of the NSW prison system from the perspective of those who spent time 'doing time'.

#### **Author Biography**

Laila Ellmoos is a professional historian based in Sydney, with a passion for researching and writing about Australian social history. She is currently the historian at the NSW Government Architect's Office, and has been recently commissioned to write a history of the Peat Island Centre, a large residential centre for people with disabilities, which is located on the Hawkesbury River. Laila is a regular presenter on Fbi Radio's "Scratching Sydney's Surface" segment, which explores the history of Sydney. This lecture for Off the Beaten Track expands on research Laila carried out when she was the National and State Libraries Australasia Honorary Fellow at State Library of NSW in 2007.

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