

Norfolk Island

©1988 by Howard L. Kaplan

With a free rhythm, not too fast (♩=120)



I shall speak, the rope being slack, Though my soul be charred and black,



In this twen - ty - se - venth year be - yond my birth.



Once, I en - tered man - hood with Skills and tools to be a smith



In a York - shire vil - lage half - way 'round the earth.



When from ho - nest work I strayed, For my crimes I tru - ly paid



And was sen - tenced in - to ex - ile far from my land,



But there is no jus - tice in Earth or hea - ven if my sin



Must be purged with two years' hell on Nor - folk Is - land.

I shall speak, the rope being slack,
Though my soul be charred and black,
In this twenty-seventh year beyond my birth.
Once, I entered manhood with
Skills and tools to be a smith
In a Yorkshire village halfway 'round the earth.
When from honest work I strayed,
For my crimes I truly paid
And was sentenced into exile far from my land,
But there is no justice in
Earth or heaven if my sin
Must be purged with two years' hell on Norfolk Island.

As my tale is long with grief,
With its first part I'll be brief.
I was sentenced for three thefts I won't deny.
To Australia I was sent,
Where my sweating back was bent,
Building roads beneath that unfamiliar sky.
When our guard became so cruel
That I struck him, like a fool,
I was beaten, chained, and tried for my quick striking,
And the judge was so inclined
To say death would be too kind
And that Norfolk would be much less to my liking.

East of Sydney Norfolk lies.
When the albatross there flies
He is on the wing until the seventh day,
But, unlike the albatross,
The poor prisoner must cross
In a ship that feels the ocean heave and sway.
Chained and rotting between decks,
How we longed to join the wrecks
That were littered on the coral we crossed over,
For to break upon the reef
And to drown would bring relief
That new terrors would we never more discover.

continued overleaf

In command of that cruel place
Was a man with half a face
Who had not an ounce of mercy in his soul.
From a work day twelve hours long,
Unrelieved by smoke or song,
We were forced to eat like dogs around a bowl.
I broke land without an ox,
Tore my flesh on jagged blocks
Quarried from a reef beneath the sea waves churning,
And in silence bore the lash,
Though it left so deep a gash
That I lay in my own piss to ease the burning.

Out of fear my soul be torn
On the barb of hell's sharp thorn
If I took my life, as much I longed to do,
I continued to draw breath,
Have no hand in my own death,
With a hope of heaven when my days were through.
Others, fearing not God's laws,
Chose their fates by drawing straws,
Some to witness, one to murder, one die bleeding,
In the hope that, off this isle,
Sent to Sydney for the trial,
They might find some chance of full escape succeeding.

Soon I heard the whispered voice
That we prisoners had no choice
But to free ourselves by bloody revolution.
So one day, to ease our pains,
We struck off our iron chains,
Never fearing either death or retribution.
But our brief rebellion failed,
We were chained again and jailed
And were tortured by our guards for their own pleasure.
By our breaking of the peace,
Five found death as their release,
While the rest lived on to face the law's stern measure.

William Westbroke Burton came;
I cannot forget the name
Of that honest judge assigned to try our cause.
When we told him how this hell
Forced the prisoner to rebel
He would not apply the weight of England's laws.
Guilty as we'd been accused,
We had been so badly used
That the judge took his report to New South Wales
And decreed no man would swing
From the gallows rope that spring
'Till the Governor himself had read our tales.

Since our trial two months have passed.
Now a ship's returned at last.
We have come to hear the Governor's command.
Those reprieved cry out in pain
That they'll live to toil again;
I thank God to hear my sentence is to stand.
As the hangman knots his rope,
He prepares my only hope
Since I first set foot upon that fatal shore.
Now the hangman I shall face.
Lord, have mercy on this race
That it know a Norfolk Island never more.

For several periods in Australia's history, Norfolk Island was used to punish men who had committed further crimes after their original transportation to Australia. A thousand miles east of Sydney out in the Pacific, with almost no way for prisoners to escape, Norfolk Island was designed to be the place of ultimate terror, the "Botany Bay of Botany Bay".

This song is based on several different prisoners' histories as recounted in Robert Hughes' book *The Fatal Shore* (Knopf, 1987). The events recounted here cover the two-year period leading up to a prisoners' revolt in 1834. The commandant in that period, James Thomas Morisset, had lost one side of his face in a military explosion some years earlier: hence the phrase "a man with half a face" appearing in the lyrics. Although 200 prisoners were jailed after the revolt, the evidence against most of them came from informers who could not be trusted, so only 55 were actually tried. Of these, 30 were convicted and 14 hanged.