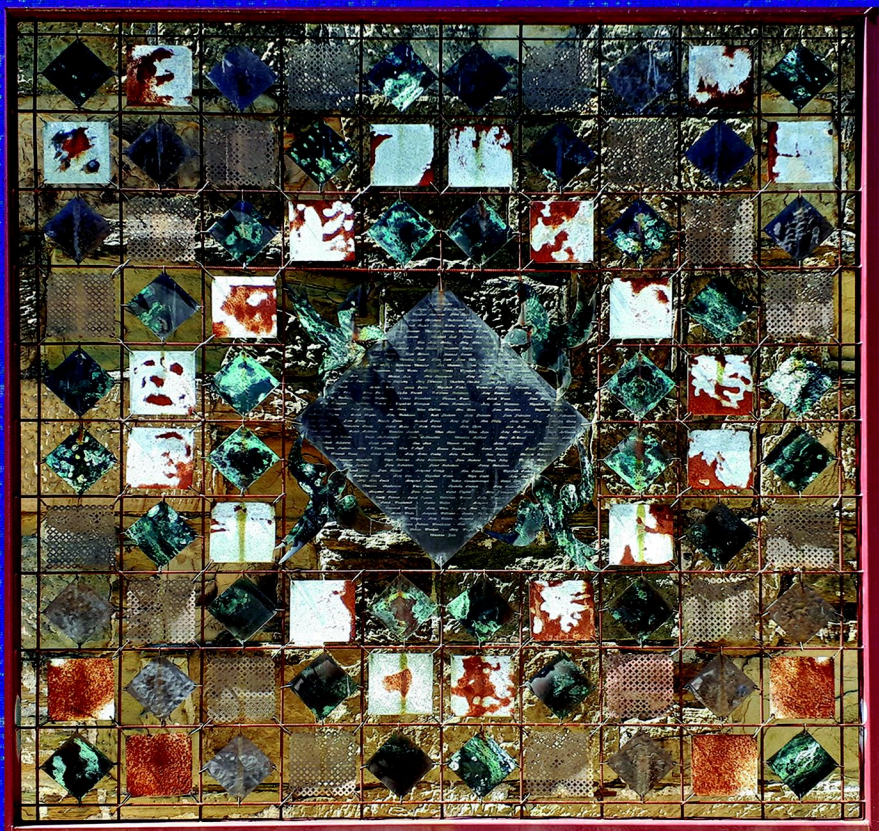
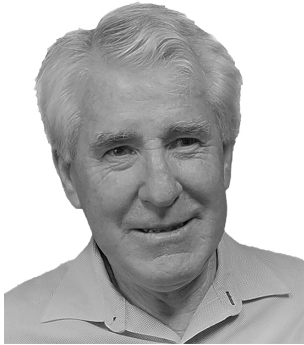


# The Quilt Approach A Tasmanian Patchwork



Glenn Martin



**Glenn Martin** lives in Sydney, although he lived in the bush on the far north coast of New South Wales for two decades. He has been a school teacher, a manager of community services organisations, and a commentator on management, business ethics, employment law and training and development. He has been the editor of publications for management and training professionals and an instructional designer for online learning. On the side he has written over a dozen books.

The Quilt Approach:  
A Tasmanian Patchwork

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# The beginning

I went to Tasmania in October 2019. My first visit had been in December 1973. The second time I came better armed with knowledge about the place, and about my ancestors who had spent some years there. Edward Lewis and Sarah Crosby, great great grandparents on my father's side, were sent to Hobart Town as convicts, Edward in 1845 and Sarah in 1850. They met and married in Hobart, and my great grandmother was born in Launceston. After that, everyone in the family comes from Sydney.

I had no great mission, I just wanted to see some of the places they had been, to get a sense of it. Memories are so much tied up with place that their time in Van Diemen's Land, as it was called then, must have remained with them for the rest of their lives. It is not hard to imagine some trace of it running through my veins.

One of the places I went to was Cascades Female Factory, just south of Hobart, where female convicts were kept. It is a World Heritage-listed site now. When I went to Tasmania in 1973 that had not happened. The site would have been desolate and derelict. As it is, most of the buildings are gone and just the skeletons of the buildings are laid out on the ground using lines of gravel. Most of the surrounding wall is intact - stone and brick walls that are thirteen feet high.

As a convict, Sarah spent time here in between assignments to private employers. The women also did contract work here, washing clothes and sewing, hence the name 'factory'. The government used the money to meet the expenses of the prison. Sarah also had a baby here, not an uncommon event, 'father unknown'. The practice was for the women to look after the baby and breastfeed it for six months, then it was taken away to the Orphan School, and the women were punished with a longer sentence for having had a baby.

Sin and sewing and servitude, filling the role of servant for their betters – that was their lot.

Sometimes, the commissioned work was for the ladies and gentlemen of the fledging society. The matron would say to the convict girls, “Imagine, the gown or frock-coat you are sewing today could be adorning the body of a guest at the Governor’s Ball next month.” In such places, one has to derive what thrill one can from the circumstances. And in among the harshness, the discipline and the struggle, the dampness and the cold, there could be moments of unheralded peace.

The following story is told at the site.

The *Rajah* ship left England in April 1841 with a load of 180 female convicts, bound for Van Diemen’s Land. These voyages were perilous, both for the ships and the occupants, who often died of sickness on the way, on a journey that could take three to five months. The *Rajah* arrived in Hobart in July 1841 with the loss of only one woman. The ship’s surgeon commented in his journal that the health of all the women was considerably better than when they had left Woolwich, a remarkable fact in those times.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wonder what distinguished this voyage that made such a difference to the women? It would seem that it was the fact that they were engaged daily on the voyage in the making of a quilt. The women were each sewing a square to be incorporated into the one quilt when they had all finished. They used pieces of materials and thread from the bag of “useful things” they had each been given before the ship left port.

But it is not the quilt itself that is distinctive; it is the fact that, on a voyage characterised by danger and despair, a group of women met daily to sew, to calm their minds in the presence of each other and make something they wanted to be beautiful, every day. That was where the life was, that was the thread that kept them alive.

It would have been of no use for them to rage against their circumstances. It may have been admirable for a short while, but then futility should kick in and make them rethink the wisdom of their rage. Defiance is sometimes all we have, but it may not be the thing that gets us to a fortunate end. The daily patient industry of

working on a creation, small though it may be, proved to be the thing that served their survival.

The quilt was made up of all their pieces; they were part of it, and their small personal story and vision was taken up into a larger statement, and despite all the different pieces, due to the differing skills and materials the women used, it was one large, coherent piece – in the end, one. That was the way to step off a ship at the end of the world, knowing that yours was a place in that weave.

The story is commemorated at the Cascades Female Factory site by a sculpture. The quilt that the ladies made has been rendered in coloured metal squares threaded together and raised in a steel frame in one of the yards.

\* \* \* \* \*

A quilt is a creation that is made up of pieces. It is only at the end that it comes together. I have come to think that our lives are like that. There is none of the planned unfolding that we tend to think of. Our lives are made up of pieces, and many of those pieces may be quite different to each other, and it is often hard to see the connections between one thing and the next. Perhaps a life is complete when all the pieces that need to be made have been made, and at the last, the pieces are composed and sewn together.

Then again, perhaps that is not a universal truth. There are some people's lives that seem to be altogether planned. They start in the top left-hand corner and go the next square and then the next. A committee obviously sat and decided at the beginning how it should be, and the quilt of their life can be read like a page of writing, from word to word and from line to line.

That is not how my life has been. I once got a job as the manager of an organisation, having never done this before, and I did that job for six years. I learned competence. But I never planned to be a manager for life. I was not on the bottom rung of a career ladder. I just felt that I needed to learn how to be a manager. I needed to learn that role and those skills. In my life, that was a small square. I am still not sure how it fits into the quilt that will be my life, at the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am talking about quilts because it makes sense of what has been happening. I have left work and my life has changed. It is made up of different things now, and there are always people who will tell you what they think it should be made up of. But this is a new square, and I can fend off the occasional advice and expectations. This square is about writing, which has always been an aspect of my life, but now it is in the foreground. And I am taking my guidance from other occupations (or vocations, or pastimes) – artists and musicians. And what I am hearing is about the process, not so much the product.

An artist I know says that painting is about being quiet, and painting from out of that quietness. A musician I heard talking about his music said that writing a song was not about having a formula – a set structure, a time frame and a visualised audience. No, he said, it was a beginning and an end, but a big space in the middle, and this was the place where you explored a feeling.

When you think about it, this is shocking. The experts say that the plot is the thing, and the characters feed into the plot and something happens that is clever, or terrible, or uplifting, because of the plot. But the musician and the artist are saying that the plot will be evident afterwards. And then there are the ladies, making their small story each day, knowing it will be taken up into a larger story that embodies all of their fellow passengers/prisoners, sitting out on the deck of the ship on good days, sitting inside the cabin on bad days when the ship is rolling violently from side to side, and pitching backwards and forwards with the waves.

I am reminded that ‘plot’ does not only stand for the steps in a story. It also stands for a plot of land. This is a great thing, because a plot of land is a bit like a quilt. When I was in Tasmania (this time) I went to an old farm, one that went back to the 1820s. It had grown in stages, so that, set out around a centre there were buildings – the main house, the workers’ dwellings, the grain store, the shearing shed, the cook house, the blacksmith’s shop, and so on. All on a plot of land, and each building was part of the whole, all necessary, all taking their place in the whole, like squares in a quilt. In the end, there is a plot.

\* \* \* \* \*



The ladies of the *Rajah* each had their voice, and it was heard in each square of the quilt they made, a small offering that was accepted, so that afterwards, after it had been put together, it spoke like a choir. The quilt was completed by the end of that long sea voyage, and it was accompanied by a statement from the ladies. The key sentiment in the statement was gratitude, for having survived, and for having spent time in a peace that many of them may never have known. I think it soaked in.

When people looked at the quilt, then, what did they see? The struggles, the desires and the pain of the women? Despair? I am sure it was all there, but I think also, the simple persistence of stitch upon stitch, the fruition of small designs. In other words, what my friend painter talked about, the quietness from which his painting comes. Do you see it? Do you see?

\* \* \* \* \*

I am travelling through Tasmania. Yesterday I saw another quilt, at the museum in a small town. It was created as a memorial to 150 years of settlement. There were squares representing different aspects of the town, and various significant events, milestones of time in 150 years. It was a public monument, so it celebrated the public face of things, and therefore the quilt was planned systematically, and the women were assigned their part in the tale beforehand. The facts were assembled and dissected, and the appropriate stance was determined towards the facts. I wonder if there were discussions about that. I wonder if there were questions. They were bound to want a quilt that projected a proud, unified view.

I know that the quilt was finished, because it was on display. I don't know about the conversations that were held, or the residual feelings of the women. The past is not an easy thing, not in our society, because we have uprooted everything and paved over it. If I were aboriginal, the quilt would be about the seasons and the weather, and the movements of birds and animals. It would be about what to do in days to come, and how to dance our gratitude for the bounty of the earth. Or we might draw it on the ground with powdered coloured chalk like a group of Tibetan monks, and when we had all seen it and the ceremony had ended, we would brush the

chalk back into the mystery, and accept the essential incomprehensibility and wonder of it all.

\* \* \* \* \*

I travelled to another country town. It was a pleasant journey. When I stopped the car, looking for a place to have morning tea, I was attracted to two wind-blowing signs anchored in the lawn beside a church. One said 'Café' and the other said 'Quilts'. I decided that this was where I would have morning tea. The building was in the grounds of the church, a staid, comforting stone church from the early days of the colony in Tasmania, the days when it was called Van Diemen's Land and the jokes were about demons.

The café had, as one might expect, quilts hung around the walls, but the body of the room was filled with shelves of materials. It was a place where you could choose from a huge array of patterned and coloured materials that would constitute the pieces of your quilt. The café was at one end of the room. It was attended by three women, old and young. Inside the café, the world outside is not to be seen. It is gone, and you are surrounded only by the completed quilts, the results of other women's ideas and diligence, and the possibilities offered by the assortment of materials on offer.

Women talked. There were a couple of men, but they were quiet, content not to lead the conversation in this place. They would go home and mend the mower, or paint a gate. This was a place where women conferred, perhaps discussing the situation of their daughter and son-in-law, and how they were handling their recent separation. "Don't tell me what to do," the son-in-law had said, "I'm not going to change."

I finished my coffee and the slice of carrot and walnut cake, and went back outside. A lady on an outside table with her dog at foot smiled at me. Was that approval for visiting the quilt café? Another piece of the story.

I had forgone a market in Hobart to come to this town today. I had been to that market once, but I had liked it and wanted to go there again. But now, as I walked up towards the town, I saw that there was a market on here today. It was okay that I didn't attend the other one. Now I walked up through the stalls, with their offerings of food and crafts, and craft-made spirits, and heard the

music of a violin that was so sweet I felt tears coming. Looking up I could see the hills that surrounded the town, still clothed in trees. The player was a Chinese man dressed in formal wear, white shirt and a long black frock coat.

I stopped at a stall and a woman was saying, “If I ever win the lottery, I am going to hold a beautiful dinner, and I will hire that man to play for the evening.” I said I thought that was a lovely idea. She said that she had once bought a CD from a man playing in public like this, and when she got home and played it, the music quality was really poor and she was disappointed.

But I had a contrary story. I had heard a man playing lovely music on the street in Chinatown in Sydney, and I had bought his CD and given it to my mother. She loved it so much that it was the music she ended up playing the most. I saw that the lady was pondering. I wondered if she was disturbed by a story that was different to her own experience, but it seemed that she was contemplating that the experience she had had was not the only possible one. That was my intention.

I was still standing at the stall. It was because the lady tending the stall had called out to me. She didn’t know my name but she said, “I know you.” I remembered her face, but she filled in the gaps for me. “You were on the same tour the other day. We were in the same group listening to what the guide was saying about the historical house.” And so we had. Right up the other end of the island. And now she was selling sweet things at a stall here in this town. I bought some sweets, and we talked. The pieces are connected.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the beginning of a quilt, there are deliberations. The quilt must be about something, unless you purchase a pattern kit, which you could indeed do at the church café. But they had on display several quilts that were stories. They were what someone wanted to say. They were not a pattern out of a kit. I understand kits. Sometimes making a quilt is about the sewing, that is all. It is like the ladies on the *Rajah*, faced with high seas and uncertainty, and no means of escape. I am sure they pricked their fingers many times with their needles as the waves surged around the ship, but the surgeon said at the end of the journey that he was amazed at the

health and disposition of the women, so blooming, so much improved. One might have expected the opposite.

But ordinarily, there are deliberations. If I think of this as life, it is a difficult proposition. For a start, you have one plan at the start, but after a while you see it has already diverted, and you know not where it is headed anymore. As a quilt, is it already a failure? I ask my friend Lilian, who is a quilter, how it works. She laughs and tells me, “There are two answers. The first answer is, you make many quilts. They are small in ambition, and they are just exercises; they are not the master quilt. But you may have one stashed away in a trunk, a blank piece, for the one you know you will do later, when you are ready. I have known women who have done this. I have also known old women who have not started on it.”

“Failure?” I asked, tentatively.

“No,” she said, emphatically.

I did not press her further on this point, but I asked, “How does one approach an exercise?”

“Ah,” she said, “if I am unsure, I start around the outside. I circle it. Sooner or later I will head to the centre. In fact, it’s just like a labyrinth, you circle back and forth, long runs, short runs, around and around, always eyeing the centre and thinking, ‘I am headed there if I keep doing my steps and thinking.’ That’s how I do it.”

“When you start, how do you start? Do you deliberate?”

Lilian said, “I am circling the question. I started with a pattern that I liked, and I was going to repeat it all the way around the outside, and then the squares started to change, and it was more like the phases of the moon, so I think that’s what it will be. Around the outside, there will be a pattern like the phases of the moon. Then we shall see.”

“I talked to a painter,” I said. “He told me that he starts with an idea of an image, and then he tries to keep his mind still while he is painting it.”

“Maybe,” said Lilian. “Sometimes. Perhaps.”

“Ah,” I replied. “Then I talked to a singer who writes songs, and she wanted to write a novel instead, because she said a song is too small – it is just one snapshot, and she wanted a whole plot.”

“But then there are Bob Dylan’s ballads, or Arlo Guthrie’s 20-minute saga of Alice’s Restaurant. They are songs and they are also stories.”

“You could argue that,” I said, “but I see the point she was making.”

“So, is a quilt a song or a novel?” Lilian smiled.

“How many squares does it have?” I replied.

“There is that,” she said. “How many squares will there be in yours?”

“I am thinking thirty-two, that’s eight by four. Or maybe forty-eight. After all, in the end, one wants to stay warm at night.”

“A person might start with four squares,” she said. “But you could be aiming for ten by eight, that’s eighty squares. To do that, you are probably thinking of patterns and repetition.”

I asked, “Would that be a snapshot, once again, or could it be a story?”

“A snapshot, as you say, could be a good thing. Like a mantra, it is the effect it has on the mind of the creator. In the China of ancient days, they called it fixing the omen, which is to make an image into something permanent.”

“I want to make a quilt with words,” I said. “I want to fix the omen that way.”

“You mean you want to sew a quilt where each square is made up of words? You could do that. Other people have done it. Sure.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. I want to make a quilt that is made up of pieces, where each piece is a story, and it is all sewn together somehow. And it all fits to make a bigger story.”

Lilian looked at me opaquely. “I’m having trouble translating,” she said.

“So am I,” I replied.

“What do you want it to say?”

“First of all, I have to choose some pieces.”

“Well, don’t make the mistake of thinking that that is difficult. Now that you’ve said that, just get on with it.”

## Author's Note

This book is clearly based on true events. I don't deny it. Fiction has its delights and amusement, but reality is more compelling.

Though I go to you  
ceaselessly along dream paths,  
the sum of those trysts  
is less than a single glimpse  
granted in the waking world.

(Ono No Komachi, c. 825-900)

I admit to moments of fiction within these pages, but only in the spirit of the whole. If you knew, you would forgive me, I am sure. I admit also that Lilian is a fiction. I did invent her, although I can say there is sufficient material in my life for her to have been stitched together credibly.

Enjoy.

**END OF SAMPLE**

What happens when you go back to a place you visited forty-six years ago? Tasmania. Do the ghosts rise up, or has the past all been erased? What if you now knew that some of your ancestors had lived there? Convicts. And another branch of your family settled there and came to prominence? Colonialists.

It might start to look like a patchwork instead of a simple story. And then the patches might be stitched together and make a quilt.

Thirty-two stories stitched together with meaning. The quilt approach.



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