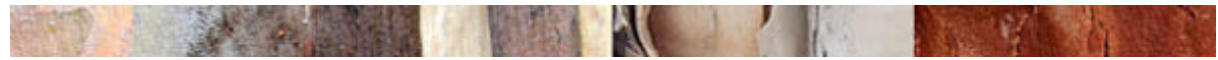


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Oxford Word of the Month – June: convict class

noun: the cheapest class of travel; economy class.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

One of the most frequent complaints when it comes to travel is flying in economy class, especially on international flights. A popular term used to refer to economy class is *cattle class*, alluding to passengers being herded into close proximity in narrow seats with cramped leg room. An Australian variant of *cattle class* is **convict class**.

Convict class has its origin in Australia's history as a penal settlement. The original sense of the term dates back to the nineteenth century, when *convict class* was frequently used to describe the very large number of convicts that formed part of Australian colonial society. The conditions aboard the ships that brought them to Australia were grim:

*The convict-ship ... was rivalled in its horrors only by the slave ship; indeed if the physical suffering was greater in the latter, in moral torture and mental defilement the hold of the convict-ship had, beyond all doubt, the bad pre-eminence. (J.B. Marsden, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Rev. Samuel Marsden of Parramatta*, 1858)*

The idea of convicts traveling to Australia in less than salubrious circumstances is alluded to in the more recent, transferred sense of **convict class**:

***Convict class.** On a recent flight from Hobart to Melbourne, my meal consisted of two biscuits and a glass of water. Even the convicts got more than that! (Hobart Mercury, 8 August 2003)*

This comment may also be playing on the original sense of **convict class**, as the writer was traveling from Hobart, a place traditionally associated with convict heritage.

An extract from *mX* also alludes to the historical experiences of convicts, in this

case to humorously deride those people who were nominated for an Academy Award and lost, but who would be consoled by a free trip to an Australian resort:

*Like the ‘losers’ of old, today’s Oscar losers can pack their swag bags for Australia—although they will hardly be travelling **convict class**. When the winners are announced, don’t shed a tear for those who didn’t nab a golden statuette—they will receive luxury consolation in the form of a \$45,000 goodie bag that includes a choice of two six-star Aussie holidays. (25 February 2013)*

While there is still only limited evidence of the use of **convict class** to refer to cheap and less luxurious travel, the term is both colourful and distinctively Australian. We can be thankful that travel today does not involve the ‘moral torture and mental defilement’ inflicted on the original *convict class*—although some unhappy travellers may disagree.

Convict class is included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (forthcoming 2016).

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