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Write the final chapter of the convict story:
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Scene 1

Off the coast of New Zealand, the ship *Tall Tales* sets sail for England.

Sailor: What are you going to do when you get back to London, Jimmy?

Porter: I reckon I will go and see a play at the theatre.

Sailor: I wasn't asking what you are going to do in your spare time. How are you going to make a living?

Porter: I have a trade I can return to. I used to be a beer machine maker.

Sailor: A what? I've never heard of one of those.

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Spot the difference puzzle:
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Pictures: iStock.com/ dikobbraziy/ Florence and Joseph McGinn

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SARAH ISLAND ESCAPE

A convict story

OF all the tales of Van Diemen's Land, the escape by James Porter and nine other convicts from Sarah Island on Tasmania's West Coast in 1834, has to be the most remarkable.

Porter and his fellow escapees did not just flee the Macquarie Harbour Penal Station in the stolen ship *Frederick*, they sailed all the way to Chile.

And the tale does not end there.

The convicts lived freely in Chile for two years, before Porter and three others were recaptured and sent back to Hobart Town, where they were sentenced to death.

But they then avoided being hanged with a clever and quite funny legal defence.

In 1833 Sarah Island was closed down and its convicts were being sent to the new penal station at Port Arthur.

By 1834 only 12 convict shipwrights remained.

They had been left behind with a small contingent of soldiers to complete the construction of the brig *Frederick*, and 10 of them had hatched a bold plan to avoid the misery which awaited them at Port Arthur.

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The great convict escape from Sarah

From Page 1

Londoner James Porter was quite a character.

He had been transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1824 for the crime of housebreaking.

After several escape attempts from Hobart Town, and other unruly behaviour (Porter received 300 lashes from 1826-1832), he was sent to Sarah Island, known in Van Diemen's Land as "hell on Earth".

On January 14, 1834, the 10 convicts overpowered their guards, who they left on shore in Macquarie Harbour with provisions.

They then set sail for Chile, with no charts and only four experienced sailors on board.

A former whaler, Porter had spent some time in Chile, and had a wife and two children there.

The ship leaked heavily and they suffered terrible seasickness, but somehow they crossed the big seas of the South Pacific and arrived in Chile about six weeks later, on February 25.

They allowed the *Frederick* to sink off shore and rowed a long boat to Valdivia, where they passed themselves off as survivors off a shipwreck.

The authorities in Valdivia did not believe their story, and soon worked out who the convicts were.

But the Governor of Valdivia allowed them to stay, despite protests from Britain - and Van Diemen's Land Lieutenant Governor George Arthur in particular - that the convicts were guilty of piracy.

But as pressure from Britain for their return mounted, the convicts decided they had overstayed their welcome in Valdivia.

Three of them jumped on board a departing American ship, while the other seven made plans to leave on a ship they were building for the Governor of Valdivia.

Three of the remaining seven decided to depart a day earlier than planned, leaving Porter, William Shires, Charles Lyon and William Cheshire behind.

The Governor of Valdivia was furious, and had the four remaining convicts arrested, before handing them over to the British navy. Taken all the way back to England, the four



Picture: Tourism Tasmania

What happened to James Porter?

ARTFUL DODGERS: Kiah Davey (as James Porter), left, and Jane Flanagan (as William Shires) in a scene from *The Ship That Never Was*.

THE amazing escape from Sarah Island on the *Frederick* inspired Australia's longest running play *The Ship That Never Was*.

The very funny and entertaining play is usually performed in the Richard Davey amphitheatre in Strahan by the Round Earth Company.

And *The Ship That Never Was* is a Children's University Tasmania learning destination.

Round Earth also provide fantastic tours of Sarah Island, and other special performances.

Last year Round Earth celebrated the 25th year of *The Ship That Never Was* in Strahan, and owner-operator Kiah Davey said current travel restrictions had only brought a temporary halt to performances.

Kiah said the play would be back for the July school holidays, and she was looking forward to returning to her role as James Porter.

"I enjoy performing as James Porter because he was such an interesting character - a bit of a rogue," she said.

"He had a knack of getting into

trouble but he also seemed to be able to talk his way out of any situation.

"Thanks to his memoirs we know a lot about Porter, but can we really believe everything he wrote about himself?"

Porter claimed his trade was a "Beer Machine Maker", but no such occupation existed in the 1800s.

He also claimed to be blind in one eye, but evidence suggests this might not have been true either.

Fact or fiction, there is a chapter missing - what

happened to Porter after he escaped to New Zealand?

Your challenge is to write a story, or even a play, about what Jimmy did next.

The plot is completely up to you, and it can be as short or as long as you want it to be.

If it is a play, it could be a single scene which reveals what happened to Porter (see the example on page 1).

Children's University Tasmania members can earn stamps in their passports for this challenge, at the discretion of school coordinators.

escapees adopted false identities.

Porter claimed to be an Irishman called James O'Reilly.

As a result, in 1837 they were shipped back to Van Diemen's Land where they could be formerly identified.

Governor Arthur was pleased.

A hasty trial followed and the four men were sentenced to death.

But the convicts made a series of appeals against the judge's decision, and managed to delay their hanging for more than two years.

Porter used this time in the Hobart Town Gaol well.

The story of their bold escape had attracted quite a bit of attention in Hobart Town, and Porter wrote a journal and some of its content was published by local newspapers.

While Porter was a little loose with the truth, the people of Hobart Town started to side with the convicts.

By then Sir John Franklin had

replaced George Arthur as Governor, and it appears the convicts had received some good advice from someone.

They eventually won their appeal against the death sentence.

They successfully argued their actions could not be piracy because it had not occurred on the high seas; they could not be mutineers because there were no orders assigning the convicts to be the crew; and finally the

Frederick had not been registered and there were no papers proving its existence, so it was not a ship at all.

As soon as the decision not to hang them was made, no doubt quite embarrassed, the authorities shipped them off to Norfolk Island in the middle of the night.

Porter wrote a second journal while imprisoned on Norfolk Island, and all four men were

eventually pardoned. But Porter, now in Sydney, kept finding trouble and ending up back in gaol.

But in a final twist to the story, in 1849 he again escaped, this time to New Zealand, and he was never found again.

Some people believe he returned to Chile, others suggest he might have spent the rest of his days sailing the world.

What do think happened?

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



There are seven small differences between the first raccoon and the second one. See if you can spot them, then check the solution at the right.



SOLUTION:
1. Ear bigger,
2. Pattern above eyes changed,
3. Finger missing, 4. Dark stripe on tail missing, 5. Front foot longer, 6. Pattern on front arm changed, 7. Shape of back changed.

Artwork: www.johnpollyfarmer.com.au/