A chance encounter led Irish artist, Kevin Todd to research and develop an acoustic sculpture project to commemorate transportation from Ireland to Australia and in particular the convict ship Neva, which sank off King Island in May 1835 while en-route from Cork to Sydney. The Neva was the only convict ship from Ireland to sink with fatalities and only six women of the over 200 women and children on board survived.

The development of the project raised some interesting questions relating to the presentation of art and history and their necessary connection in a publicly accessible manner. The challenge for the project is to present an engaging experience and story in the context of an audience that lacks specialist knowledge in either art or history.

The project also allowed Kevin to explore his own cultural space and his experience as a migrant to Australia. Kevin has researched the Neva at archives in Hobart, Sydney, London and Dublin and this has raised some interesting questions regarding events surrounding the wreck.
Locating the Neva: Art and History

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My hidden story developed from research relating to my artwork *Cartographies*, which was exhibited at various galleries around Australia in the early 90’s. The work was primarily about space and distance and the use of current (at the time) digital fax technology to create meaning and an experience for the viewer, with some images being faxed from Australian Antarctic bases to the various galleries.

As part of my work for the exhibition I researched place names on the Australian coastline where there was a psychological inference such as Deception Bay in Queensland and Disappointment Bay at the north end of King Island. Disappointment Bay takes its name from the wreck of the convict ship *Neva*, which sank off the coast on May 14th, 1835. To my surprise I learnt that the ship had left my hometown, Cork, Ireland in January 1835 bound for Sydney with women convicts, all but six of whom died.

The *Neva* women connected with my own psychology; as a migrant I felt a sense of dislocation and indentified with the women who had fallen between the histories of both Ireland and Australia, having left but not arrived. My curiosity persisted to the point where I started to research the wreck and as persistent ideas/feelings are often a good place to nourish creativity I also started to think about how the women might be commemorated through artwork. So the chance encounter during *Cartographies* led to overlapping artistic and history work; the development of an art project, including a residency in Ireland; research of original material relating to the ship at archives in Australia, Ireland and the UK; the development of interpretative material for the artworks and the exploration/creation of my own sense of identity as a migrant.
The proposed artworks involve identical sets of seven acoustic sculptures at King Island and in Cork, which interact with the wind to create voice-like sound and an awareness of space, time and environment. The spatial concerns of cartographies are present in the sculptural works, which were developed and prototyped using CNC/RP technologies. There is to be a single sculpture for each of six surviving women and one for the crew.

However, in the context of this paper I want to elaborate on the hidden (the theme of the Double Dialogues conference) aspects of the Neva story, which imply something has been concealed rather than simply forgotten. Although forgetting can be psychologically convenient, concealment is a conscious and deliberate act. In the context of Irish and Australian history the Neva was/is not hidden, simply forgotten and this is especially so in Ireland where there is no public memorial to the more than forty-thousand men, women and children who made the long journey by sea to Australia.

The basic facts of the wreck as reported by survivors at a board of inquiry are as follows:

The ship left the Cove of Cork (now Cobh) on January 8, 1835 with 150 women convicts and their 35 children, 9 free women with 22 children going to join convict husbands already in Australia and a crew of 26.

The voyage was relatively uneventful with one convict death, one crew death and one birth. At noon on May 12 the ship’s position was taken and it was 90 miles to the west of King Island (see map below) and at a point roughly at the same latitude to Cape Wickham, the northern most point on the island. Captain Peck, who was on his second convict voyage in the Neva then plotted a course to take the ship between King Island and mainland Australia.

Around 2am on May 13 a lookout spotted land (King Island) ahead and the ship was steered north running parallel to the coast for two hours until it hit a reef at around 5:00am. The ship broke apart and after 8 hours drifting in the water, 12 women and 10 crew, including the captain reached King Island, where a crew member and 6 of the women subsequently died; “two just dying and one dead near to the rum cask” (CSO 809, Examinations/Peck).

It was also reported that some women were so drunk on the ship that they were helpless.
“Most of the other women who had been in the main prison had got on deck, and into the cuddy, where they were drinking and some of them were so drunk as to be unable to help themselves” (CSO 809, Examinations/Hyland).

In all six convict women and ten of the crew survived and they report burying around 95 bodies which were washed ashore along the beach. Seven skeletons possibly from the Neva were later found in the bush and are now buried near the Cape Wickham Lighthouse.

The map presented with the Board of Inquiry report (CO280/59 92118 pg.147) The ship's position at noon on May 12th is given 90 miles west of Cape Wickham and at the same latitude. This map was based on Matthew Flinders’ map of 1802

The graves near the lighthouse at Cape Wickham. The plaque in the centre marks where seven skeletons thought to be from the Neva are reburied.

Around the same time a small vessel with a crew of two, the Tartar belonging to Charles Friend of Launceston was wrecked off the south coast of the island and the Neva survivors met up with these two after about a fortnight. The Tartar survivors informed Peck that a
sealer named Scott was also on the island and after they found him his dogs helped the survivors catch wallaby.

On June 14th Friend, who was looking for the Tartar anchored his ship Sara Ann near New Year’s Island off the west coast of King Island;

“I anchored under the New Years Isles, and landing on the N.W. end of King’s Island traversed the beach and rocks about thirty five miles until I reached Mr. B.H. Peck with the men and women survivors from the wreck of the “Neva” as also the crew of the “Tartar” cutter belonging to myself which had been wrecked on the same island. In proceeding along twenty miles of beach and rocks I could discern nothing more than detached pieces of wreck and staves of casks” (CSO 809, Memorial of Charles Friend).

After attempting to bring Peck to Port Fairy where Friend had a business interest they returned due to unfavourable winds and collected the Tartar and Neva survivors, leaving the island on June 23rd and arriving at Georgetown (near Launceston) on June 26th. However, the convict Margaret Drury and crew members, Peter Robinson and William Kidney were away from camp hunting and were not taken off the island until the Shamrock was later sent from Launceston to collect them. Interestingly, Margaret Drury and Peter Robinson later married and their descendants in Australia have been traced.
A committee of inquiry into the Neva wreck was held on July 3rd, 4th and 6th and a full report sent to Governor Arthur. The committee members were; George Deare, Major 21st Fusilery; W. Lyttleton, Police Magistrate and the Port Officer, Mat. Curling Friend.

As my research progressed I felt something was not quite right with the description of events and indeed Wm. Moriarty, the Port Officer at Hobart whom Governor Arthur asked to comment on the report and Arthur himself also had misgivings about the description events.

"From anything that has been elicited in this enquiry I see no reason to suppose that the Harbingers are so far removed from the position assigned them by Flinders, as the spot on which the Committee have placed the wreck of the Neva would seem to indicate, it is a natural infirmity of the human mind to seek to attribute to any cause rather than the real one, misfortunes which may have resulted either from our imprudence or want of correct judgment. I cannot wonder therefore at the Master wishing to believe that the Harbingers are laid down too far to the Eastwards" (CO280/59 92118 p182).

"but it is remarkable that it is not stated in your report nor can His Excellency discover by the evidence where the vessel struck or how far from King's Island - his Excellency presumes it must have been the South end of Harbingers Reef, but then he is at a loss to conceive how the vessel came there" (CO201/247 p.369).

It might be that the survivors conspired or were instructed (in the case of the convicts) to hide aspects of the truth relating to the Neva wreck. Captain Peck, the first officer Joseph Bennett, Charles Friend, three seamen (Robert Bullard, Thomas Sharp and William Hyne) and five of the six surviving women all gave statements to the Commission of Enquiry. An additional two seamen (Charles Wilson and Henry Calthorpe) signed statements agreeing with the Hine’s testimony.

Peck and Charles Friend each stated that little of the 3051 gallons of rum the Neva carried was washed ashore and none was salvageable. Yet correspondence in January 1836 from a Board of Survey to the Commissariat in Hobart asks about the salvage price for rum; “...rum belonging to Government and saved by Mr. Joseph Penny from the wreck of the barque Neva” (CSO 809, Board of Survey).

The letter goes on to schedule 485 gallons (2204litres) in puncheons and kegs and states that the last shipment from England was valued at 1s 10p per gallon; a total value of over £44. The salvaged rum would have weighed in excess of 2000kg and require considerable effort to move from King Island to Launceston.

When the cutter Shamrock returned from King Island in early August with the three survivors who were initially left behind, Mat. Curling Friend wrote to the Colonial Secretary, John Montagu to say that no government stores were washed ashore or saved; “...no Government stores worth bringing off the Island have been washed on shore or saved” (CSO 809, Mat. Curling Friend to John Montague).

Although rum is mentioned in relation to convicts drinking, both on the ship and on the beach the sequence of events on the ship seems implausible, particularly given that 5 of the 11 statements to the inquiry say that the women were securely locked in the hold every evening. There is also a contradiction in accounts of how the women got on deck with Peck, Bullard and Hine stating the prison was broken open;

“She shortly raised a midships, and the stanchions of the prison fell down, on which the prisoners all came on deck (CSO 809, Examinations/Peck)."
However, Ellen Galvin states

“On the ship striking, the Captain immediately came down, unlocked the door and released all the women prisoners, as well as those in the black hole and desired us all to come on deck” (CSO 809, Examinations/Galvin).

It seems unlikely that some of the women would have time in the period between the ship striking and breaking up to get so drunk as to be helpless and common sense would suggest that they would have been more concerned with trying to survive.

Each of the convicts told the inquiry how well treated they were with Ellen Galvin in particular stressing the point with four affirmations of good treatment in a 386 word statement, despite that fact she was illiterate (Ellen’s mother and sister drowned in the wreck);

“During the voyage and up to the time of the wreck of the vessel the Doctor, Captain and Mates behaved to us like fathers…… No intercourse was permitted during the voyage between the prisoners and any of the crew………… I have heard of no causes of complaint during the voyage……. We were all treated with the greatest kindness by the Captain throughout the voyage and since the wreck” (CSO 809, Examinations/Galvin).

Despite their affirmations George Deare, Major Commandant in Launceston reports the women complaining of mistreatments and of having to separate them because of this;

“They appear to be inclined to complain of the mistreatment on the part of the Master and Superintendent” (CSO 809, George Deare to John Montague).

One possibility then is that some convict women were already drinking with the crew (the reason they were so drunk) before the ship struck the reef. With good weather, free rum, 150 women convicts and only days to go until Sydney perhaps the crew were busy taking advantage of the situation rather than paying attention to the ship’s position. Whatever the reason it appears the captain and crew tried to hide the actual location of the wreck, which they positioned approximately 19.5km to the north west of Cape Wickham.

Although the Maritime Archaeology Site Register positions the Neva wreck on Navarine Reef and a map from 1863 shows a wreck there, Captain Peck stated to the inquiry that he struck Harbinger Reef and that it was incorrectly positioned on the map;

“Question: Do you consider the Harbinger Reef properly laid down on the chart?

Answer: I do not consider them properly laid down on the chart; they are in my opinion laid down, too far to the Eastward” (CSO 809, Examinations/Peck).

If we overlay the map from the Board of Inquiry, which is based on a map made by Flinders in 1802 with a contemporary maritime chart we can see that both reefs were given approximate positions by Flinders and the extent of Harbinger Reef is less than its actual size. Nevertheless, Peck positions the Neva wreck around 19.5km from Cape Wickham even though Harbinger Reef is approximately between 5.1km and 6.0km and Navarine Reef approximately 3.26km from the cape.

Accepting that it would be difficult to ascertain where he was wrecked at night the captain nevertheless he seems keen to distance the Neva from the island. He had 6 weeks on the Island to figure out if he had struck 19.5 or 3.26km from the shore and to the west or east of Cape Wickham. Also, the fact that Friend encountered wreckage for 20 miles along the beach east of the cape and states that this is where the survivors came ashore would reinforce that Navarine Reef is the location of the tragedy. Friend also wrote to Governor Arthur stating that;
“... the “Tartar” cutter on her passage to the fishery on my account was lost about thirty two miles from the spot where the “Neva” wreck came on shore” (CSO 809, Friend to Gov. Arthur).

Peck told the commission that they came ashore at 4pm after a total of 8 hours drifting to the shore. Given the water temperature in Bass Strait during May (11–14c) this seems unlikely as the United States Search and Rescue Task Force gives survival time in 10 – 16c degrees as 1 -2 hours for exhaustion/unconsciousness and 1 – 6 hours for death (United States Search and Rescue Task Force, 2010).

The inquiry map (CO280/59 92118 pg.147) overlaid on a contemporary maritime chart (AHS, AUS 789). Peck’s location of the wreck is marked A and Navarine Reef as positioned on the inquiry map is marked B. The actual locations of Harbringer and Navarine Reefs are marked C and D.

The inquiry map (CO280/59 92118 pg.147) showing the ship’s position (1) at 2:00am on May 13 and Peck’s location of the wreck at 5:00am (2). The actual location of Navarine Reef is marked 3 and Peck’s route to there from his position at 2:00am is marked (4) in blue. There is no rock where Peck positions the wreck.
Both the Captain and Bennett gave the position of the ship at noon on May 12th with nine-figure accuracy (39.36 S. /141.57 E and 141-57 E. /39.37 S) and it would seem unlikely that a routine figure such as this would be remembered by both men seven weeks after it was recorded; especially given their experience over that period and that the later significance of the location would not have been apparent when it was taken.

If Peck’s description of events was accurate then how did the Neva come to strike Navarine Reef three hours after land was first sighted? It is clear from the inquiry map that the ship would have to pass through Harbinger Reef and go around Cape Wickham to get from where land was first sighted to where the wreck actually happened. Striking Navarine Reef even at night would be considered negligent and possibly Peck was trying to cover for this by positioning the wreck much further out to sea. Was Captain Peck attempting to hide the location of the only convict ship from Ireland to sink with fatalities?

Perhaps we can never know the facts of the wreck and although there is evidence of attempts to sell the salvaged rum in September, Peck had left Launceston on August 12th, arriving in Sydney on August 19. He left for London on board the Andromeda on Sunday, September 13th. There is also an advertisement in the Sydney Herald on Monday, August 24 seeking charitable donation for two seamen from the Neva who are in a “most destitute and deplorable state” (Polack, 1835) and wanting to return to England. It would appear that the survivors did not profit from the wreck.

My chance encounter with the Neva has shaped the form and direction of my art practice. In the context of the project there is a definite connection between the history research and the artworks, which grew from my curiosity and a desire to accurately describe the event for the public interpretation. The project has also allowed me to create my own history and explore my sense of identity as a migrant; and migration as a productive and positive cultural space. Perhaps there is something other than the facts of the wreck in my “hidden story”, possibly the pleasure of exploring the mystery and its potential to nourish creativity.

There is also the question of relating the story of the Neva to the public; an audience that may not have specialist knowledge of art or history. Of course this is a problem for all public art but in the case of the Neva it is important to tell an “accurate” story that engages the audience through an experience that is possibly only available through art. In this sense the history has shaped the art with six sculptures being the same height as each of the surviving women. Visualising information relating to transportation from Ireland to Australia has also been important in locating the Neva in the overall historic context and a series of charts have been developed as part of the proposed interpretation.
A list of the women and children on the *Neva*, details of the surviving women, the transportation charts and details of the sculpture project are available at;

http://www.toddartist.com/public_art/transportation.html

Oh...and there are a number of other “leads” I am currently following; a report that someone wrote a letter claiming to know what actually happened to the Neva and the report of a rumour that the Neva was carrying £50,000 for the payment of troops in Tasmania!

**List of References**

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CO280/59 92118 (pg.182) Letter to John Montagu, Colonial Secretary from the Port Office Port Office, August 12th 1835.

CO280/59 92118 (pg.147) Board of Inquiry map showing course of the Neva

CO201/247 (pg.369) Colonial Secretary Montagu to Board of Inquiry Colonial Secretary’s Office 10 July 1835.

Maps

Australian Hydrographic Service (AHS), 2003, AUS789 (King Island), 1:150,000 Australian Hydrographic Service, Wollongong, N.S.W.


Newspaper article


Website