Nicholas Divine (1739—1830): The Master of Convicts

“Here are only convicts to attend convicts, and who in general fear to exert any authority, and very little labour is drawn from them in a country which requires the greatest exertions.”

— Governor Phillip, 16 May 1788.

“The proudest Monarch on earth cannot equal him riding thro’ the Town on his charger”

— Surgeon John Harris on Nicholas Divine, 1807.

Introduction

Nicholas Divine (sometimes spelled Devine) was a member of the colonial government of the New South Wales penal colony throughout most of the Convicts & Cthulhu era. A free Catholic Irishman,
he occupied an important middle-tier office known as the 'Superintendent of Convicts' making him responsible for the direction of which convicts were assigned to which tasks or postings. The unique nature of this important role — and the fact that the day-to-day life in the colony revolved around convict work gangs and convict servitude — means that it is very likely that free settlers and military characters in your Convicts & Cthulhu campaign will at some point have reason to curse or bless Nicholas Divine's decisions. For convict characters, having Divine as an ally might make all the difference between a plum assignment and back-breaking labour.

Even beyond his official duties, Divine is an interesting character who led a colourful and, at times, eventful life. This included an outward journey to Australia as part of a fleet which lost a ship to a fateful encounter with an Antarctic iceberg. Late in his life he also suffered a violent attack by bushrangers. These dramatic events can be woven into your Convicts & Cthulhu campaign, either as literal historical events involving Divine or as inspiration for similar events of your own devising ... perhaps with a more otherworldly explanation thrown into the mix.

Included below are some handy notes designed to give the Gamemaster a wide variety of options for using this interesting historical person in games of investigative Lovecraftian horror.

Character Origins and Life Before Australia

Nicholas Divine was born in Ireland, at Burren Maine, in County Cavan in Ulster in 1739. He worked initially as a farmer but went to England and by 1782 had become Superintendent at the prison hulks in Woolwich (see box nearby). Divine's work there made him ideal to transfer to New South Wales where Governor Phillip was decrying the lack of appropriate free men to supervise the convict population.

Divine, along with eight other supervisors of convicts sailed on the Second Fleet in 1789. Their voyage to Australia was to prove more than usually perilous: one of the ships, the HMS Guardian (on which Divine was travelling), became wrecked when her Captain sought unsuccessfully to replenish the ships water supplies by navigating beside an iceberg sighted off the southern coast of Africa. See the box, 'The Wreck of the Guardian' (page 7) for more details. After surviving this deadly encounter, Divine transferred to another ship, the Lady Juliana, and ultimately arrived in Australia in 1790.

Immediately upon his arrival, Divine, aged 51, was appointed Principal Superintendent of Convicts, under Governor Arthur Phillip. This made him one of the central figures in the convict administration. He held this position (whose responsibilities are described below) for the next 18 years, only being dismissed from office by the dramatic events of the Rum Rebellion which overturned Governor Bligh in 1808 (see Convicts & Cthulhu for details).

After the two-year military coup had been quashed by the arrival of a new official Governor, Macquarie, Divine was granted a pension and retired to live on his farming property. He would have lived out the rest of his days in peace were it not for a brutal robbery and beating at the hands of bushrangers that cost him his physical and mental health.

Personality & Distinguishing Characteristics

Nicholas Divine was a tall, strapping man and was a formidable opponent in the ploughing matches in his native Ireland. He was known as something of
The Prison Hulks

With the overcrowding of gaols in 1776 the Hulks Act was signed, allowing old decommissioned warships in the Thames and other English ports (including Deptford and Portsmouth) to be used as floating prisons. Convicts sentenced to transportation were often consigned to the hulks to await their sentence being carried out. They were old sailing ships, no longer fit for sea travel. Sometimes these were old British naval vessels, other times they were foreign ships that had been captured. They were refitted by having the sails, rigging, masts, and rudders removed and internally fit-out with gaol cells. The disabled ships were then towed to locations offshore in harbours or in the Thames, to be permanently moored. Thereafter they became floating prisons.

The hulks were filthy, overcrowded, and often run by corrupt officials. Genders were not mixed on the hulks. Convicts were shackled in irons and put to work on the Government docks; it was hoped they could labour on such useful projects as cleaning the Thames. Bribery could attain lighter duties, but most convicts could not afford this. Dissector’s agents prowled the docks offering 5 pounds for a convict corpse, something that could be helped along by a doctor on the take. For all this convicts still feared the unknown destination of New South Wales more than they did life in the hulks, for there they were at least still on English soil.

Many convicts sent to Australia had spent time (sometimes a considerable amount) on a prison hulk awaiting transportation to New South Wales or later Van Diemen’s Land.

The following prison hulks were in use around the time of the Convicts & Cthulhu era. All were located in England.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former ship</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Years as Hulk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Censor</td>
<td>Woolwich, SE London</td>
<td>1776 – ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Prudent</td>
<td>Woolwich</td>
<td>1779 – 1814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Dunkirk</td>
<td>Plymouth, Devon</td>
<td>1782 – 1792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Ceres</td>
<td>Woolwich</td>
<td>1787 – 1797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Chatham</td>
<td>Plymouth</td>
<td>1793 – 1805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Pegase</td>
<td>Portsmouth, Hampshire</td>
<td>1794 – 1810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Prothee</td>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>1795 – 1815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Fortitude</td>
<td>Chatham, Kent</td>
<td>1795 – 1820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Captivity</td>
<td>near Portsmouth</td>
<td>1796 – 1816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Crown</td>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>1798 – 1802 &amp; 1806 – 1815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Laurel</td>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>1798 – 1821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Portland</td>
<td>Langston Harbour, near</td>
<td>1802 – 1817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Savage</td>
<td>Woolwich</td>
<td>1804 – 1815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS Vengeance</td>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>1808 – 1816</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Players whose investigators have a convict background — either current convicts, or former convicts who are now free or ‘ticket of leave’ men — may well have spent time on one of the hulks. Adding such a detail to your investigator’s background can create opportunities for establishing connections with other characters who also spent time on the same hulk in the same period. For example, if your convict spent time on one of the Woolwich hulks, he or she may have come to know Nicholas Divine, perhaps even having earned his favour for a good deed. Alternatively, your convict may have made enemies while incarcerated on the hulk, murderous rogues that he or she thinks were to be kept in “Old Blighty” or sent to far corners of the world. But perhaps those ne’er-do-wells might turn up unexpectedly as part of a new convict arrival at Botany Bay, if the Game Master wishes.

a character in the colony, being notably proud. One of his contemporaries described him as possessing a vast vocabulary, having purportedly “swallowed a dictionary.” Divine was also one of the first free Catholics in NSW.

Divine injured his left hand and lost the use of two of his fingers during his voyage out.

Roles in the Penal Settlements

Unlike the individual (Anthony Fenn Kemp) profiled in C&C Muster #1, Nicholas Divine served only one main role during most of the period covered in the core Convicts & Cthulhu setting. His example demonstrates how an entire career can be based on holding one key position, in this case that of Principal Superintendent of Convicts.

However, his long tenure does offer an opportunity to look at how Colonial politics and factionalism can impact on a character and their fortunes.

Timeline of Nicholas Divine’s career as Principal Superintendent of Convicts:

- 1790—1808 Principal Superintendent of Convicts, NSW, though technically his role as overseer of convicts began on the voyage out, first on the Guardian then on the Juliana in 1789—90.

- 1801 — Embarked on trading ventures with his brother-in-law, convict lawyer George Crossley.

- 1806 — Fell out with John Macarthur during the latter’s growing tensions against Governor Bligh. Seen as a Government loyalist by the New South Wales Corps.

- 1807 — Signed petition in favour of Bligh.

- 1808 — Sacked by the Rebel Administration after Bligh was deposed.

Later

- 1810 — Lobbied the new Governor, Macquarie, for reinstatement at his old role but denied due to his increasing deafness and infirmity. Was given an allowance of 2 shillings a day in recognition of his service.

Left for England to appear as a witness for Bligh at George Johnston’s court martial. After he returned to NSW he was granted a small pension. Returned to his farm and Burren Burren to live.

- 1822 — Divine and his wife were beaten by bushrangers at his farm and left for dead. His injuries were so severe he lost the use of his hands and legs and slowly lapsed into dementia.

- 1830 — Died aged 91, three years after his wife passed away.

What does the Superintendent of Convicts do?

Divine was recruited in his role and offered the sum of 40 pounds per annum and free rations. The role is responsible for the deployment of convict labour and the good conduct of convicts.

The box nearby shows the general orders outlining the official duties of a superintendent of convicts. The particular order reproduced here is actually from 1814 but provides a useful detailed summary of the expectations of the office and can be surmised to be close to what Divine does in the role. These duties could equally well be considered current for any period from the landing of the First Fleet in 1788 through to 1818, when an administrative change meant that applications for Government Servant came direct to the Superintendent of Convicts (instead of going to the Governor, as was the previous custom).

Land Ownership

Divine was granted land at Farm Cove in 1794 from Acting Governor Grose. This was 120 acres in the district of Bulanaming, where Divine grew wheat and maize. In 1806 he established a farm at the southern end of Sydney where he grew apples and oranges and tried to establish a vineyard and tobacco crop. Divine called the farm Burren Burren after his home town. This area later became known as Newtown (which is still its present name).

Divine’s land later became a source of legal contention when, in his will, he left it to a convict servant named Rochford for the remainder of the servant’s life. Rochford immediately commenced
selling lots of the land. This was contested by Divine’s family back in Ireland who claimed that after his injuries, Nicholas was not fit to make such a decision. Ultimately, the family lost this case as there was a long delay by the family in pursuing it, and the area was well established by then.

**Family Connections**

Divine is a further example of how characters in colonial NSW may be related. Divine’s sister was Anna Maria Divine who married convict lawyer George Crossley in 1798 (there is some confusion in the sources about the relationship between the two men, but this seems the clearest connection). Anna Marie was a free woman and their marriage took place before Crossley’s transportation. Crossley was a somewhat contentious individual (see the core Convicts & Cthulhu book) being a lawyer who had been convicted of a crime and sent to the colonies, there to find that the local government was so short on legal expertise that they engaged his opinion even though he was still a convict. Most notably the convict lawyer became a principal advisor to Governor Bligh when the official Judge Advocate, Richard Atkins, proved to be deficient in the law. Crossley was still officially not permitted to practice law in New South Wales.

Ultimately, both Crossley and Nicholas Divine were to suffer at the hands of the Rebel Administration after Bligh was overthrown in the Rum Rebellion. Both were deemed to have been associates of Bligh’s government and duly stripped of their status.

Divine had a son Edward and a daughter Amy, both born to Margaret Smith, a convict woman, in 1791 and 1794 respectively.

**Using Nicholas Divine in Convicts & Cthulhu**

There are many different ways of using Divine in a Convicts & Cthulhu game ... or just picking pieces out of his background to help inspire backstories for other characters. Included below are several ideas for weaving the evocative real-world history of Divine and the colonies into your own game scenarios and campaigns.
Inspiration for Player Investigators

Divine offers an example of an individual holding a long-term post, but also illustrates how such a government position might be endangered and altered by the changing fortunes of power factions in the Colony.

His work as a farmer may also recommend player character to use their Persuasion or Influence skills to gain land grants as early as they can, as a supplementary income against misfortune. Also, the example of duties might help in the establishment of a Player Character Superintendent of Convicts, as there were at least eight others at different times serving under Divine.

Divine as a Patron for Investigators

Divine is well-placed to serve a role as a powerful NPC patron, especially for convict player characters. There are a variety of different reasons Divine may have “taken a shine” to some of his convict charges (perhaps even harkening back to an old friendship established during time aboard one of the Woolwich hulks, see page 3).

Nicholas can assign favourite convicts to different government gangs and send them to various locations and even provide transport as in wagons and boats. Although he is not directly responsible for the day-to-day assignment of convict servants, his standing with the Governor is strong enough that characters should add 10% for his direct goodwill on matters directly concerning Government House (this is on top of other bonuses if the Faction rules from Convicts & Cthulhu campaign are being used).

Divine’s relationship to George Crossley can also help Player Characters wishing to seek legal aid. Also, his carriage of musters and other records concerning convicts could be invaluable assistance in an investigation.

Divine as an Antagonist

For convict investigators, Divine could be one of the worst enemies possible, since he wields enormous power over their lives. Convicts who are unassigned are especially vulnerable, as they fall directly under his control even if they are working on a gang. Nicholas or someone in his role could deny the convict investigator gear or even lessen their rations or make accusations against them of “depredation of Government material” as is noted in the General Orders above.

As with any historical character, if the Gamemaster wants a more extreme version of villainy, it is usually safer to create a brand-new character based on Divine, with a different name, some salient details changed, and perhaps some Mythos connection woven into the new character’s background.

Some Sample Story Seeds

Here are a handful of story seeds which demonstrate just three ways in which Divine might make an appearance in your Convicts & Cthulhu campaign.

- The Architect of Madness: Some members of a convict work gang have gone mad building a mysterious structure designed by a dubious architect trying to create a gate or other magical or otherworldly construction. Divine can be unaware of anything except the failure of men to do their duty and send replacements … or might charge the player characters to investigate on the Governor's behalf.

- The Weird That Came In From The Cold: Perhaps, all those years ago when Divine was shipwrecked on the open sea, he caught sight of something otherworldly in that malevolent fog-bound iceberg that shattered the hull of his ship. That weird and inexplicable entity or thing still haunts Nicholas Divine each time he dreams. It is a curious ‘something’ that is trying to gain a foothold into this world and which mentally urges Divine to aid it.

Divine hears of the investigators’ interest in weird and unexplained matters and summons them to ask for advice about the entity in his curious dreams. They may search in Mythos Tomes, but at the same time other images of the thing are cropping up in carvings, letters, even in natural formations. Behind it all is a devotee of the Great Old Ones (perhaps even a convict sorcerer) who is trying to use Divine as a focus to bring down a great horror on the colony.
The Wreck of the H.M.S. Guardian

As described in Nicholas Divine’s background summary, one of the more eventful passages of his life was the disastrous wrecking of the H.M.S. Guardian, part of the Second Fleet bound for Australia. Such a dramatic encounter could potentially be used by an enterprising Gamemaster in several ways, including the addition of a weird or Mythos element to the real-world event (as in “The Weird That Came In From The Cold” nearby), or inventing an entire new calamitous iceberg encounter to plague another ship voyage — another long-haul journey from England, or a shorter trip undertaken by sealers or whalers into the icy southern waters closer to Australia.

To assist the Gamemaster, below is a summary of the historical incident which led to the sinking of the Guardian, off the Cape of Good Hope in 1789. The loss of this ship was especially damaging to the fledgling colony of New South Wales, as the Guardian was carrying much-needed provisions intended to relieve the famine afflicting the colony.

The H.M.S. Guardian was under the command of captain Edward Riou, a veteran of service with the Navy in the West Indies. The midshipman was Thomas Pitt, nephew of Prime Minister William Pitt. Its journey from England to the Cape of Good Hope (the southern tip of Africa) was relatively uneventful. When it arrived there, the Guardian was met by William Bligh, future governor of NSW. Bligh had recently transferred there from Timor after his long trek paddling in an open boat after having been forced off his own ship during the famous mutiny of the Bounty. Bligh knew Riou, the two of them having sailed together previously on Captain Cook’s third voyage of discovery.

After a layover to reprovision at the Cape, the Guardian sailed southwards. By Christmas Eve they sighted an iceberg and the Captain decided that this presented an opportunity for the vessel to replenish its stores of fresh water. Because of a drought afflicting Cape Town, the ship had taken on a smaller ration of water than usual. To achieve the delicate approach to the iceberg, Captain Riou sent longboats that approached the ice and carved off chunks. By the time these were done and returned to the Guardian, darkness had fallen. To make matters worse, a fog also began to rise up out of nowhere. Visibility dropped, and lookouts were despatched to the rigging and on deck in an attempt to keep the iceberg in sight. These precautions did not save the Guardian. The iceberg struck it in the darkness, tearing the bottom out of the ship.

Captain Riou put crews of men into five of the longboats and sent them out to summon help, from other vessels or from Cape Town, the only nearby port. In the high seas, the longboats did not fare well. One of them was dashed against the hull of the ship and all hands lost. Three others were never heard of again. One managed to limp eventually back to Cape Town.

The Guardian itself, taking on water, also attempted the desperate sprint to make it back to port. Captain Riou was convinced that the ship, and he himself, fared little chance. But, despite having personally suffered a crushed hand and injuries to his legs, he was determined to try to reach safety. He ordered that all cargo be jettisoned, thus slowing the rate at which the ship was sinking. The remaining passengers and crew worked ceaselessly to keep the ship afloat. For nine weeks the beleaguered Guardian struggled on, eventually reaching Cape Town safely. Indeed, it managed somehow to arrive slightly earlier than the one surviving longboat. By the time it pulled into port, the ship was said to be down to the waterline.

The Guardian was deemed not fit to continue the voyage to Australia. Divine, along with five other men, transferred onto the next arriving convict ship to complete his outward voyage and take up his appointment at Sydney. That ship was the Lady Juliana, the first female convict ship and notoriously known as a ‘floating brothel’ (a claim that has since been challenged by historians). In addition to carrying Divine and other survivors of the Guardian to Australia, it also bore several items of important news from England — including news of King George III’s illness and subsequent recovery, and George Washington’s inauguration as President of the United States of America.

Sources:
Super for a Week: Nicholas Divine has reported that he is unwell and wishes one of the investigators to fulfill his duties for one week (of course allowing for associates, helpers, or teams of convicts to help if needed). The week does not prove to be smooth. In three of the sites where a muster is held, the investigators find that there are actually more convicts present than are included on the muster sheet. While it is not unheard of for the count to come up one or two short (if someone has escaped), having more than the expected number declared present is highly unusual, to say the least.

Investigating further, the investigators learn that the extra convicts are not actually people at all, but a kind of magical homunculus created by a sorcerer ensconced on a ship in Sydney Harbour. This nefarious Magister seeks to use the creatures to gather hair or other leavings from all the convict supervisors to use them as unwilling sacrifices in some foul ritual of revenge. Perhaps Nicholas Divine’s mystery illness is just the start …

Five Weird Mythos Things to Find Buried in an Antarctic Iceberg

Game Masters who are interested in creating dangerous fictional encounters with an Antarctic iceberg to enliven a Convicts & Cthulhu scenario, might consider these Mythos alternatives:

1. An Elder Thing frozen and preserved inside the iceberg.
2. A disgusting Shoggoth-thing held in stasis by a peculiar technological marvel.
3. Several strange-looking Albino King Penguins frozen in ice; mini-shoggoths in a mimic-disguise.
4. A peculiar mechanical item of brass apparatus and tempered glass, hammered into the ice and etched with a combination of French words and mystic symbols. A tattered label reads “Corps d’investigation occulte de Napoléon.”
5. A curiously crystalline section of the iceberg which seems altogether too regular to be natural; close examination reveals impossible non-Euclidean angles and prismatic bursts of light, perhaps suggesting some kind of peculiar dimensional rift.

Note that these statistics reflect Divine in his prime, while working as Superintendent. By the end of the Macquarie era he is considered an old and infirm man — if playing in this era, reduce his STR and CON by 5 each.

Bibliography

- Nicholas Devine, entry in Dictionary of Sydney: https://dictionaryofsydney.org/person/devine_nicholas

Like what you’ve read, but don’t yet own the core Convicts & Cthulhu sourcebook? Head over to RPGNow or DrivethruRPG and grab yourself a copy, either in PDF or softcover Print-On-Demand. Either can be obtained under a "Pay-What-You-Want" pricing model where you pay only the basic cost of creating the copy ($0 for PDF, or about USD $4 for the softcover book) plus whatever extra you’d like to send the way of Cthulhu Reborn as a "thank you" donation.