

BOOK INTRODUCTION

The Long Farewell by Don Charlewood

Burgewood Books, Victoria, Aust. 2005.

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(First published 1981 in Allen Lane)

It is with intentional contradiction that I “introduce” the ‘Farewell’. Perhaps it was also in the author’s mind when he broadsides us with narrative contradictions. Some between perceptions and facts:- ie the shortest or the safest route, the promises and the realities; the future and the fear, passages of providence and peril, heroes and villains.

Some is heart rending, as if the mostly poor and bereft, even to the educated classes, had not suffered enough in financial bleakness and become grist for the mill, their way to a new life was, often as not, a painful permanent wrench from all they had known or owned. It was now perhaps the most terrifying experience civilian Britains had ever faced and endured.

Thankfully the author lets us breathe and gives us breaks of sunshine and plain sailing through the tyranny of the system and the seas. He is like a good ship’s Captain who steers the journey and it is the diary accounts and records of the emigrants which bring the conditions, the agonised accounts of the passengers, the tempests and icebergs.

The diaries are almost entirely by emigrants to Australia, from the United Kingdom, our main population source in the sailing ship era.

A (white) census in 1881(>100 years from colonisation) counted 1.74 m Aust. born and .98 m born overseas (40%), and .93 m were from Britain.

Charlwood has a clear objective in immediately contrasting the Atlantic routes to that the Australian passage :- time, navigation perils, storms, doldrums, icebergs, fire, and the voyages’ most hazardous risk, that of threading the 50 mile wide needle of Bass Strait at Cape Ottway & King Island.

Unlike the passengers, we are forewarned of the practices and the perils, as we journey with the emigrants into this new world of hope; a physical and mental journey which changes people forever, the realisation of leaving all behind, probably never to endure this again.

He makes an intriguing assertion that the contrasting conditions of the shorter Atlantic American voyage, and the greater passage to Australia (& New Zealand) played a part in shaping the attitudes and differences between the peoples of the 2 continents. The statement is not fully discussed and enticingly leaves it to the reader to explore or refer to Geoffrey Blainey’s The Tyranny of Distance (Melb.1966).

“Once Governments began to select emigrants to Australia and subsidize their fares, they tended to become responsible for their well being during the voyage (*controls and standards for ships, catering & health etc. Practices learned through years of convict transportation -Ed.*). North America, by contrast, was a private-enterprise country, founded by merchant venturers, populated by people paying their own way. It is not surprising that the North American ethos contrasts with that of Australia” [sic]

I am drawn in by this theory, for it merges with the package of attitudes and traditions and habits we have been taught by our parents, handed down from our forebears. It is a fascinating soup of ingredients which make us today.

Shipping of emigrants was a relatively new thing. Britain’s ships had transported slaves, convicts and early settlers to America, but with the Highland Clearances, the Irish & Scottish potato famine and economic Depression in England & Wales, movement of people was now on a large scale. The value of the manifest was making it big business, to and from the destinations.

For nearly a century from the first settlement in Aust, every emigrant, bonded or free, had in common an experience none could forget and all could understand. A sea passage lasted 2 - 6 months, from the Old World to the New, across vast tempestuous oceans, severed from all familiarity. They endured terror and hardships, even squalid life & death conditions, and arrived as different people. It is ironic that Convicts had the best prospect of a safe voyage. Their harsh regimen led to an average of only 4 deaths per voyage, while later, ship surgeons would consider it acceptable to lose up to 20 emigrants on a voyage.

News of a ship known to have gone down would take 6 months to get back in the UK. Those lost and had failed to arrive long after their due date, would be presumed to have perished, and news delayed months further as locals nervously waited.

Press reports conjectured the terror of incidents. During a gale the steerage passengers were battened (shut) in quarters for safety. As a general policy they did not get lifeboats.



The ship *Taylew* left Liverpool 1854 with 458 passengers and 84 crew. It ran aground just 130 miles into the journey, with the bow sprit leading over the land, still the panic and disorganisation resulted in the drowning of 290, nearly half the ship's list, just yards from the shore.

The *Northfleet* anchored off the Thames for better weather, and was run down by a Steamer, which didn't stop, and only 57 of 350 survived.

As we read these accounts we grow to understand that most people were strangers to the sea, and lived their voyage in constant tension and never far from panic. It is key thought when viewing art depictions of the times and events.

There were the major terrors of fire, icebergs and fever; and the lesser not necessarily deadly ones of gastro, heat, cold, constant seasickness, and toilet. Fleeing a sinking ship was one part, surviving was another. The *Cospatrick* caught fire west of Cape of Good Hope. 473 passengers panicked, only 83 made it to lifeboats, and in following harrowing circumstances only 3 of them survived that experience.

Meanwhile the trans- Atlantic route was plied by sail and steam for hundreds of thousands of punters. Although a shorter route, the risk was greater. In 1834 18 vessels went down with 700 deaths. The author asserts that the main reason was defective construction of those ships, gross overloading, and maritime insurance which enabled owners to recoup losses on dodgy cargo ships. They were modified to carry passengers one way, and disassembled for raw materials as bulk cargo on return.

Deaths through illness was rampant during the potato famine, Typhus swept through the mustering centres at the ports, later to manifest in victims at sea. From 107,000 in that time 6000 died on voyage and 11,000 on arrival. This was private enterprise migration as compared to the Govt. sponsored Australian shipping which standardised victualising and on-board accommodation. Here economics was a factor. It was an economic necessity to subsidise people away from the UK to improve the local economy. *(It is in contradiction with modern doctrine of population 'growth' stimulating economy ! Indeed it is a worthwhile thought to compare the whole issue of illegal boat emigration with those times and circumstances. - Ed.)*

The colonial authorities demanded a say in emigrant selection.. (*The Nashwauk wrecked at Moana SA 1855 had aboard 300 folk including 130 single Irish milk maids and domestics. None were lost. The debacle of drunkenness and debauchery raised questions about the "type" of emigrant they were encouraging to SA. The paper claiming they were "plainly.... unfit... as emigrants, or corrupted on the voyage"- Ed*).

Charlwood reminds us that despite the dangers, and deprivations, on the Australia Run, people were infinitely better off than their Atlantic brethren, and most of the families they left behind.

One of the absorbing techniques Charlwood has is , to often draw us into the experience. He says "It is difficult for us to imagine 5 months at sea"; at which point we perhaps should put the book down for 15 minutes and reflect on it. None of us take that long to go anywhere. We travel in days and hours.

The Captain's challenge was determination of longitude after 13,000 nautical miles often without land reference. How far east were we? Did we miss West Australia ? Might it "pop up" tomorrow, or worse, during the night? Some ships' recordings were out by up to 140 miles. That's a long way inland if you hit the coast unexpectedly.

The route from Capetown to Aust. looks a straight "dead run" on maps. but in reality, because the earth is a globe. the shortest route is the radius arc between 2 points on the surface. This forms part of "Great Circle of Diameter" just like the equator; but can be at any angle through the centre. "the Great Circle Route" was proposed by John Towson in 1847. Linking the South Atlantic to Australia went into dangerous Antarctic waters, so the Great circle Arc was divided into a series of short straight chords designed to miss the ice but left Capetown hundreds of miles to the north.

Eventually Godfrey on *The Constance* did it and arrived in Adelaide in a record 77 days. The average now was slashed from 120 to 75-80 days from Liverpool. (six weeks faster). Not only was it shorter; but it picked up an unexpected benefit, the Roaring 40's. The winds at 40 deg south latitude which circle Antarctica.

While the author leaves some emigrants wallowing in the doldrums, we are surging with the swell and the gales and feeling as tense as the ropes on the rigging. In their wee bit hills and glens and soggy moors none could imagine the journey. He reports their wonder.

"Leaving Britain in balmy weather, flying fish and bonito seen, and phosphorescent seas as the trade winds blew them towards Brazil. Near the equator the winds dropped as they entered the doldrums , perhaps for 3 weeks without a breeze to propel them out of one of the most disagreeable places at sea. Eventually moving, they plunged south finding they were inadequately clad for the higher latitudes."



Wind blew and sails tore and water came in hatchways by streams. It seems very miserable and the ship Roald and heaved and Groand from one side to the Oather... Tins fall from shelves, sometimes on yer head

as you lie on your Bed... and a jar of red cabbage fell and wet the bed. When waves comes against the ship it makes it tremble..... and crashed on the deck like a cannon.”

Such a route demanded the best The passage to Australia was served by the finest sailing ships the world ever knew.

For decades to the 1840's there was little development from the convict and early emigrant ships, and they remained primarily versatile freighters to carry people one year and cargo another. They were Barque-rigged up to 600 tons, sailed badly, slowly, as speed was not so important as getting there. “The steerage passenger sailed in little better than a hermetically sealed box”

When steamers got going, they worked the Atlantic runs and provided competition. This spurred on designers to develop the Baltimore Packet ship:- fast slavers, then Clippers. Enter American-Scot, Donald



McKay and the *Flying Cloud*, a massive 1793 tons. It changed the nature of ocean sailing with speed, grace and room for many passengers. It later did splendid performances on the Australia run.

At the discovery of gold in Australia in 1851 the Black Ball Line purchased *Marco Polo* with legendary skipper Bully Forbes. He took 701 emigrants to Melbourne in 68 days. A new time scale was being constructed. It mattered little to this occasion that 53 had died en-route. McKay was producing the finest fastest ever built, sustaining speeds up to 22 knots under 12,000 sq.yards of sail. Despite the record breaking, it was still 3-4 months at sea and sometimes even more breathtaking and terrifying.

Steel hulls were the next design improvement, offering more room with with strength for less internal structure. Sails with auxiliary steam engines gave ships manoeuvrability and power in adverse situations.

The most notable was Brunel's *Great Britain* 3,500 tons, steel hull, steam & sail, and greatest reliability carrying 20,000 passengers to Australia, more than any other ship, on 34 trips. In 1869 the Suez Canal opened and pronounced the rapid decline of the great sailing ships and the Great Circle Route.

The story continues next issue. No reputations were intentionally harmed in the making of this Newsletter, and the aim of this summary is to give light to the book and author. -Alex McLeod