

BOOK REVIEW

The Long Farewell by Don Charlewood (cont.)

Burgewood Books, Victoria, Aust. 2005.

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(First published 1981 in Allen Lane)

The story of sailing ship emigration to Australia & NZ collated from historical documents, and significantly from emigrant diaries.

As we continue to plough the southern ocean in this next précis of the book, we appreciate Charlewood's constructions of life aboard the ships. He points out in commentary, that most of the diarists were from cabin class, and hence the perspective of the steerage passengers, isn't often represented, especially in the worst circumstances. An example is describing the conditions of the poorest group, a great number of impoverished highland scots, devoid of english language and social skills, even to have no understanding of basic cleanliness, health and welfare.

The *Ticonderoga*, worst of the Australian "plague ships" (96 dead of 811 passengers) made a confronting scene to Port authorities. Carrying a preponderance of Highland Scots, the lower decks were a filthy state and did not appear to have been cleaned for weeks, and the stench was overpowering...lockers were full of "dirt", mouldy bread and maggots. Beneath the bottom boards were soup & various cans of putrid odor and Port bottles and containers, filled with stale urine, while maggots infested beneath the bed boards. This had been same reported state when ordered by the Captain to be cleaned, 5 weeks earlier.

Another entry, Jesssie Campbell, shocked by her poorer dispossessed countrymen, wrote "Captain..& Doctor....complaining woefully of the filth of Highland emigrants, ...they did not believe it was humanly possible to be so dirty in habits... fancy using their food dishes for certain other purposes at night. Poor as I am, no consideration on earth would let me trust my family on a ship of Highland emigrants if the voyage was still before me."

The passengers universally were arranged into small groups for Mess Catering and duties. The Scots and Irish, in general, confounded the health officers or ship surgeons by not attending to instructions on health and community discipline, although the food and amenities for many were better than their squalid existence at home, and still they had a new life in a new land awaiting them.

Ships' classes generally reflected society's class structure, wealth & income, education, upbringing. When placed in an unfamiliar lodging facility of a ship, aside from the obvious unfamiliarity of sea voyaging, there were numerous functionary obstacles . Few Steerage passengers had ever seen a "Water Closet" (WC - toilet), or been accustomed to washing (let alone total rinse). Few understood the logistics of small group Mess. Sleeping and living at such close quarters (inches) from neighbours strained the peace and on many ships the overbearance of married men on vulnerable women was common. The prevalence of willful indiscipline tested the Surgeons, and officers. Fighting was common.

Meanwhile the various cabin class passengers, still endured considerable discomforts, cramped conditions, suffered an anguish relevant to their reasoning and education (while classes from the slums seemed to have a vapid resignation to all suffering). All passengers were victims of frequent profiteering by Suppliers and Ships Officers, who supplied less than the expected quality. Some folk managed to purchase better supplements if calling at a Port, however on the Great arc route there were no stops.

Even the casked or tank water onboard was sometimes drawn foul, from near the berths of embarkation. When rain came on voyage these people scurried to catch drinkable water.

Accommodation in cabins ranged from high comfort and service to modest boxes which must be fitted out by the passengers. One couple described their well appointed "apartment" with their work box, dressing case, chest of drawers all lashed to the floor and walls, a rigged shelf, and presumably 1 bed 6ft x 3 ft in a 8' x 8', "spacious arrangement".

A typical example, the *St, Vincent*.

Steerage accommodation between decks, amidships, a bunkhouse 124ft x 25ft (40m x 7m), two sides of double tiered bed spaces, 24 each side, each 6ft x 3ft space was walled by planks from deck below to deck above. One upper space for married couples, and their children below. Clothing and implements hang from the stanchions and ropes about each bay.

The interior space of 13 ft. had a central table, bench seat and foot boxes at end of the beds, leaving barest of room for movement and dressing.

The single men and youths are accommodated around the bow similarly, in spaces 6ft x 2ft wide.

In an enclosed bulkhead apartment abaft (stern), are the single women's quarters, Bed spaces stacked 6ft x 3ft. where two are required to sleep together.

There are 2 small 'hospitals' for the 288 passengers, and several pregnant women will give birth on the voyage.

The main deck housed the galley, and numerous livestock containers & cages.

Light below was so gloomy, Sisters intending to keep a journal gave up being unable to read by the dimness of the lamps. This may have been a blessing to the prudishness or modesty of women who needed to undress in this crawlspace of humanity. Ventilation, although poor, had ad-hoc improvements, but if the wind didn't blow in the tropics it was vile. Similarly in the icy storms of the south, when they were battened down for days, and ablutions were attend to inside.

Some non British ships had less protective standards. There are accounts of non-segregation of the sexes and ages, and even the taking of single girls as bed companions by the crew. While not widespread behaviour, this was often observed on these trips. The Atlantic runs only complied with the Passenger Act (segregation) in 1852. There was plenty of manipulation within the system. Young girls sent away from home as 'daughters' of married couples; pregnancies of single women and newlyweds, were revealed on board; and births by women whose husbands are waiting in the colony.

For all of the strain, humour was alive and shared.

The Becketts with 4 children observed:- "awoke last night and were sleeping head downwards, then heaved over to a stand-up sleep. Then turned up, and then down with every motion. Then there was music, for all the pots began to jostle then set to dancing a country jig. After, they leaped off the tables to dance the fandango in the middle of the cabin. The glass bottles were in high spirits and grew hilarious, boisterous, finally cracking their sides. Water kegs were strolling about the cabin in company with amorous looking teapots. Fragments of dead pig became resuscitated in the company of puddings and cakes and other stuffs. Being all awake, the other proprietors of the items had droll conversation on the events."

The crews were predominantly intemperate uneducated young men, toughened to the bullying, to the pain, discomfort and injury. They worked in the appalling conditions of 4 hr shifts, often wet, or 150 ft above the deck in a storm. Aloft on the mainyard of a ship rolling in heavy seas, crew furling sail may swing violently with the ship in an arc up to 100 yards, even getting dipped in the waves.. and ...Helmsen (2) were lashed to the helm as seas washed about their necks.

They were a constant source of bewilderment, wonder, fear, annoyance, noise, violence, and bravery in the experience of the passengers.

(To be continued)

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