

BOOK REVIEW

The Long Farewell by Don Charlewood (cont.)

Burgewood Books, Victoria, Aust. 2005.

ISBN1-876425-00-8 Non Fiction.

(First published 1981 in Allen Lane)

The story of sailing ship emigration to Australia & NZ collated from emigrant diaries & historical documents.

We conclude the summary of this excellent book with a little more appreciation of the transition people were making by voyaging to Australia.

The ship's surgeon or Medical Officer, was a key figure in the passengers' well being. The status of the surgeon on board varied, although the regulations may have described roles. It was the Master who thwarted or supported their actions. Caroline Chisolm demanded that they be responsible for rations, to adjust as patients and passengers needed for health. Also to have authority to compel cleanliness. These were Master's functions and matters of economy, and often at odds with Doctors' humanitarian aims

The surgeons on the Australia run were better. The Government-sponsored ships ensured that they were qualified, paid and supervised by immigration Commissioners. Even so, many were doubtful doctors. In 1849 on Australian bound vessels 22 out of 78 surgeons were criticised.

"Surgeon died on voyage due to intemperance".

"Surgeon guilty of gross misconduct with female passenger".

"Great neglect of his duties ...having become insane".

By 1892 the British regulations and instructions had amassed into an 80 page book covering matters of appointing Mess "Captains", Bathing, encouraging music, specifications of surgical instruments, and the apothecary kit. A Doctor was often assisted by a Matron with duties to the single women and pregnancies. These women could be tyrants, and sometimes necessitated such, with the rambunctious Irish and belligerent Scots. "Miss Acid:- a lean vinegar faced woman well into her 50's and a tongue like a rasp".

Fear of catastrophe was never far below the outward manner of passengers, and disproportionate outbursts of hysteria, fainting and despair had been displayed by the gentler sex, while men on occasions, had exhibited cowardice and selfishness. On one occasion a passenger proclaimed "Fire", sending the entire ship's company into frenzy and panic. Once the error (or

ruse) was realised by the Captain, he put the culprit in irons. On landing he was sentenced again to irons.

For all the safeguards, the personal and social health of passengers, esp. the Highland Scots & Irish, was generally poor to abysmal, and any outbreak of carried-on disease (measels, cholera, typhus etc) reaped its toll on top of the voyage's natural risks. The bigger the ships the greater the death rates, and the frequency of funerals must have been a great strain on the surgeons and the anxious passengers.

In 1852, 42 ships ave. 390 passengers averaged 20 deaths. However the 4 large ships averaging 800 passengers each, had a 75 death average. The majority were children. With scant knowledge of hygiene and a resistance to direction from the Doctors, these groups fared far worse than the compliant Convicts in surviving transportation. On one voyage, Captain Forbes responded to a report of 51/53 deaths being Children, "The births had balanced out the deaths". These are heavy demands on the Doctor, and most voyages would have been intolerable without their arbitration and devotion.

"Hot Water ! cries the cook from the little hut of a kitchen on the main deck, wherein burns an enormous stove which would suffice to serve an army, provided they did not eat from the menu". Tea and coffee, cherished by the passengers, was served to Mess groups in half gallon pots. On the decks were the caged livestock to be butchered along the journey, regardless if any beast died of sickness or disease. An incident of light relief came in a storm and rolling swell, which sent a cow crashing about its pen and eventually to and fro across the deck until it fell down a hatchway and into a cabin, where it was presumed to have remained, well, for the remainder of its trip.

Tedium and tiresome company tested their communal pastimes of boardgames, and conversations. Reading and instruction was encouraged, even as a means of improving themselves. Gambling was discouraged, but rife, on board ships. Passengers comment to the frequency of auction sales of personal effects to pay debts or raise gambling capital, Dances were encouraged for exercise and entertainment; but folk were segregated by class and singles did not mix. Swimming & bathing by men at times was allowed, and there was the wanton shooting of wildlife by men who brought their guns.

Ships had their newspapers which announced concerts, church, education classes, even world news if they happened to meet a passing ship. If it

happened to be going to the UK, letters were hastily written for the vessel to carry “home”. Receiving mail was more difficult. One seaman, away for 46 months, received one letter from his wife.

There is an account of meeting a transport ship of 250 female convicts, noting, “they looked happy and exceedingly clean”. In contrast, another met a Portuguese slaver in the Atlantic which sailed “with a fearful effluvia”.

Travellers shared their terrors and also their hopes and plans, developing friendships, holding reunions over many years. On board, the destitute and disconsolate were afforded a period of respite from having to beat a path through life. They had relative security, food, shelter, and must have been buoyed by the optimism of a new beginning, and even gold!

Approaching their destination the voyagers built their excitement. The realisation of severance from home was complete, and the new optimism grew. “I perceived an aromatic odour as of spring flowers

blown from the land ; - wind from the shore, strong and delicious! The scent of spicy hayfield;- I expect the yellow wattle”.

Another writes “this inert mass of cooped up beings galvanised into a new life by - a butterfly, a fragile winged messenger, viewed ecstatically by 300 pairs of eyes”.

The impressions on landing must have been varied, as much with the location as with the outlook of the emigrants as they searched for things familiar. The new land had a distinctly foreign look:- the straw hats, the dusty streets, unfamiliar plants, and an independent swagger and manner of the locals. Here, Charlewood leaves his new arrivals, on the warves, like released birds not knowing where to fly.

It will be generations later that their descendants fly “home” in search of their origins. ■



An unknown artist captures the attitudes on arrival at Geelong; hats raised and cheers for the vessel; off to the diggings; hearty parting of friends; the slump of bewilderment; and a symbol of a foreign land - the Aboriginals.