

The Voyage of the Mexborough 1841

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A decree had gone out, from late June 1841, to all the Gaols of the Irish Kingdom who were holding female prisoners under sentence of transportation.

They were to transmit the women to the Richmond Female Penitentiary on Grangegorman Lane in North Dublin to await the arrival in Kingstown Harbour of the vessel intended to convey them to their destination.

On being received at Grangegorman, those of the Roman Catholic persuasion were placed by Head Matron, Mrs. Rawlins, under the spiritual care of prison chaplain Father Bernard Kirby, a zealous and consummate Irish priest.

Father Kirby wasted no time in praying with the women and exhorting them to individually confess their sins, make their penance and receive absolution and forgiveness from God for the crimes which had brought them to their present predicament. They could then receive the sacrament of communion prior to their embarkation to the penal colony.

Friday 23rd July saw the little chapel of the Penitentiary "fitted up" with much taste and neatness and presenting a most interesting spectacle. The altar was decorated with a profusion of flowers and other ornaments.

The two large galleries were occupied by the ordinary prisoners of the establishment. However, underneath the galleries, maintaining a contrite, meek and pious congregation, were quietly assembled the convicts in their sombre dress, resembling something more like a religious community than the denizens of a gaol.

After the sacrifice of the Mass had been celebrated, Father Kirby addressed the female convicts directly, in a fascinating and forthright manner.

He likened their present situation to Mary Magdalene. Once favoured with fortune, nobility, beauty and mental endowments, yet she abused her many attributes by all her crimes and improprieties.

But after her career of sinful wretchedness, she, at length, found the grace of God. She, as they had, received absolution and like them, her sins were forgiven and she became the exemplary Saint beloved by all.

Father Kirby then entreated the convicts that they should rejoice at being transported to Australia, a much better land than where they currently lived.

He told them the story of a skilful gardener, when inspecting his plants, he would, if he saw them growing too closely together, transplant a portion of them into another soil, in order that they all might flourish and produce an abundant crop, while, if he left them in their present state, they would grow weak and sickly.

So it was with his female convicts.

To save them from a fearful fate, God had permitted the hand of the law to reach them. He allowed the Judge to sentence them to transportation to a foreign clime, where they would have the opportunity of returning to the paths of virtue by the grace of repentance, thus becoming prosperous and happy.

With such a prospect before them, had they any reason to weep or lament for their destiny? No, on the contrary they should rejoice at the potential which was ahead of them.

Listed as a convict ship for females, the 376 ton barque *Mexborough* arrived in Kingstown Harbour, 12 kilometres south of Dublin the following Wednesday.

It had departed from the Royal Navy dockyard at Depford under the command of Master, John Bridgman en route to collect those female convicts sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's land.

On board was Royal Navy Surgeon Dr. Henry Mahon.

Dr. Mahon had been surgeon on the *Isabella*, twelve months earlier, with 119 female convicts who were sent to Sydney from Dublin. Dr. Mahon was highly regarded following his favourable report of the conduct of those prisoners during the voyage without any deaths on board.

However by the time the *Mexborough* reached Dublin, the Royal Navy recalled Dr. Mahon, as they required him to serve on the male convict ship *Barossa*. The Navy quickly sent John Stephen Hampton, in succession, as surgeon to take charge of the Irish female convicts destined for the *Mexborough*.

Thirty three year old John Hampton had graduated at Edinburgh in 1828 and was appointed as an assistant naval surgeon on several ships. At the Plymouth dockyards he had worked to prevent the spread of Cholera and was rapidly promoted to the full position of Surgeon.

The *Mexborough* was his first appointment as a Surgeon Superintendant.

He later served on the *Constant* and the *Sir George Seymour* and in 1846 he was appointed Comptroller-General of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land.

He departed in 1855 under complicated circumstances, later becoming Governor of Western Australia, but that is another story.

Over the next few days one hundred and forty five female convicts and thirty six of their children were removed from Grangegorman Penitentiary to the *Mexborough* to be settled in for the long voyage.

Also embarked were fourteen free settlers, consisting of six women and their eight children. The women had received permission to join their convict husbands who had been transported to Sydney some time previously.

However, the Mexborough had not seen the last of Father Bernard Kirby.

Two days before it was to depart, the resolute priest went on board and sought out Surgeon John Hampton to ask him how he was to act on Sundays during the long voyage.

Hampton replied that the orders of the Admiralty were clear and distinct.

His orders and duties were that he should read the Church of England services for the convicts under his care every Sunday.

Fr. Kirby strongly demurred, he compellingly informed Hampton that, of all the souls he had on board, only 22 were Protestants and over 150 were Catholics. These devout Catholics would be forced to violate a most explicit rule of their church, which forbade them to attend any form of prayer or worship not recognized by Catholic authority.

To his credit, good nature and understanding, John Hampton agreed with Father Kirby and consequently allowed him to select and appoint several pious and discreet women. Kirby then prepared these women so that they would be able to read prayers on every Sunday for the Catholic Convicts during the long voyage.

Meanwhile Hampton had completed all the arrangements of settling the women into separated mess units and cleaning parties.

All the stores and supplies were checked and carefully stowed and the Mexborough sailed from Kingstown Harbour on Sunday 12th August 1841.

So who were these female convicts on board bound for Van Diemen's Land? They had come from most counties all around Ireland.

The youngest was thirteen year old Anne Campbell. There were 21 teenagers including Anne, then 87 young women in their twenties, another 21 were in their thirties, leaving the remaining 16 aged from forty to 70 year old Mary Cregan.

The 36 children on board with their convict mothers ranged from just four months old to a twelve year old girl.

The vast majority of the women had been sentenced to transportation for the felony of theft. These crimes included house robbery, stealing money, clothes, cloth material and various animals. The list of articles stolen makes fascinating reading, anything from a few shillings, hair nets, ribbons, a scarf, a Dutch doll, a dish of steaks, a chair, to stealing two cows.

Two women had been sentenced for perjury and another two women on board had committed murder. These two were sentenced to transportation for life, whereas only six of the women had received 15 year sentences, with another eight who had ten year sentences, while the rest of the women were each sentenced to seven years transportation.

Ninety four of the female convicts were single. Twenty five were married and twenty six were widows.

Most of them gave their trade as general servants or farm servants. Many said they were house maids. The young teenagers called themselves nurse girls. There were a few laundresses and needlewomen and one boot closer.

Sixteen women reported that they had been "on the town" for a variety of years.

For the first two weeks, as it sailed south towards the Cape of Good Hope, the *Mexborough* battled contrary winds and very bad weather, causing the usual suffering of sea sickness amongst most of the passengers. Fortunately only two of the women required Dr. Hampton's long term medical intervention.

The *Mexborough* was an old ship and required the utmost vigilance to prevent leakage into the prison areas.

Dr. Hampton had established a strict routine which everyone on board followed except during the worst weather days.

At daylight, the convict cooks were admitted on deck and the ships company commenced cleaning the upper deck and water closets. At six AM all the women got out of bed and neatly rolled up their bedding and washed and dressed themselves and their children. As soon as the cleaning and drying of the upper deck was finished, generally between 7 and 7:30, everyone was admitted on deck and were fed their breakfast.

At nine all the convicts except the cleaning party were sent on the upper deck and the whole of the prison deck was then thoroughly cleaned by scraping, scrubbing, and holystoning.

The cleaning of the prison area was generally finished in fine weather about 10:30. The Convicts, with the exception of the sick, were then all sent on the upper deck and the prison doors locked until dinner time at one PM.

After dinner, Dr. Hampton put no restriction on the women having to go below, because he found that they preferred to remain on the upper deck.

Thus the prisons areas were kept very well ventilated, clean and cool until it was time to send the women and children below for the night, which in temperate, cool or cold weather was always done at sunset.

During the hot weather, within the tropics, he permitted the women to remain on the quarter deck and poop until six or even sometimes nine PM, which he witnessed had a most beneficial effect on their health, comfort and contentment.

At ten the convict women and children were always quiet and in bed.

Swinging stoves were often used in the prison areas to promote dryness and ventilation.

The holds were frequently fumigated and ventilated. The bedding was repeatedly aired and shaken. Washing days were once a week or more often according to the weather, and the prisoners always mustered on Sunday with clean clothes.

The general condition of the women and children improved and most remained healthy as they spent those first twelve weeks heading towards the Cape.

Captain Bridgman, on reaching Cape Town, sailed the ship around the Cape Peninsula into the sheltered waters of Simon's Bay, where the Mexborough sheltered for a week taking on a sufficient quantity of water for the remainder of the voyage.

However, on departing the Cape, the weather was to be against them again for the rest of the voyage, as they battled the roaring forties through the southern Indian Ocean, with continuing gales and naturally stormy seas towards Van Diemen's Land.

Medically, Dr. Hampton had a relatively easy voyage. There were a few health problems and diseases in the early days, which he was able to cure with normal remedial treatment. In the colder weather there were numerous cases of inflammation of the nose and throats of the women as was to be expected. In fine weather lemon juice and sugar was issued to the Convicts - in bad, or wet weather they were given Wine.

One of the convicts' boys fell and broke his collar bone early in the voyage and one of the free women broke her wrist.

There was one birth during the voyage. The labour was perfectly natural with the mother and infant doing extremely well.

Only two women became seriously ill and died, almost within sight of their destination, some sixty miles off the coast of Van Diemen's Land, much to Dr. Hampton's regret.

Both the patients in the fatal cases were unhealthy, debilitated women, who were very frequently on the sick list. Throughout the bad weather, particularly during the windstorm in which they died, both women were very despondent.

The almost incredibly dirty habits of 55 year old Mary Holohan, were produced, no doubt in the first instance, by the Diarrhoea under which she ultimately sunk. During the last week of her life, she was a most loathsome nuisance, destroying all the spare bedding. She had to be put in a warm bath morning and evening, otherwise the Hospital and after part of the prison would have been altogether uninhabitable.

Huge winds drove the *Mexborough* out to sea over those final few days until she sailed into the Derwent River on the 26th December after four months and two weeks at sea.

Dr. Hampton reported to the authorities that apart from the two fatal cases, the convict women, the free settlers and the children, on arrival in Hobart Town, were in better health and condition than they were on embarkation at Kingstown and none were under, or required, medical treatment.

In his reports on their behaviour, he listed only three women who were bad and troublesome, another sixteen were middling and the majority, the remaining one hundred and twenty four women were well behaved.

In just over two weeks after their arrival, sixty eight women had been assigned out from Hobart Town, while John Hampton was further employed in medical charge of fifty seven of the women who were sent on board the government brig *Isabella* for assignment in the Launceston district.

On his return to Hobart Dr. Hampton was given permission to return to England.

Captain John Bridgman personally paid for the fourteen free settlers, the women and children, to travel by ship to Sydney to rejoin their convict husbands and fathers.

Bridgman eventually sailed the *Mexborough* to Singapore loaded with ballast.

In the limited time remaining, it is worth noting that seventy two of the *Mexborough* women eventually married here. Another twenty eight applied to marry, some several times, but there is no record of them officially marrying and the remaining 43 of the women did not apply and possibly did not legally marry and thus remained single.

Finally, could this successful and trouble free voyage been mainly a result of Father Bernard Kirby's religious exhortations back in Grangegorman Chapel, or was John Hampton's perseverance and attention to discipline, cleanliness and dryness, in rendering the women comfortable, contented and healthy, be solely responsible for their triumphant journey to an improved existence here in the new world ?

Sources.

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