

Surgeons Superintendants of the convict ships and their influence on how the women experienced the voyages.

The journals which have been transcribed were all written by surgeons of the Royal Navy. They were experienced surgeons and well trained in the rules and regulations of keeping a ship clean. Although the rules applied to all convict ships and the surgeons were good, sometimes very good doctors, their personalities and their priorities influenced how the voyage would have been for the women on the ships, for their emotional well being and their comfort and health.

I have chosen five surgeons and their journals to look at how the personalities, the time and place in their careers, and the different skills they brought with them, influenced life on board.

Robert Espie, Royal Naval Surgeon

Born Derry c1790 died 1870?

Promoted to the position of surgeon in 1814

Surgeon Superintendent on convict ships:-

Morley 1817	(males to Sydney)
Shipleigh 1818	(males to Sydney)
Dorothy 1820	(males to Sydney)
Lord Sidmouth 1823	(females to Hobart & Sydney)
Lady Rowena 1826	(females to Sydney)
Mary (VDL) 1830	(males to Hobart)
Roslin Castle 1834	(males to Sydney)
Elizabeth 1836	(females to Sydney)

Lord Sidmouth- Master James Ferrier via Rio 152 days

Left England 11/9/1822 Arrived Sydney 10/2/1823

Female convicts 97 – 1 death (50 to Hobart)

Robert Espie was a surgeon on 8 convict voyages stretching over twenty years. In his medical journal from the Lord Sidmouth, 1823, he gave a detailed account of the arrival of each group of women, the preparations for sailing and the rules and regulations to be observed on board the ship during the voyage to VDL & NSW (these were hung up in the prison); he described the routines for storing the bedding and cleaning the decks, the visits and farewell gifts of the Christian ladies and a daily entry in his journal of the routines and events including arrival and disembarkation of the women— all of which provide an excellent view of life aboard a convict ship. He focused on the regulations and the order and how these were achieved. He took the role of superintendent seriously.

What does the journal tell us about the man?

The detailed journal entries and the number of voyages indicate that the role was an important part of his career and he took pride in completing it well – a low death rate seemed to be popular on the score card among the surgeons. .

“I have had the Honor of being four times as Surgeon & Sup^t of Convicts to N.S. Wales, two voyages of which I did not lose an individual, and of the two others only 3 grown persons, one of whose lives (as detailed in this journal will shew) I could have saved provided I had had a tractable person to deal with.”

He was a stickler for the rules and applied it to all on board, convicts, crew and master – a point which may not have endeared him but probably earned him respect, perhaps grudging on some occasions.

The crew –

The situation of a Surgeon Superintendent of a woman Convict Ship if he does his duty can be no sinecure as they constantly require to be looked after and particularly to restrain them from contact with the sailors – this can only be done by beginning well at first, and checking all appearance of intimacy before the Ship leaves England Directing the Master to discharge any sailor who may shew a disposition this way which I did in two or 3 instances, to his no small annoyance

Two or three sailors dismissed before the voyage started which annoyed the master of the ship and the incident at Rio would have angered him even more.

The Master & the incident at Rio Janeiro

Saturday November 30th

– In the course of the evening a complaint was made to me by several of the women that they had not had their usual allowance of provisions & which I found to be the case on investigation, this was entirely owing to the villainy of the Ships steward who has hitherto borne so good a character that we had ceased to delegate any person to overlook him. I had this matter thoroughly investigated and never omitted again to keep a sharp lookout upon him and to make two of the women attend when weighing the Rations etc.

Monday December 2nd

Ship laying out in the fairway but have prevented her from sailing 'till I have some redress for the ill conduct of the steward.-

Tuesday November 3rd.

The Master being unwilling to render me any redress 'till the morning when he reluctantly dismissed him. It appears without doubt that he has within this late while abstracted a little of the women's Rations, but which has been fortunately detected without much harm being done. Delegates now regularly attend all issues and shall do so thro'out the remainder of the passage

Robert Espie stood his ground against the master of the ship and forced him to dismiss the steward who had taken the rations. Although he took action when the women had complaints and was not afraid to stand up to the master and the crew if he had to he did not tolerate any misbehaviour by the women either and they endured their punishments too.

The Women.

I am happy to say in a healthy and orderly state placed them in proper messes and issued them their Bedding and regulated them as I could best devise for their health and comfort

..made the women scrub and clean every part of the prison most strictly shewing them what would be expected thr'out the ensuing voyage, which I am happy to say has been easily enforced among them-

The rolling up and stowing of the beds and cleaning of the decks was written up daily by Robert Espie. It seemed to be an important task of the day and one which he liked to be well done.

Wednesday September 4th

..some of the prisoners begin to be obstreperous which will shortly render it necessary to punish them if they persist in it.

Tuesday September 10th 1822

Handcuffed Ann Bolland for violent and abusive language, but released her shortly on a promise that she would behave well thro'out the voyage,

...punished Jane Gordon by putting her in Solitary confinement in the Coal Hole for making a disturbance yesterday evening while the clergyman was at prayers - This woman is an abandoned character and I think the worst on Board

... confined Charlotte King a convict from York Castle for violent and abusive conduct last night after dark in the prison, by putting all day in the Coal Hole on bread and water

Served no wine today in consequence of the noisy and disorderly conduct of the women last Sunday after its issue. I shall therefore only serve a gill instead of half a pint as heretofore –

- Shaved Elizabeth Simpson's head for the theft which has been so clearly proved upon her, and removed the Handcuffs at dark

Mentioned in journal

6 women had their heads shaved for theft

12 women spent time in the coal hole - a couple more than once -for boisterous & outrageous behaviour or for fighting

3 were handcuffed for a time for insolence & abuse..

All had their wine allowance reduced & others lost the privilege on occasions.

He showed appreciation of the work of Mrs Pryor and the ladies who visited the ship before it left England
General Remarks

Sunday September 8th 1822, Woolwich, Mrs Pryor read an address to the women which was extremely appropriate and affecting. She afterwards took leave of them in a most kindly and affecting manner.

Did he like the missionary? Perhaps not as he usually referred to the Rev Williams as 'the missionary' but he stood no nonsense during the services.

Sunday November 10th 1822

at ten o'clock had them all assembled on the quarter deck together with the Ships company for Divine Service which was performed by the Missionary – the Methodist tears up preaching by the Roots –

Sunday December 29th 1822

– at two o'clock served the prisoners a gill of wine each, except a few who had forfeited that indulgence by disorderly conduct while the parson was at prayers yesterday evening

Rev Henry Williams

Rev Henry Williams of the Church Missionary Society – was met by the Rev Samuel Marsden in Sydney. He went to New Zealand accompanied by Samuel Marsden and settled there. Was involved in the Treaty of Waitangi

The Lord Sidmouth a convict ship carrying female prisoners whose practice of singing obscene songs the young missionary succeeded in getting forbidden, in spite of a suspicious apathy on the part of the ship's captain.

Courageous, masterful, and energetic, he was born to command rather than cooperate. Combative by temperament, he was vehement in dispute and seldom willing to accept a compromise.

www.teara.gov.nz/en/1966/williams-henry

Robert Espie - fair minded

Friday January 24th

The Boatswain of the Ship struck one of the women yesterday evening for some insolence upon her part but this unfortunate creature I think does not possess her right faculties. I have taken care to prevent recurrence of the like again if possible. I attend to my regulations personally, otherwise we would have a little Bedlam –

Monday March 1st Sydney Cove–

I cannot but express my great joy at having got rid of so troublesome a charge-.

Did the presence of a righteous clergyman who would not take no for an answer and a ship's master who was fed up with both surgeon and clergyman add to the angst of the journey? The women seemed to bear all the blame in his statement.

Excerpt from the voyage of the Elizabeth 1836

'I, like a fine dolt head, asked Sir William Burnett to get me appointed to a women ship ... I had very nearly suffered stabbing by one of the females before the ship left Woolwich. I had fairly imagined I know how to manage convict women, having had two ships of that sort before, but from some cause of other I most certainly did not succeed to my own satisfaction in this last ship...'

Sources

Royal Naval medical Officers Journals (Lord Sidmouth 1823) ADM 101/44/10

www.teara.gov.nze/1966/williams-henry

www.jenwilletts.com/surgeon_superintendent

John S. Hampton, Royal Naval Surgeon

b. c 1806 d 1869 (England)

Diploma of medicine, Edinburgh, 1828

Assistant naval Surgeon 1829

Full surgeon 1834

Appointed Comptroller General of Convicts VDL May 1846-1855

(During his time in the office, allegations of inhumanity and corruption were frequently published in the press)

Appointed Governor Western Australia 1861 -1868

He imposed a far stricter regime than in the past,

His sound financial management endeared him to the Colonial Office, and went some way to alleviating his unpopular public image

Convict ships

Mexborough 1841 females to Hobart 12th September-26h December 1841

Constant 1843 males to Hobart

Sir George Seymour 1845 to Port Phillip & Hobart

Mexborough via Cape 136 days

Master Jn H. Bridgman

Female convicts 145 – 2 deaths

Reputation

authoritarian outlook, unfriendly & cold

allegations of inhumanity & corruption

used convict labour for his own gains

allegations of cruelty

good medical reputation

successful financial administrator

Journal

A concise journal - medical reports of the two women who died plus one other case.

General Remarks – show successful voyage – nearly all arrived in a healthy & clean condition

After embarkation the Women and children improved in condition, and appearance, were very healthy,

On the 12th Nov^r the Mexborough again sailed from the Cape & was exposed to a continuance of gale of wind and very inclement weather up to the date of arrival at Hobart Town on the 25th Dec^r and being a very old ship it was exceedingly difficult, & required the utmost vigilance, to prevent leakage keeping the Prisons damp.

The most strict & preserving attention was given throughout the whole voyage to cleanliness, ventilation and dryness; the daily routine established on these points & invariably enforced except during very bad weather

In fine weather Lemon Juice and Sugar was issued to the Convicts - in bad, or wet weather- Wine and the whole of the Lemon Juice and Wine sent on board, was issued previous to arriving at Hobart Town.

The Convicts, Free Settlers & very large proportion of young children arrived at Hobart Town in better health and condition than they were in on embarkation at Kingstown, in proof of which although the voyage had been long with much bad weather there was not a single patient under treatment when the ship anchored in the Derwent.

The fact that there were no patients under treatment when the ship arrived in Hobart is difficult to believe considering the description of the ship being damp, the weather bad and the voyage long. John Hampton was an authoritarian who would have enforced strict rules to ensure the best possible health outcome and it is possible that the women did not easily approach him unless health problems were serious.

Surgeon & Mary Holahan.-

There was one woman who descended into insanity and her actions resulted in her death.- Was it a protest/ despair/ insanity or even senility.

5th December 1841

This old unhealthy woman previous to arriving at the Cape was under treatment for a severe attack of common continual fever which debilitated her very much. Since coming on board has always been exceedingly dirty in her habits, a few days after embarking & whilst the ship was at anchor at Kingstown using her shoe as a bed pan and keeping the shoe in her blanket, full of excrement. this happened more than once while she was in perfect health notwithstanding that every practicable inducements were used to prevent her doing so. Since the commencement of bad weather a few weeks ago, although perfectly sensible & able to assist herself she has invariably passed her stools and urine in bed, positively refusing to use a bed pan, or to be helped to keep herself clean. and has therefore rendered it impossible to keep her bedding dry and clean.

Removed into the Hospital & put into a warm bath. To have a nutritious diet and Barley Water for common drink.

6th December although she asks for drink and everything else she wants will not ask for or use the bed pan or night chair.

7th December Says that she has no pain anywhere. is quite well, and wishes to be left alone" continues to pass her stools and urine in bed and when remonstrated with on the subject says that " she likes it so".

15th – 21st December she continued to pass her stools & urine in bed up to 10 AM. on the 21st Dec^r. when she died in a violent gale of wind.

General Remarks

The almost incredibly dirty habits of Holahan no doubt in the first instance produced 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 & requiring to be put in a warm bath morning and evening, otherwise the Hospital & after part of the prison would have been altogether uninhabitable, and however incredible it may appear offered the most violent resistance to being shifted and kept clean, although perfectly sensible & able to make all her wants known.

Mary Holahan was a widow who was 55 years old

– was she a mother and grandmother?

- she was aboard a ship where rules were toughly enforced.

- did despair lead to insanity?

- or was she senile?

Perhaps all of these led to her behaviour.

In the battle of wills between Mary Holahan and John Hampton – Mary won.

Sources

Wikipedia, _Hampton John Stephen,(1810-1869) by Peter Boyce, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1, (MUP), 1966

Royal Naval Medical Officers Journals (Mexborough 1842) ADM 101/53/5

Charles Cameron, Royal Naval Surgeon.

Promoted to Surgeon Royal Navy 16/9/1816 (nine years experience before becoming surgeon superintendent on convict ships)

Convict Ships

Midas 1825	females to Hobart & Sydney
Princess Charlotte 1827	females to Sydney
Ferguson 1829	males to Sydney
David Lyon 1830	males to Hobart

Midas via St Jago 146 days

Master Jas Baigrie

Female convicts 109 (58 Hobart) 1 death

Hard working

Compassionate

He wrote detailed notes of the illnesses and treatment-

Had a sense of humour.

Promoted humane treatment of prisoners

In a letter to a friend in Sydney Charles wrote:- (The Morning Post 16th September 1826)

"After we left the River in the Midas, with the exception of having a good deal of sickness on board, everything, as far as the convicts were concerned, went on in such a pleasant manner that I am now almost astonished when I reflect upon it. Even the very worst of them, and those who behaved very ill, when they first came on board, afterwards conducted themselves in the very best manner. Whatever the opinion of the world may be, and however depraved those unfortunate women may be considered, the seed of virtue is not altogether dead in them, neither are they wholly insensible to kindness. They are more highly sensible of, and more grateful for, any act of kindness than mankind generally suppose, and particularly more so than many who are placed in more fortunate circumstances. I am also convinced, that if they were treated less harshly by those who have got authority over them, than they generally are, many more of them would return to the paths of virtue, and become good members of society. They were treated by every person on board the Midas with the utmost kindness and attention to their comforts, and they repaid that attention by their grateful demeanour and general good conduct; not one disagreeable circumstance occurred during the whole passage, as far as the female convicts were concerned, and they were landed at New South Wales with the very best characters.

What the Journal tells about Charles Cameron

Sense of humour

Charles Cameron showed a sense of humour in his words about the behaviour and incidents with Mary Holahan. He appeared to be a man with a fine sense of the ridiculous.

Mary Wilson 21st August 1825

Is insane in many of her ideas, and foolish almost in all.

September 2nd 1825

Appears as yesterday, but I have got myself wholly out of her favour, for last evening she took a fancy to some Raspberry Jam which I had got for one of the Children, and asked for some of it, which I rashly promised to send her. On applying to the Steward I found it had been all used; she would however take no substitute; nor will she forgive me. All this day she will not speak one word to me. I am therefore under the necessity of guessing at her complaints.

Care of the very ill

Charles Cameron's journal gave a vivid glimpse of the suffering of the sick women; the seriously ill and those who were sea sick. He spent many hours on the prison deck with the women and wrote of the long tiring hours when he completed his journal late at night.

7th September 1825

In many respects however I consider myself fortunate. for, thank God, I enjoy good health to enable me to meet the very numerous calls on my assistance. The Females themselves render me every assistance; They go about everything which I wish them to do, in the most willing manner; even they are respectable forward in offering their services. And so general is the feeling among them that a loud word is not to be heard in the Prison; for fear of disturbing the Sick in Hospital. Captain Baigrie gives me, also every assistance in his power,

12th September 1825

The Females who are well however are exceedingly attentive to the sick, and render me every assistance, indeed it would be impossible for me to give a sufficiently Strong Idea of their very praiseworthy conduct in that

Respect. They are also highly grateful for all the attention which is paid them on my part. And perhaps for that very reason I exert myself to the utmost, till I am nearly exhausted to be of service to them.

27th September 1825

It may be supposed that I am very negligent in keeping my Journal of the Sick. But if it could for a moment be seen, the state they keep me in from morning till midnight it would I think become matter of astonishment that I am able to give any account at all of them, For the last 48 hours I have not had scarcely an hour to myself. Between Epileptic, Hysterical (principally arising from quarrelling) Patients, Complaints, and other duties; I have fully enough to do.

25th October 1825

The scene of Sickness I have to pass through from morning till near or past midnight, is as much as I am able to bear up against; and in endeavouring to do justice to them (the Sick) am totally unable to attend to some of the other Duties required of me.

Laughter

2nd October 1825

Mary Tapper

It is to me, matter of great surprise, that, notwithstanding her long, and severe sickness, the immense quantity of Blood she has lost, and the spare diet on which she has always existed, she is still one of the stoutest Females in the Ship and fully as much so as when she first came on Board. In general, too, she is cheerful and disposed to laugh with those who are merry.

Mary tapper was a very sick young woman who suffered severe seizures and complications arising from them. She spent many days in hospital and seemed to have been a favourite of Charles Cameron with her sense of humour. He was surprised at her being the stoutest woman on board ship and had remained as stout as ever despite the fact that she always had a poor diet and been bled often.

Dying patient – Mary Neale

Charles Cameron showed compassion to the dying Mary Neale making her final days as comfortable as he could and giving his own time to fulfil her requests. Among the journals there are other examples of surgeons showing compassion to the dying especially allowing special foods and cots and cradles as their hospital beds.

25th September 1825 Mary Neale She has every attendance, and attention paid to her comfort, and has everything she wishes for from the Cabin Table. (I have always approved of what she has asked for) Today she had at dinner some Roasted Turkey, and a little Porter, which she relished very much, and she is of a very grateful disposition.

3rd October 1825

Stated this morning that she was aware that she could not live and desired that I would read to her. which I did.

4th October 1825

This evening she asked, to take her to Sidney, where her son is going

What the women thought of Charles Cameron

A Letter of Sincere Thanks from the Unfortunate Female Convicts On Board The Midas, Captain James Baigrie, To The Ladies In London.

Referring to the surgeon

It is not in our power to speak too highly for his praiseworthy kindness and fatherly goodness to us,

There has been a great deal of sickness in the ship; thank God we have lost but one woman and one child. We expected at one time to have lost a great number. We almost despaired our surgeon could ever have stood it, and had not the Almighty been on our side, he never could; there never could be a

Gentleman so constantly attentive to unfortunate women; he was for ever below in the hospital with the poor sick - and never appeared satisfied but when discharging his duty. We can never be thankful enough.

Charles Cameron published his treatment of scurvy which he had used on the Ferguson (1830)
In 1832 he published his New Theory on the influence of Variety in Diet in Health and Disease.

Charles Cameron died in February 1837 at the Haslar Royal Naval Hospital.

Sources

Royal Naval Medical Officers Journals (Midas 1825) ADM 101/44/10

www.jenwillets.com/surgeon_superintendents.htm

www.jenwillets.com/convict_ships_m2.htm

John Wilson, Royal Naval Surgeon

Convict ship

Emma Eugenia 1844 170 females to Hobart- a long journey of 153 days – no deaths

The sort of Surgeon that film writers would script for

Appreciative of the work of his head nurse

Outspoken to authorities about cleaning routines

Brave in rescuing the woman who jumped overboard.

Emma Eugenia 1844 -124 days

Master- George Kettlewell

Female convicts 174 (no deaths)

Sailed 30/11/1843 from London

Arrived 2 /4/1844 - Hobart

The journal.

General Remarks

The leading features of the System pursued throughout were unremitting attention when sick, constant employment when well, & unceasing Surveillance.

Jane Tate, Chief Hospital Nurse 20th December 1843

The patient has been most attentive to Sophie Jacobs, by day & night, turning her in her bed, lifting her out of it, when necessary, giving her drinks, instantly removing the stools etc. The symptoms, it will be seen are similar to those of the latter, at the commencement of her illness.

....there is still great depression of spirits, and in the event of her death, she has this morning given directions about the disposal of some trifling property.

John Wilson wrote this sentence in his journal as he noted Jane Tate's illness. It is a fine tribute to the work and skill of this convict woman.

M.A.McDonald 21st February 1844

McDonald was led into the Hospital by one of her messmates, labouring under a sudden attack of dimness of sight, amounting to almost total blindness. The patient is one of the best behaved, and most attentive of the schoolgirls. She is at school five hours every day on the Poop, and is often unavoidably exposed, when reading or writing, to the glare of the Sun.

2nd April 1844

The Patient can now read & sew nearly as well as before, the recent deprivation of sight,

..... As the vessel came to anchor this day, off Hobart Town, she is put off the Sick List, but directed to sleep in the Hospital till the day of debarkation of the Prisoners.

John Wilson's keen interest in his work as a doctor was reflected in his entries in the journal; his remarks about the women tended to be positive and he included interesting information about some events on the ship.

General Remarks

John Wilson had definite views on how to keep the prison clean without using harsh cleansers and methods. He was not afraid to state his opinions forcefully to the Naval Authorities in England.

The space opposite each Mess was given in charge of and daily cleaned by the two Mess women, in the first place sweeping clean, and then by the application of coarse woollen clothes dipped in water & thoroughly wrung. Scraped occasionally. Especial care was always taken that not a superfluous drop of water was used.

Except during a Gale, the Prison was as clean, dry, and well-aired as any Prison on shore. Vinegar, Chloride of Lime, or Hanging Stoves were never required. The abomination of Dry Holy stoning was carefully avoided, and ever will be, until it can be perceive the difference between the atmosphere of a Dry Holy Stone Ship, and a Sheffield Dry Grinder Workshop

The next incident shows he was brave and took his role as superintendant seriously by going out himself in the small boat to Jane Grady

Jane Grady. *This case is marked Dyspepsia in the absence of a more appropriate designation. The patient had led a very irregular life for several years and was nineteen times in jail before conviction. Her present illness appeared to be the consequence of her jumping over board half way between the Cape & Hobart Town. She had handcuffs on at the time, as a punishment for striking and wounding the Chief Officer. About fifteen minutes afterwards I caught her by the hair about half arm's length under water.*

Sources

Royal Naval Medical Officers Journals (Emma Eugenia 1844) ADM 101 No. 38

Edward Caldwell, Royal Naval Surgeon

East London from Dublin to Hobart

Master- James Parley

133 women – 19 deaths – 1 more soon after arrival

12 deaths of children; at least a further 8 soon after arrival

Left 10/5/1843 – Arrived 20/9/1843

133 days (via Madeira)

Edward Caldwell b. c.1790 – d. 1/5/1863

Promoted to Surgeon 8/1/1811

Surgeon Superintendent on convict ship **East London 1843**

Nineteen women and twelve children died; that is one in seven of the convicts who embarked. Edward Caldwell had been a surgeon for thirty years when he signed on for the voyage. He was fifty-four years old but had a further career in the Navy so he was not on his last legs. He only made one voyage on a convict ship – he probably did not want to repeat it nor would the Navy have wanted him to.

Edward Caldwell's medical journals are extensive – it takes a lot of writing to cover so many deaths. His neat notes would have been collated at the end of the voyage but he must have had a very full working journal. There was an enquiry into the deaths so there are reports and letters. He included notes from his daily diary and the mess lists and who died in each – an interesting insight into the social group of the prison deck. Among the medical notes he included information about the backgrounds of his patients – all very poor and often in unhealthy conditions even before they were on board ship.

He took his role as doctor quite conscientiously and used all the treatments he had available at that time. But among the notes there are a few hints of poor decisions. He may not have been responsible for all that went wrong but some of his decisions may have worsened the outcome.

Mary Healy

of a very dissolute, dishonest, riotous, bad character. She has been in confinement upwards of eight months, and under the sentence of transportation for seven years. She has given a great deal of trouble to the Matron and to the Medical Superintendent at the Penitentiary at Grange Gorman, having so far succeeded in feigning disease of the chest.

Before Edward Caldwell left Dublin he visited the Penitentiary at Grange Gorman with Dr Harty & Surgeon Read to inspect the females chosen to embark. The doctors from Grange Gorman told Edward Caldwell that Mary Healy, the first case in the journal, feigned disease of the chest – she was in hospital even before the ship left Dublin. She was not the only said to be feigning disease. In several other cases the surgeon wrote so charmingly that they had all concurred that a sea voyage would greatly improve the health of the sick women – it didn't - they died. Edward Caldwell seemed easily persuaded.

Mary Healy

She entertained hopes of eluding the sentence of the law, what with voluntary abstaining from all food but what was agreeable and pleasing to the palate, and by the collusion of those in confinement.

Mary Healy had led a revolt against the prison food in Grange Gorman. The report of the Board of Enquiry found that the women contributed to the scurvy on board by refusing to eat pea soup, cocoa and other foods. Mary Healy was not involved as she was in hospital (dogged and silent) but were there others who had been part of the protest. Edward Caldwell blamed some of his patients for not taking government provisions. However another culprit could account for the loss of appetite among the women.

June 12th 1843

I have given lemon juice and Sugar since the Ship arrived Madeira to be discontinued, except to those the most deserving the others having declined taking the allowances prescribed by the printed instructions.

The decision to give lemon juice only to the most deserving was a shocking admission for a surgeon of such long experience. His attitude shows he was fed up and let the women do as they pleased. Another surgeon, Robert Whitmore Clark on the John William Dare(1851) wrote that female convicts from Ireland, particularly those who had been in jail for a length of time before leaving, had showed sign of scurvy when they embarked. So Edward Caldwell's decision not to enforce taking lemon juice would have consequences; some of the early symptoms of scurvy are lethargy, loss of appetite and diarrhoea.

Although there were many reasons for illness on board but the presence of scurvy would have weakened immune systems, increased the severity of their illnesses and contributed to the high mortality.

July 31st 1843

Have thought it advisable to proceed to our destination without delay as several days would be lost in bearing into the Cape.

Did not want to waste time calling in at the Cape – in a hurry to get the trip over or persuaded by the master of the ship?

I can imagine it possible to keep the deck of the male convict ship as the lower deck of a ship of the line but the females will wet the deck at night requiring my attention at the earliest hour possible in the morning to dry scrape the deck and to get all bedding on deck as soon as possible.

Well, what could he do - they were women! A large number of sick and dying women, diarrhoea and many very young children it must have been a stinking hell below decks at night particularly with very few water closets. Hygiene requirements would have overwhelmed with those limited facilities. Some of the dying had to wait for hospital vacancies and must have lain in their own filth or relied on those around them and some of those were far from well. The surgeon when he came down in the morning for duty found a dirty mess. What was happening on the prison deck at night when the surgeon was in his cabin writing his notes? Who was in charge of the situation and what help was put into place?

Edward Caldwell wrote conscientiously about his medical work but it was his role as superintendent for which he seemed unprepared. Robert Espie had written so many years earlier that the role of superintendent was no sinecure.

But not all the women were sick and rules and regulations were ignored because there was a romance between a convict woman and a mariner which eventually resulted in a marriage. No doubt there were others who eased their journey with various liaisons—where was the eagle eye on them? Were all the women below decks at night?

Although the enquiry blamed the women for refusing the food and being filthy the Deputy Inspector of Hospitals in Tasmanian John Clark who had called for the enquiry said:-

.. other females in convict ships have arrived from Ireland after equally tedious voyages without suffering from this disease; and who have never refused Tea, Cocoa, Pea Soup, etc.

I cannot but think that if a strict and stern discipline was in the first instance of this shameful violation of decency, they would not have prevailed as it seems they did throughout the voyage.

The ship ought to have put in at the Cape of Good Hope

Many women from the East London rioted at New Town Station three months after arrival – traumatised or protesting when up against brick wall of strict discipline.

Sources

Royal Naval Medical Officers Journals (East London 1843) ADM101/22/1, (John William Dare 1852 ADM 101/254), (Lord Sidmouth 1825) ADM 101/44/10

Colonial Papers: Letters which preceded the Board of Enquiry: Report of the Medical Board of Enquiry; CSO 16, No 388. 22/88/185

Newspaper: Empire (Sydney) 3rd October 1865 (The Murder of Mrs Jarvey)

Female Convicts Research Centre; Convict Institutions, Probation Stations, New Town Farm

Some favourite quotes

Midas 1825 - Surgeon Charles Cameron

September 2nd

Mary Dowling

Complains very hard that I will “not allow her wine”, when I know that she is a poor dying woman.-

Emma Eugenia 1844 – Surgeon John Wilson

November 29th 1843

Hannah Hunt

When questioned her answers are accompanied by tears.

Arabian 1847– Surgeon Robert Wylie

“another grain of opium at noon and one in the evening”

Aurora 1851 –Surgeon. W.S.B. Jones

Janet McGregor

This woman is of Scotch Birth has been respectable and of a mild quiet disposition, so very opposite to the rest of her sex from the same quarter of the world on board,

Blackfriar 1851- Surgeon James Moody

one woman when ordered to wash a dirty, squalid child, replied “glory be to god she had reared nine of them and had never put a drop of water on one of them”.