

CHILDREN ON THE VOYAGES

In 1668, master surgeon and leading obstetrician, Francois Mauriceau wrote:

Going with child is as it were a rough sea, on which a big-belly'd woman and her infant floats the space of nine months: and labour, which is the only part, is so full of dangerous rocks, after they are arriv'd and disembark'd, have yet need of much help.ⁱ

An uncertain future lay ahead for baby Mary Ann as she lay cradled in her mother's arms. Ellen Heath stood before the court charged with 'having willfully and maliciously administering a quantity of arsenic to her husband with intent to kill...the jury found the prisoner guilty and a judgment of death was recorded' and commuted to life.ⁱⁱ On 4 April 1850 the convict ship *St Vincent* anchored off Hobart Town. On board was 24-year-old Ellen and her 16-month-old daughter. Sadly just over one month later, Mary Ann died of dysentery in the Dynnrne Nursery.

The focus of this paper is the plight of those children who joined a parent on a convict transport ship bound for Van Diemen's Land. Their journeys were as long and arduous as their parents, suffering all the discomforts of a sea voyage, including overcrowding and the want for better food and warmer

clothes. But, unlike their parents, very little is known about the plight of these young travellers. Additionally, the children of convicts had no option but to become institutionalised, subjected to all the discipline of a prison environment, as if felons themselves.

Whether left ashore in Britain, or huddled together on a crowded hulk ready to set sail across the ocean, life's journeys for all the children of convicts changed forever, as transportation tore families apart. Without guardianship, many of those left behind could begin their initiation toward adulthood within the confines of a workhouse, additionally burdened by the loss of loved ones. Dianne Snowden has estimated 'that about 2,000 free children came on board with convict parents'. Mostly with their mothers, but 'for a short period in the 1840s, Irish boys came with their fathers to Van Diemen's Land'.ⁱⁱⁱ For each and everyone, their paths to adulthood lay at the mercy of the seas and the endurance of their protectors.

Once in Van Diemen's Land children were placed under governmental care, in a nursery or an orphan school, whilst their parents served out their sentences. Historian John West saw these children as 'orphans, cast upon a nation's mercy; for though nature gave them the claims of children, she did not secure them an interest in a parent's heart'.^{iv} Whilst West was referring to the convicted boys at Point Puer, I believe this quote can be equally applied to the unconvicted children who travelled to Van Diemen's Land.

Detailed records of transported felons reveal comprehensive dossiers in which to discover much about the lives of those convicted, but any information pertaining to the children is sketchy at best. Of how Ellen and her daughter coped throughout their voyage we have no record. Ocean voyages were notoriously dangerous, even for the most experienced of seamen. How the children of convicts coped on the biggest journey of their lives is largely unknown. In her book *Abandoned Women - Scottish Convicts Exiled Beyond the Seas*, Lucy Frost relates, within a 'booklet of comprehensive instructions addressed by the Admiralty to the ships masters and its surgeon superintendent, no guidelines cover the transportation of prisoners' children. Nothing is said about deciding which children will be fed and clothed at public expense on a long voyage, and then looked after and educated [once] in the colony'.^v Additionally, and to put this into context, life was dangerous for all young children of this time, whether on shore or aboard ship. At least the British government did allow mothers to take their children, where for the babies left behind their mortality would probably have been much worse.

Once onboard ship, the health and well being of the convicts was the responsibility of the surgeon superintendents. These men were experienced naval officers, whose task during the voyage was to attend to, and provide detailed reports listing the physical condition of the convicts they came into contact with. It is from their reports (some more detailed than others), we are able to discover an insight into how some children coped and suffered whilst at sea.

Arguably, the first child to arrive, literally, in Van Diemen's Land on a convict ship, was Catharina Potaskis, born on 17 February 1804 as the *Ocean* berthed at Risdon Cove.^{vi} Unlike the voyages of the children who followed, Catharina at least, did not have to suffer through months at sea. And, against all the odds she survived infancy, married and raised a family of her own.

The following are some of the stories from on board ship, with reference to the daily reports as written by the appointed Surgeon Superintendents...

The *Lord Sidmouth* left Woolwich, on 22 August 1822, arriving in Hobart Town on 1 March 1823 with 23 children of convicts and 49 free passage children on board. Surgeon superintendent, Dr Robert Espie, compiled not only a detailed medical report, but also incorporated diarised entries that provide a very comprehensive account of the voyage. Espie was a fastidious operator. His diary entry of 7 September is typical of the routine on board. When the weather was fine, he 'had the beds stowed on Deck at six o'clock and the prison and the free womens places clean'd out before breakfast'. On 8 September the day dawned 'gloomy and boisterous' and regardless of the inclement weather, again he maintained a tight ship, where 'the prisoners and free women [made] their places as usual [ready] for Divine Service'. Reading the day-to-day accounts of this voyage it is clear that in all weather conditions Espie managed to maintain a tidy ship, whilst easing the discomforts of sickness, and especially, looking after the children. On Friday 13 September he attended to 'Several children ailing from colds and affection of their

Bowels'. His insistence on cleanliness and tidiness is impressive. He also took steps to ward off illness and the necessity for his intervention, insisting that in fine weather 'all the women and children [went] on deck to wash and clean themselves'. On 30 September Espie 'commenced a school for the children under the superintendure of the clergyman assisted by two of the free women'. Schooling continued on a regular basis throughout the voyage. On Saturday 5 October he 'had soup made for the children' and also made available a soup with 'a quantity of Donkins preserved meat...to women suckling young children'. Espie's compassion for the children and their mothers under his care is undeniable. But even with all his attention to their well being, there was also sadness. When twin girls died, he wrote the mother, was desperate and exhausted from a loss too hard to bear. The girls were only 18 month's old and had been born in a workhouse. Espie noted they were 'so staved and small that their dimensions to any thick sight might be said to be invisible they both weight'd less than 15 pounds'. Espie also provides an insight into the 'unclothed state of many of the children'. He organized them to be supplied with hospital bed linen to enable them to go through the voyage in more comfort. But Espie could do nothing to save 10-year-old Robert Borsch, who fell over board whilst playing on deck with some other children and was not recovered.^{vii} Luckily however, on the *Lord Sidmouth* there was no mention of disease or contagious illnesses that plagued so many of the transports that followed. For the majority of the children on board the voyage appears to have been more an adventure than a trial.

On 8 January 1847 the *Elizabeth and Henry* arrived in Hobart Town. On board were 169 female prisoners and 25 of their children. All, according to surgeon superintendent Harvey Morris appeared to be in good health. Two babies born during the voyage died within six weeks of each other and other than Matthew Bradley, aged four and Mary Ann Dunn, aged five, who both presented with ophthalmia (contagious inflammation of the eye), only one other child came to the attention of Morris; that was Henry Cornwall. His mother Ellen was sentenced to 10 years transportation for theft and was incarcerated in Millbank Prison, where Henry turned one year old. During the voyage a concerned Ellen took her son, who was suffering from diarrhea, to Morris. Morris's report shows he treated and discharged Henry as 'cured' on 7 January 1847, just one day before docking in the colony. Sadly, only two months later Henry passed away.

Morris's final report reveals that in general he had mixed feelings about the care and attention given to children by their mothers. The death of one child during the voyage was by his account, 'caused by the want of maternal love and tenderness', and it has been said that some mothers were not interested in their infants. But Ellen, according to Morris was to be praised for her intense affection towards her offspring.^{viii} Additionally, from *chain letters – narrating convict lives*, written by Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, we are fortunate to be able to add some more detail to the events that lead up to Henry's demise. Ellen wrote a letter to her husband in England, in which she revealed, in her opinion Henry was far from cured following the surgeon's treatment, at odds with Morris's report.^{ix}

Surgeon superintendent Edward Caldwell on board the *East London* also had an opinion on the matter of uncaring mothers. He described many of them as 'careless, filthy and slothful...unfit mothers'. But, it has to be considered that under the circumstances and with regard of the destitute nature of the lives these women and children had left behind, we should be careful when considering the mothering abilities of the convict women. Those mothers had most likely spent months behind bars, with or without their children. It would be particularly naïve to think that the women would not be dispirited and desperate, from years of battling to survive and raise a family. Twelve infants died onboard the *East London*. On this voyage weary mothers trying to nurse their babies struggled to provide, as they themselves succumbed to 'seasickness, dysentery and scurvy'.^x

The largest number of children to arrive in Van Diemen's Land on a single voyage was 81, on board the *Earl Grey* in 1849. As with the *East London* before them, they left Ireland during the Great Famine, and many were already in poor health. The surgeon superintendent, John Ferrier, wrote that 'the majority of the children, who in most instances were consigned direct from Union Houses, were embarked in an extremely emaciated condition'. But added, on a more positive note 'most of them speedily became robust under improved conditions'. Those on the *Earl Grey* experienced a protracted journey of some 143 days before reaching their destination on 22 May 1850. Ferrier's reports pertaining to the youngest of the travellers, the children of convicts, tell a sad tale of debilitating illness, where only five of the nine children he attended to survived. The first to succumb was nine-year-old

John Clerkin. He suffered seasickness whilst the ship sailed the Irish Channel and died on 24 December 1849 and three-month-old Samuel Lindsay passed away on 10 January 1850. Ferrier's report concluded that John Conlan and Thomas Brown, both nine months old, suffered from 'deprivation of maternal nourishment.' Ferrier added that the boy's mothers were both suffering from acute dysentery at the time. What a nightmare, physically drained and unable to nurse their babies, emotionally torn through being unable to relieve their child's suffering and then left to mourn amid unimaginable hardship. As to the condition of the rest of the children on arrival in Hobart Town, Ferrier did not leave any account, but it would be fair to say that for these young travellers, transportation may have offered them a chance of survival and new beginnings that were unobtainable in their homeland.^{xi} You will hear more of the *East London* as the day progresses.

The *Blackfriar* left Kingstown, Ireland on 7 January 1851 and arrived in Hobart six months later on 7 June. Surgeon superintendent John Moody showed a great concern for the health of the 59 children on board, noting, 'a large proportion of the children had recently arrived from provincial workhouses and were miserable looking objects'. A major issue was the contagious eye disease, ophthalmia that was rampant in Ireland. Five-year-old Mary Connors died on 11 April of ophthalmia and dysentery. Moody wrote of the children from the workhouses 'some had lost one or both eyes from purulent ophthalmia while, in other instances, they were just recovering from the disease'. In what seems to be a common thread, Moody was also intolerant toward the maternal instincts of the mothers. He instructed one mother to wash her child,

to which the mother replied 'glory be to God she had reared nine of them and never put a drop of water on one of them'. Was this mother just rearing her child in the manner to which circumstances allowed and to which she had become accustomed? Whatever the answer, it is certain that Moody found her actions abhorrent. In concluding his report Moody does not make any mention of the children who died during the voyage, only to add, confidently, that in his opinion the women under his care arrived in Hobart Town in a healthier state than those who had arrived for many years. ^{xii}

It has been suggested that in some cases, surgeon superintendents were more preoccupied with providing good reports to their superiors than revealing the true extent of the condition of a patient. Additionally, many believed the convict women to be bad mothers, especially singling out the Irish women for criticism. Such generalizations should not be applied. The convict women were faced with unimaginable circumstances and by the same reasoning, not all surgeon superintendents can be criticized as being derelict in their duties. Moreover, many surgeons had to deal with contagious disease and illness that the convicts and their children were already ailing from and no doubt exacerbated by, life on board ship. How much medical knowledge of disease and childhood ailments could the surgeons have had? In the opinion of historian Robert Hughes 'A good surgeon-superintendent represented whatever was best in the System; he might not be a great doctor, but his decency made him exceptional in the netherworld of transportation'. ^{xiii}

Ultimately, circumstances beyond the control of man, such as the length of

the voyage and the weather conditions also played an important part in the health and well-being of the most vulnerable, the children.

To conclude I would like to return to Ellen's story...

Ellen Heath, the young mother who cradled her baby as she stood on the dock, awaiting sentence, endured the deprivations of transportation, suffered the loss of her baby daughter and lived to age 82. She was survived by at least one child, a daughter she named Ellen, with whom she resided until her death at Zeehan in 1908. I cannot help but wonder if Ellen ever revealed to her new family the story of Mary Ann, a child who had travelled so far and died so young.

ⁱ Francois Mauriceau in Robert Holden, *Orphans of History – The Forgotten Children of the First Fleet* (Melbourne, 1999), p. 1.

ⁱⁱ *Lloyd's Weekly* (England), 11 March 1849.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dianne Snowden, 'A most humane regulation? Free children transported with convict parents', *Informat*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2011), p. 33.

^{iv} John West, *History of Tasmania, Vol. 2* (Launceston, 1852), p. 247.

^v Lucy Frost, *Abandoned Women – Scottish Convicts Exiled Beyond the Seas* (Crow's Nest, 2012), p. 80.

^{vi} Marjorie Tipping, *Convicts Unbound, the story of the Calcutta convicts and their settlement in Australia* (Victoria, 1988), P. 18.

^{vii} National Archives of England, Journal of the Convict Ship *Lord Sidmouth*, ADM 101/44/10.

^{viii} National Archives of England, Journal of the Convict Ship *Elizabeth and Henry*, ADM101/24/7.

^{ix} Ellen Cornwall in Frost & Maxwell-Stewart, chain letters - narrating convict lives (Melbourne, 2011), p. 112

^x National Archives of England, Journal of the Convict Ship *East London*, ADM101/22/1/1.

^{xi} National Archives of England, Journal of the Convict Ship *Earl Grey*, ADM101/21/5.

^{xii} National Archives of England, Journal of the Convict Ship *Blackfriar*, ADM101/12/1.

^{xiii} Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore – A history of transport of convicts to Australia 1787-1868*, p. 157.

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