

The 'East London'

Nineteen women and twelve children died aboard the convict barque, *East London* during its voyage to Van Diemen's Land in 1843. Their journey commenced on 13 April 1843 at Gravesend in London, stopping at Kingstown, Dublin on April 21 to await the arrival of prisoners from Grange Gorman. This ship only made one voyage of this nature, but has the notorious honour of having the most deaths aboard a female convict ship to Australia. Unfortunately, the tragedy didn't end there. The twelve remaining children, all under two years of age who survived the journey, became sickly on arrival. Five of them died at the Dynnyrne nursery soon after being admitted. An inglorious reputation indeed, but why so many deaths?

In an era where medical knowledge was limited and death was frequent, one may ask, is that number really so high? In comparison to the total deaths aboard other transports, it certainly was. Almost three and a half thousand female convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land aboard twenty one ships during the period 1840-1853. The total recorded deaths from those voyages being 80. The *East London*, with 19 deaths of adult females, accounted for one quarter of the total deaths. A shocking statistic. If the *East London* could be referred to as a 'sick ship', then the same could be said for the *Greenlaw* which made its voyage south in 1844. Of the 120 women who embarked, there were 172 reported cases of sickness and disease, with over half the prisoners diagnosed with scurvy. However, despite the horrendous sick list, only five deaths occurred on board.

The *East London* was a relatively new vessel, having been built in Sunderland in 1839. According to Charles Bateson, the ships built in the Durham shipyards were modern, more pleasant for the prisoners, and fast. Seventeen other vessels built here were also used in the last remaining years of transportation. Ships such as the *Rodney*, which made numerous trips to Hobart Town in under 100 days, was part of the new Sunderland built fleet.

Surgeon Superintendent aboard the *New Grove*, Dr David Thomson remarked how he had successfully brought three consecutive shiploads of convicts to Australia without a single fatality. His voyage to Van Diemen's Land in 1835 landed 165 females safely after 122 days at sea. There were however two stillbirths on board, and the death of these infants did not form part of his record of accomplishment.

In December 1845, the *Tasmania II* carrying over 130 female convicts and their thirty-seven children, arrived in Van Diemen's Land after a swift three-month voyage from Dublin. According to surgeon superintendent Lardner, the children gained an average of 7½ pounds each during the voyage. This statistic would indicate that the knowledge and care shown by the surgeon superintendent is paramount in ensuring the health of his cargo.

With these elements in mind, the 133-day voyage undertaken by the *East London* would seem slightly protracted, but not excessive. One reason for this may have been the course set by Captain James Parley, stopping at the port of Madeira. However, in reading the surgeon's journal, it seems that bad weather hampered the journey. Regardless of weather or course set, as we have heard today, there were a multitude of other factors which contributed to the sickness and death on board.

It was in the best interest of both the Captain and Surgeon Superintendent to deliver as many living convicts as possible, after all, they were paid for it. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart mentions that, "... masters were paid for each live convict landed in the colonies, rather than for each prisoner embarked in England and Ireland. Although the presence of a qualified medical practitioner combined with the economic incentive to land as many live prisoners as possible did not, in itself, guarantee low mortality rates."

In case you've ever read it, the "Instructions for Surgeons Superintendent on board convict ships" is quite a detailed document and contains forty-seven instructions on how the master and surgeon superintendent should carry out their duties. Payment via a gratuity would then be issued upon arrival. The surgeon superintendent receiving 10 shillings and sixpence per convict landed, and the Master £50 for satisfactory conduct. As a further inducement for proper execution of duties, the crew were also given a gratuity, £20 to the Chief Mate, and £15 to the

Second and Third Mates. However, fraternising with the female convicts meant no pay at all.

Edward Caldwell must have been paying attention to instruction number twenty-two which required the hair to be cut off of patients with infectious diseases. He certainly did that, shaving a number of women's heads, possibly in the hope it would relieve their symptoms.

Charles Bateson spoke about the aptly named, 'sick ships'. With this in mind, maybe their design was a factor in sustaining the health of those on board? Jeanette Hyland notes that the hospital on the *New Grove* was located, "in the after part of the lower deck. It was large, airy and dry, unlike on some ships where it was located in the forward area and far from dry."

Dr David Wyse, Surgeon Superintendent of the *George the Third*, concurred with the notion that the hospital not be placed at the front of the ship (bow). He said, "I am happy to state the mighty improvement effected by changing the hospital from the bows to the main hatchway, this gives more room for the general accommodation and places the sick in one of the best ventilated and lightest parts of the ship."

In the early days of transportation, square-rigged wooden sailing vessels were used and their design was not ideal for human habitation. Below decks was poorly ventilated and the air was contaminated with the stench from bilge water, human refuse and sulphur. Swinging oil lamps burnt what little air was left after the hatches were closed. Female vessels were especially prone to lack of fresh air due to the hatches being locked at night to prevent the crew gaining access to the women. The scuttle holes located along the hull enabled fresh air in, but only in good weather, as they were closed during heavy seas. Both the *Atlas* and the *Hercules* were vessels such as these. The masters of both these ships kept the prisoners locked in filthy conditions, bereft of fresh air or sanitation. Charles Bateson described their berths as, "... verminous, the air so devoid of oxygen that the candles in the cabin went out."

According to the Surgeon's Report, Edward Caldwell bought, at his own expense, fifteen tonnes of water on June 4 when the *East London* stopped at the port of Madeira along the coast of Portugal. It is probably in this very gesture that he

started an epidemic of which he had no control, nor any idea what to do about it. Up until that point, there had been no deaths aboard and only four reported cases of sickness.

Prior to docking at Madeira, Edward Caldwell must have thought his actions praiseworthy when he supplied the convicts with ample water on May 19 and ordered the bedding to be well aired on May 28. The *East London* was only in port for three days, departing on June 6. For the next week there was no increase in the sick list, so Caldwell ceased serving lemon juice and sugar on June 14 which he had previously supplied to counteract the incidence of scurvy. After all, he had just purchased a two-week supply of fresh vegetables and 15 tonnes of water. However, within less than 48 hours, things took a turn for the worst when Mary Healy, Alice Fitzsimons and two others fell gravely ill. So what went wrong?

By July, three more patients presented to the hospital. The surgeon changed the diet on-board, ordering fifteen pints of oatmeal to be supplied to the children and elderly women on July 10. This allowed a respite from the alternating salt meat, and preserved meat and rice diet. Eliza Higgins gave birth in the hospital alongside one-year-old Catherine Brady who was suffering from great exhaustion, lack of sustenance and oedema. Two days later her baby died of convulsions, Catherine Brady died of Atrophy, and Mary Healy of suspected tuberculosis and Diarrhoea. By now, Edward Caldwell must have known he had an epidemic of some proportion on his hands as he immediately order the decks and berths to be well ventilated and gave instruction for full use of Chloride of Lime.

Joanna Wilmott died soon after admission, suffering diarrhoea and convulsions. This was the tenth recorded case of diarrhoea aboard the *East London*, and the fourth death. Bridget Carey also succumbed to diarrhoea on July 31, and within the next five days, John Fitzgerald, Catherine Murray and Mary Spillane all passed away from debility and diarrhoea. From August 15 to September 17, eight children and sixteen women lost their lives to sickness and disease.

Diarrhoea was prevalent among the women, and marasmus, (or wasting) and diarrhoea common amongst the infants. With all of this data in mind, it is worthy to note the correlation between hospitalisation and death. The crew weren't dying, neither were the officers, or the women in their own berths. It seems that a trip to the

hospital was killing them, but from what? The infants who were weaned from supposedly unfit mothers were dying of debility and diarrhoea, neither being symptoms of placing them with a wet nurse.

Edward Caldwell witnessed all the symptoms of diarrhoea-related deaths on board the *East London*, yet in his journal he makes no attempt at diagnosing an epidemic. He did not seem to have the knowledge to effectively treat his patients. Whether he was indignant or just following orders, his methods of management were archaic and ultimately useless. Head shaving, cupping, bleeding and enemas were either fruitless or sped up the death of his unwitting patients. Weaning the infants may have assisted the mothers, but it did nothing to assist the children. Every infant Caldwell ordered weaned ultimately succumbed to diarrhoea, an affliction they didn't suffer from on the voyage prior to being placed in his care, or the care of his appointed nurses.

John Fitzgerald, age four months, died of debility just a fortnight after being weaned from his mother Mary Farrell. Four weeks later, Mary was also gone. Three infant girls were admitted and all perished within one week. Their mothers following soon after, losing their lives to sickening cases of wasting caused by diarrhoea. Mary Hislop died on August 29 of exhaustion; she lost her mother just a week prior. Two eighteen-month-old boys, Patrick Healy and Patrick Whittle, both passed away from diarrhoea and marasmus. Patrick Whittle was weaned from his mother Susan three weeks before his death. She died one week after him.

Patrick Healy lay in a coma prior to passing. He was such a strong little boy, holding on for six weeks after the death of his mother Mary. Upon reading the surgeon's journal, the symptoms leading up to these deaths are reflective of cholera; an epidemic which was sweeping the North Atlantic trade routes during this time. Coleen Arulappu mentioned earlier the prevalence of scurvy aboard the *East London* and I agree it was a huge factor in the declining health of the convict women and children. However, I would like to add one more possibility if I may. Whilst I do not have a medical degree, I do believe that cholera was introduced on this ship whilst docked at Madeira and whether it was brought aboard in the water or the food may never be known, but some of the symptoms mentioned in Edwards Caldwell's journal appear far more sinister than scurvy, and as it turned out, far more deadly.

Lethargy, dry mouth, rapid pulse, cold clammy skin, weakness, laboured breathing and involuntary use of the bowels were all common indications that Cholera may be responsible, and they were present in many, if not all, of his patients. Death from Cholera occurs rapidly due to the loss of fluid (up to six litres per day), which if not replaced, will cause dehydration and certain death.

Of all the tragedy aboard this vessel, surgeon superintendent Caldwell only admitted partial liability to one. When young Michael Curreen died at eighteen months of diarrhoea, he attributed it to, "the carelessness of nurses appointed by me." Michael and his mother Ellinor had both been on the surgeon's oatmeal rations for some time. Oatmeal perhaps mixed with the water procured from Madeira? Ellinor lost her life five days before Michael, tragically leaving her three other children orphans.

As we have heard in the seminar today, when the conduct of masters and surgeon superintendents come into question, they are very rarely reprimanded, or punished, despite shocking evidence to the contrary. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary regarding the *East London*, the Deputy Medical Officer, John Clark M.D., recommended that a Medical Board be appointed to "inquire into and report on the causes of this unprecedented mortality." In response, the Colonial Assistant Secretary Mr Dermer mentioned the sickly condition that the children had arrived in was caused solely by their mothers - not providing sufficient nourishment because of their high salt diet, and their obvious reckless state of mind.

The board of enquiry assembled over three days and their findings were quite surprising. Besides blaming scurvy, filthy habits and refusal to eat, notably they mention that no deaths occurred during the first sixty-six days of the voyage. This was true, however they did not mention that the deaths did not start until after the ship docked at Madeira and took on fifteen tonnes of water.

The Medical Board actually justified their decision by saying that the Prisoners became more reconciled to the Government Diet, that during the last part of the voyage, mortality became less! From a timeline of events, this is not the case. In fact, the deaths were more prolific, the further the voyage went on; twenty seven fatalities in total during August and September alone.

According to research compiled by Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and James Bradley, convicts were susceptible to disease caused by nutritional deficiency. Thomas Gorringe in 1850 attempted to explain the causes and cures for diarrhoea, dysentery and cholera. There were a number of formal addresses to the Westminster Medical Society London from various surgeons, and they all concurred that large doses of opium or astringents would prove fatal, as they interfered with the restoration of fluid in the organs and the patient would be reduced to coma. This may have been the case in Edward Caldwell's unfortunate patients, but we will never know for sure. Even though that particular diagnosis may have been worthy, the next one was not. The surgeons then went on to say that the most effective treatment for diarrhoea was an enema or induced vomiting.

Nineteenth-century beliefs regarding medical treatment, were very different to what we experience today. Skin allegedly protected the body from disease. Toxins left the body as perspiration, menstrual blood, urine and faeces. Submerging the body in water risked the re-entry of toxins through the pores and orifices." In Victorian England, you just had to appear clean. As Deb Norris mentioned earlier, the lower classes simply didn't have the luxury of baths and so they were just not considered important.

Belief at the time was that airborne miasma caused diseases such as cholera. In fact it was a pioneering doctor, John Snow, who in London in 1854 proved the virulence of bacteria for the cholera epidemic was carried in water. Knowledge that came far too late for many, not only aboard convict ships, but society in general; drinking contaminated water was killing them, but ironically, they refused to bathe in it!

The masters and surgeon superintendents who criticised the women for their uncleanliness were hypocritical to say the least. Hence the prolific use of Chloride of Lime aboard the convict vessels to cleanse the decks and the berths. Because of the misunderstanding in relation to waterborne viruses, if only they had boiled the drinking water and washed their hands, sickness may have been dramatically reduced.

Death, in all its forms, is not only an expectation of life, but an unfortunate necessity. However, death from mismanagement, misunderstanding or simple misadventure is tragic. The women and children aboard the convict vessels suffered from not only their own circumstances, but the combined circumstances of others. They were placed into the care of people who were paid to look after them. Sometimes this was carried out correctly and sometimes not. No board of enquiry seemed willing to prosecute the master or surgeon superintendent despite glaring evidence of neglect or bad behaviour. The principles of the time proving over and over again that women and children are expendable, and somehow responsible for their own fate, no matter what the cause of death is.

Death aboard a convict ship offered no formal burial, so bodies were wrapped in shrouds and cast overboard, with surgeon's like Caldwell neatly recording the latitude and longitude of disposal, as if that would somehow atone for the fact they had died. In summing up this paper one pertinent quote comes to mind and it moved me as I thought about all those discarded bodies, "The caravan tracks across the deserts were marked by the bleaching bones of beasts and men, but the track of these convict ships across the ocean might as easily have been distinguished by its line of floating corpses."

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