

A Voyage, a Riot, the Factory

My paper is about the women aboard the *East London* 1843; the high number of deaths during the voyage, the riot by the survivors and, the women who spent time in the factory.

Ireland in the decades before the famine was under pressure from a booming population and falling employment. Journalist, William Makepeace Thackeray wrote, **“How do all these people live? One can’t help wondering; — these multifarious vagabonds, without work or workhouse, or means of subsistence?”** It was from that part of society that the women on the *East London* emerged.

133 women were on board with 49/50 children; 127 of the women had been charged with some type of larceny. There were pathetic crimes caused by extreme poverty – theft of food, clothes stolen from the workhouse. Anne Read broke a street lamp the year before because she was starving and wanted to go to prison. A few women faced rather cold and cruel decisions when their sentences were handed out while some were quite the entrepreneurs of their class. However most were practised petty thieves –used to pick pocketing and snatch and grab – with well worn paths to the pawn shops and fringe market stalls. For rural women the theft of livestock was their downfall. Others were from the towns, the slums, the streets. Many were prostitutes probably more than those who admitted to being on the town. But individual stories had long strands which were often complex. Mary Kelly, in court a month before her sentence of transportation, was asked by the judge if she would go home if he let her off. She said she would not go home for any money. The women were not without connections, some were related and many had husbands, fathers, brothers and sisters and children transported on other convict ships and one had a husband who was a soldier in the colonies. The women had close family who sailed on at least sixteen other convict ships – one the day before..

They boarded the *East London* in two groups. The first smaller group appeared settled with few children. The second larger group was made up of women with the most children, particularly infant children and there were sickly women or those who had given birth in prison, the trouble makers and the late arrivals in Dublin. Many women left children in Ireland. On board was there any sectarianism which was common in Ireland? Not much evidence of it. Fellow inmates from the same county remained companions. The women who travelled together usually stayed together. Ill health, disability, and perhaps having a bad temper or many children were not inducements for sharing the mess groups

It was the high number of deaths during the voyage which caused an enquiry to be set up. Dr John Clarke, Deputy Inspector General of Hospitals V.D.L., who saw the state of the women and children on arrival, wrote the next day and called for an enquiry. Nineteen women and twelve children died at sea. Twelve women and seventeen children were sent to hospital on arrival. One possibly two, women and, ten, probably eleven, children died in the following weeks. Scurvy on board had hastened any illness or fragility amongst the women and children and led to the deaths.

What caused such a calamity?

Three doctors on the board of enquiry found that the women refused food and deposited faeces, urine and water on the prison decks at night. Dr Clark responded to the report and said other ships had sailed from Ireland on equally tedious voyages where the women had not refused food. He said a strict and stern discipline should have been used to avoid the shameful violation of decency.

The medical journal from the voyage gave some clues to what happened. Edward Caldwell was a surgeon of thirty-two years experience in the Royal Navy. His medical records showed he understood and practised the medical methods of the time and appeared to apply his knowledge to the sick women. However one entry said he imagined it possible that male convicts would keep the lower deck as men of the line but the female wet the deck at night. While he was a willing surgeon the role of superintendant may not have been quite to his liking especially being lumbered with Irish women convicts. He should have read Surgeon Robert Espie's words that the job of superintendant was no sinecure.

Then there was vagrant, Mary Healy. When Edward Caldwell visited the penitentiary at Grange Gorman he was told Mary Healy had been on a hunger strike and refused to eat food except what was pleasing to the palate and had colluded with others to join her. (Mary was in hospital before the ship sailed and died so was in no position to lead a hunger strike at sea). Bad weather in the first weeks caused sea sickness and many women lost their appetites. Edward Caldwell, probably influenced by what he heard about Mary Healy, believed the women deliberately refused to eat. And so he said that only the most deserving would get lemon juice the others having declined their food. As a result Scurvy appeared among the women. The surgeon of the John William Dare 1852 commented that women who had long periods in prison in Dublin showed signs of scurvy when they boarded so the lax discipline about the lemon juice on the *East London* had dire consequences; especially with women who had been many months in prison, had very young babies or had suffered from the effects of great poverty.

The early stages of scurvy cause extreme weakness, loss of appetite, diarrhoea and irritable behaviour. Throughout his journal, Edward Caldwell wrote that his patients had become indolent and careless or disagreeable and slothful. There was scurvy listed in the medical records of twelve women who died and symptoms in the descriptions of the illnesses of several others. The hospital was often full and sometimes dying women remained in their berths awaiting a vacancy. So many women and children- very weak and with diarrhoea- would have completely overwhelmed the water closet facilities on board.

On the other hand nineteen year-old Catherine Shaw, '**of very prepossessing appearance**', according to Irish newspapers fell in love during the voyage. Her mariner came back to Hobart and married her within a year. If regulations were ignored for her and she was able to find comfort away from the squalor of the prison deck then I doubt she was the only one.

No enforcement of lemon juice, a necessary dietary requirement, no supervision or discipline about hygiene particularly at night and, liaisons with crew members suggest that the women were not closely regulated and were left to their own devices for much of the time. The surgeon had shrugged his shoulders about what was happening on the prison deck- they were women convicts and Irish ones at that! He simply looked after the sick. His life too was at a crossroads which may not have helped in the situation.

At the end of September when they arrived in Hobart only 100 women were fit. They must have welcomed the safety of the shore and the relief of being away from the stench and filth of the prison deck and the moans and needs of dying women and children. But they had witnessed suffering and death. They saw two attempts at suicide on board ship. They were surrounded by the distress of the children, the dying ones and those left orphaned by the voyage. Who stopped their cries and who helped feed them?

Once disembarked the women went to Brickfields. Signs of unrest started with ten recorded incidents of insolence and gross insolence. In the New Year the women were at New Town Station and on 26 January their anger erupted into a riot. Mr Hestell, who started as warder on 10 January, a new broom and enthusiastic, said in his statement about the riot, **“I have assisted in mastering them and in their general management”**. Strict discipline and angry women who had witnessed so many deaths in terrible circumstances set the conditions for the riot. Trouble started in the days beforehand and two women were in solitary confinement at the time of the riot. On the day of the riot the women were ‘excited’, ‘disordered’, in a ‘state of mutiny and making a great uproar’. Catherine Kemp/Thorpe (a street wise young lady from Bow Bridge Dublin) was the ringleader and was protected by others when warders tried to take her into custody. The women barricaded themselves in the station, smashed windows, used threatening language, broke down the wall to the bread store and took the bread. Brooms were wielded as weapons and a few slight injuries made to staff. Eventually reinforcements arrived and order was restored.

The main rioters appeared in court the next day and in the days that followed charges were laid against others for disorderly conduct and stealing the bread and later came charges against the women who broke down the dividing wall. As well as solitary confinement and imprisonment all had their probation extended. At least 20 women were involved and perhaps even more were present.

Eight women were immediately sent to Cascades to serve six months of their probation, some in separate cells. Ringleader Catherine Kemp when sentenced in Dublin, yelled out, “Must I leave my own country for nothing”. She was a feisty spirit and well defended by her fellow prisoners, Catholic and Protestant, but that did not prevent her imprisonment. The attractive Catherine Shaw was also one of the women sent to Cascades. She had to wait until her time in the Factory was up before she could marry. They and their fellow rioters made a defiant group incarcerated in the Factory. Three of the main rioters (including the two Catherines) had shared a mess (perhaps only at times) with two women and their children who died and another sent to hospital. They had many reasons to be angry.

Over the years many women from the *East London* saw behind the walls of Cascades and some died there; babies were born and mothers fought in the nursery. The records tell few tales but some seep through. Ellen Cronin, in solitary confinement after the riot, got to know Cascades well over the years. She was there in 1846 and a week after her release she was charged with being ‘improperly in company with the night watchman of the Female House of Correction while he was on duty’. She was sent off to the Launceston Factory well away from the friendly night watchman at Cascades.

Ann Dermody, described by the Irish prison authorities as having a sulky bad temper, did not improve in Hobart. In 1845 she was charged with disorderly conduct at the Factory for throwing a piece of bread at Mr McLeod’s head and spent a further six months in prison. Again in 1846 she was charged with gross disorderly conduct for forcibly taking a loaf from matron’s hand and gained another six month sentence. She was sent off to Launceston to cause further trouble.

Mary Reilly, a rural woman, was pregnant and in the Factory in 1849 when she was charged with having a shift which was torn up and, was sent to the cells for seven days. Two weeks later she was delivered of a still born child.

There were other *East London* women who gave birth in the Factory. And fighting in the nursery appeared a common charge for them. Elizabeth Higgins, Margaret Smith and Elizabeth Dunne who had twins, were sent back to the cells as punishment when each of them, in separate incidents, was involved in fights in the nursery.

Mary Bryan, who gave meal away while she was in the Factory, had her sentence of hard labour extended for six months and recommended to be put in the separate cells. There was no mention of who received what she filched.

Two women from the *East London* died in the Factory, Catherine Cahill and Susan Cassidy. Catherine's death was told in the inquest paper. Susan, described by the Mercury as, '**An emerald of the first water**', died of old age at the Factory.

What happened to the children who survived? I have not followed through many of them but Ann Brady who turned six during the voyage, grew up and spent time at Cascades for theft and prostitution. Her two year old son, Randolph Augustus Brownsmith, died there. His grand name hints at a dream of better things in life. Perhaps a dream that was common to many of the women and their attitude of whatever it takes.

Sources

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