

Caring for the Children at Sea

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The deaths of children in the nurseries of female factories has been widely publicised, and is now well known. For more than half the time the Cascades Female Factory operated as a convict establishment, the nursery was housed off-site because local Hobartians were so outraged by the squalid conditions reported to them through the newspapers. Conditions on the ships bringing children to Van Diemen's Land with their convict mothers were almost without exception much better than in the nurseries. At a very basic level, the bedding was aired each day, and considerable effort went into keeping the sleeping areas below deck as clean and dry as possible. Children usually spent most of their daylight hours on deck in the fresh air, and they ate regular meals, even though the shipboard diet was grim from our perspective—no fresh meat or vegetables for weeks on end. Furthermore, the journals of the surgeons superintendent provide plenty of evidence that many surgeons were genuinely keen to ensure the health of all their passengers, including the children. Nevertheless, as I identify children who sailed with their mothers, and enter their records into my database of transported children, I become aware that mortality among the children is far higher than among the adults on these voyages. Unfortunately, caring *about* the children didn't always entail caring successfully *for* them.

To show you what I mean, I want to look at one ship, the *Morley*, on which the death rate for children is strikingly different from that for adults. The surgeon superintendent responsible for the health and well-being of the *Morley's* passengers was a young doctor, Thomas Reid, not yet thirty years old. He later recounted his experience in a book called *Two Voyages to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, published in London in 1822.¹ Reid's first voyage took him to Sydney on a male transport, the *Neptune*, in 1817. His second voyage began on the 22nd of May 1820 when the *Morley* sailed down the Thames with 121 female convicts. Fifty women would be disembarked in Hobart Town, one of the first cohorts sent directly to Van Diemen's Land.

Dr Reid, born in Ireland to protestant parents, is described by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as “a sincerely religious man who worked hard to improve the lot of the prison population”.ⁱⁱ He was messianic in his zeal for using the long sea voyage to create “an orderly company” from those “wild and abandoned creatures” who came on board the *Morley*. As a humanitarian committed to reform, it is not surprising that he should have dedicated his book to the celebrity prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, and prefaced the work with an epigraph from the iconic opponent of human slavery, William Wilberforce.

I can't tell from the book how many children were on board, but I know that there were children travelling with their free mothers to re-join their convict fathers, as well as children travelling with convict mothers. All the children seem to have been treated alike, and for those who were old enough, there was a school with books provided by Elizabeth Fry and her benevolent friends in the British Ladies Society.ⁱⁱⁱ Dr Reid quotes his diary entry for the 8th of May, while the *Morley* is still in the Thames embarking its passengers from Britain's gaols:

At 10 a.m. I mustered all the children, arranged them in classes for the purpose of carrying into effect the intentions of the Ladies' Committee with respect to the formation of a school, for which they had taken special care to provide a woman, one of the free passengers, as a teacher; and had also furnished a very liberal provision of juvenile books of every suitable description.^{iv}

Reid was proud of this school, where all the children aged almost five and upwards were taught (none was older than 10, he says). The core of the curriculum involved “reading and a knowledge of the Scriptures”.^v Under the direction of a clergyman on his way to New South Wales, the children memorised hymns, psalms, and chapters from the New Testament. Reid was delighted by “their diligence”.^{vi}

He has less to say about their general health, though he does record illness and death, and the picture which emerges is distinctly less rosy than the account offered by Charles Bateson in his classic study of the convict ships. Bateson praises the *Morley* as a vessel with an excellent health record. During six voyages, [quote] “she conveyed over a thousand male and female convicts to Australia for the loss of only six men, and on three of her passages she arrived

with no deaths to report among her prisoners”.^{vii} Reid’s voyage was one of the three with no deaths—among the adults, that is.

The passage was very rough, and although Bateson concentrates on speed—its “passage of 99 days from London to Hobart stood as the record for a convict ship for many years”, he says^{viii}—Reid’s frequent references to storms suggest that the *Morley* was blown across the seas, to the misery of its passengers. A week after they left the Thames, most of the prisoners were still sea sick, and had begun to suffer from “debility brought on by incessant retching, so that not any thing, even a necessary dose of medicine, can be found to remain on the stomach for an instant”.^{ix} To make matters worse, “measles are spreading among the children very rapidly, thirteen of whom are at present affected”.^x On the 8th of June, Reid “was summoned to a child that had long lingered from water on the brain, and was then dying”.^{xi} Later that afternoon a funeral service was read as the child’s body “was committed to the deep”.^{xii}

The next night “an infant belonging to one of the prisoners died from the effects of a blood-vessel of the lungs ruptured about five weeks previously”.^{xiii} On the 29th of June, Samuel Brown, “a convict’s child, died in the hospital”,^{xiv} perhaps from the after effects of measles, perhaps from what Reid called the “inflammatory fever” attacking many of the women this week.^{xv} On the 29th of August, after more than three months at sea, the *Morley* finally ‘anchored before Hobart-Town about half-past three in the afternoon’.^{xvi} It was snowing heavily, and next day the children with their mothers were still “obliged to remain below” because snow “continued the greater part of the day with sleet and squalls”.^{xvii} Six days later Reid recorded the fourth and final death: “A young child...which had long been ill with diseased lungs, died since coming in to harbour, and the body was this day interred ashore, the service being performed by the Reverend Mr Knopwood.”^{xviii}

Even the humanitarian doctor had been unable to keep all the children alive during the voyage. Nevertheless, I think it is important to recognise that on a ship decimated by measles, only one death seems attributable to that often lethal disease. Reid’s account suggests that three of the children died from conditions originating before the voyage, a reminder of how unhealthy their young lives had been and how hard a voyage in winter through the tempestuous seas of the southern ocean must have been on the constitutions of frail children.

And then there were the accidents, the children who broke bones when they fell down the hatchways, or were scalded when the ship lurched and hot soup spilled over them. Twenty years after the *Morley* reached Hobart Town, a surgeon superintendent wrote to the Lieutenant Governor about the accident which befell a little boy during the voyage of the *Gilbert Henderson*. Michael Lackey was only two years old, too young to remember in the future the father left behind in England when he sailed with his mother, Julia. The nineteen-year-old convict was facing a life sentence for manslaughter. “I kept a lodging house”, said Julia when asked to state her offence, “and the people in number 20 had just received a fortnight’s pay when a row occurred and a man was killed”.^{xix} A few days before the *Gilbert Henderson* reached the River Derwent, when it was sailing through the turbulent waters of the southern ocean, the little boy fell overboard. The surgeon superintendent explained what happened:

At 9.45 a.m. of the 23rd [of April, 1840], a child of Julia Lackey, a convict, fell overboard when Mr James Tweedie, Master of the ‘Gilbert Henderson’ convict ship instantly ordered the ship to be brought to, and jumped overboard from the poop, after the child, swam to the child who was a considerable distance astern of the ship, and was decidedly instrumental in saving the child’s life at the manifest risque of his own. The Jolly Boat was instantly lowered down, and the Second officer and crew of the boat providentially received safely on board Mr Tweedie and the child, and brought both on board in an exhausted state; who were restored after due medical attention to their different states.^{xx}

A moment of terror. All attention riveted on saving a child. And, miraculously, “providentially”, the child is rescued. Three months later his name is entered into the register of the Queen’s Orphan School, and on this site where we meet today, he lived for five years. Then, on the 18th of March 1845, his mother came to retrieve him, just three weeks after she had married a plasterer who could give Michael, now seven years old, a home.

So, to conclude, I certainly do not wish to minimise the dangers posed to children sent on the convict transports. And I do want to call attention to their significant rates of mortality. Nevertheless, after reading so much about neglect in the convict nurseries on land, I am impressed by the surgeons superintendent

who looked after the children at sea. Of course some were negligent, and some display attitudes in their journals which infuriate me. But most journals are records of taking genuine responsibility for the young lives entrusted to them. And at a time when I see no evidence of comparable care taken for refugee children in our detention centres, or for the bewildered Indonesian boys from the fishing boats in our gaols, the example of these naval surgeons and of masters like James Tweedie sets a standard of care to which I wish we would return.

ⁱ Thomas Reid, *Two Voyages to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822.

ⁱⁱ Entry for Thomas Reid (1791-1825), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucy Frost, 'Gifts of Patchwork and Visits to Whitehall: The Ladies' British Society and Female Convict Ships', in S. Thomas, ed, *Victorian Traffic: Identity, Exchange, Performance*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, UK 2008, pp 2-18.

^{iv} Reid, p. 126.

^v Reid, p 30.

^{vi} Reid, p. 249.

^{vii} Charles, Bateson, *The Convict Ships 1787-1868*, Brown, Son & Ferguson, Ltd, 2nd Edn, Glasgow, 1969, p 240.

^{viii} Bateson, p. 240.

^{ix} Reid, p. 136.

^x Reid, p. 136.

^{xi} Reid, p. 157.

^{xii} Reid, p. 157.

^{xiii} Reid, p. 157.

^{xiv} Reid, p. 166.

^{xv} Reid, p. 164.

^{xvi} Reid, p. 206.

^{xvii} Reid, p. 206.

^{xviii} Reid, p. 242.

^{xix} Convict conduct record, CON 40/1/6, Archives Office of Tasmania.

^{xx} Correspondence, Colonial Secretary's Office, CS05/1/237/6101, p. 5, Archives Office of Tasmania.