

Voyage of the *Earl Grey* 1849 - 1850

The *Earl Grey* departed Kingstown, Ireland in the mid winter of 1849 for a direct voyage to Hobart Town. Aboard were 240 female convicts and 81 children who were transferred from the Grangegorman Penitentiary where they were housed from county gaols in Ireland to be readied for transportation to Van Diemen's Land, a direct voyage that would take almost 6 months. The women had been found guilty of a range of offences from larceny, arson and assault as well as stealing lambs and cows. Also on board was the Master of the ship, H.E. Lansdowne, the Surgeon Superintendent, John. Ferrier, a Matron, Assistant Matron, five (5) men, six (6) women and one (1) child in steerage. It is likely that there was a number of soldiers on board to guard the prisoners and to address unruly behaviours.¹

It was to be the fourth voyage of the *Earl Grey* to Australian shores since she was built in 1835 and was set against the backdrop of the potato famine, the result of a fungus that ravaged Ireland's potato harvest from 1845-1849. At the same time debate on the usefulness of transportation at a time when Van Diemen's Land had skilled labourers, and enough free men and women who were looking for work was raging. Convicts had been free labour since the early 1800's and the *Earl Grey* arrived ten years after transportation was abolished in NSW and prior to the 1853 abolition in Tasmania.²

The *Earl Grey* was contracted from her owner Dunbar and Sons, noted by Bateson to be relative latecomers to the convict trade and highly successful in their ventures. Duncan Dunbar had succeeded his father in the shipping business in 1825 and chartered two ships to the convict transport but it was not until the 1840's that he supplied what Bateson describes as a considerable number of merchant vessels hired by the convict trade at the lowest rate per ton. Dunbar and Sons favoured ships that were built in India but the *Earl Grey* was built in Sunderland, near Newcastle, England in 1835.³ Typical of other convict transports of the time she was a merchant ship, built by the shipbuilder, Farrow.⁴ A barque of 571 tons, the *Earl Grey* had a characteristic style of two square riggings and a foresail. She was average in terms of her tonnage for the job of transporting convicts.⁵

On that gloomy Irish midwinter day, in temperatures between 5 and 9 degrees celcius one might imagine the mood of the women to be downcast but it is possible that there may have been a measure of excitement at being able to leave the confines of the prison and some anticipation of improvement in their circumstances. There is no direct evidence to support either view. However, the journal of the purser of the *Duke of Northumberland* noted on 16th November 1852.

"The women were very much excited today. They had been kept separate...and now being all together they made merry, singing and dancing just for the purpose of making a noise. After they had done their tea they were all sent below and locked up for the night where they kept up the dancing, singing and occasionally fighting till the morning".⁶

Whatever the mood of the women their general condition may have been compromised by their experiences of poverty and imprisonment in the regional prisons and Grangegorman. Those who were boarded may not have been in the best of health, secondary to poor nutrition and harsh living conditions, a situation not about to improve. Ironically the children, who were consigned from the Union Houses thrived under the changed conditions and although noted to be emaciated on embarkation by the surgeon were also noted to have thrived under the conditions at sea.⁷

A hint to conditions on board can be gleaned from the surgeon's report in which one of the deaths that occurred during the journey was attributed to the wearing of cold and wet clothing.⁸

"Irish females under arrest arrived at the overcrowded county gaols dressing in rags and after sentencing were moved to Grangegorman, to await transportation, often wearing the same garments".⁹

Female prisoners were issued with "two serge dresses, three cotton shifts, one flannel petticoat, two check aprons, two cotton jackets, two cotton nightcaps, two neckchiefs, two pairs of shoes and two pair of worsted hose". McMahon says that the clothing was of poor quality and unlikely to last the conditions of the voyages. She cites Alexander Kilroy, the surgeon aboard the *Australasia* in 1849 as criticising the flimsy shoes that had been issued as they allowed the women's feet to get wet and cold on deck, advocating for more robust and subsequently cost effective footwear.

McMahon, says that the convicts complained bitterly about the cold. The clothing for the women was seen as inadequate, particularly after the ships left the warmer climates for the cold of the southern hemisphere. Various surgeons over time asked for the issue of additional jackets.

Children on board some earlier transports were not issued clothing and were naked. McMahon reports that the the surgeon's clothed children from stores that were marked for use on arrival or from clothing fashioned from hospital furnishings. It is likely by the time that the *Earl Grey* sailed that children were issued with clothing of similar quality to the women.¹⁰

They were perhaps lucky that the *Earl Grey* appears to have been less leaky than some other ships, McMahon noting that the seaworthiness of the vessels varied. Whilst ships such as the *Mexborough* and *John Calvin* were identified as "leaky", the *Earl Grey* was noted to be tighter below decks and easier to keep dry.¹¹

As the ship journeyed into the southern Atlantic Ocean and left the warmth of the tropics, the misery of the voyage may have been exacerbated by the development of illness in the women and children. The surgeon superintendent writes that from the time they left the Cape (Good Hope) about half way through the voyage that there was persistent "cattharus and

diarrhoea” for remainder of the voyage. One can only imagine the fetid smell of the “head” (toilet) and the living environment.¹²

The treatment of choice for such illnesses was mercury and opium in the early stages, the combination and quantity of which depended on individual circumstances. Bleeding was also performed in several cases marked by robust plethoric habit and in the cases where the disease had merged into visceral complications, but however it fell to subdue the disease and at the same time aggravated the debilitated state of the patient. The surgeon also gave a testimony to the Chloride of Zinc in maintaining its distinguished regulation;¹³

Scorbutis (scurvy) was an enduring issue with many of the presenting symptoms representative of a deficiency of vitamin C. Mawer reports that “from the time of Vasco da Gama, European crews on long sea voyages had been decimated by the ravages of scurvy. Although the causewas unknown, it was no secret that fresh food would effect a speedy recovery”

“The surgeon superintendent was responsible for inspecting the convicts for any signs of disease and to issue the antiscorbutic lemon juice and sugar”..¹⁴

On the 2 February (6 weeks out of port), the “main hold became intolerably foetid from decayed potatoes which were removed and after free application of the Chloride of Zinc all trace of effluvium was removed within two hours”. Ironically the women had left the potato famine in Ireland.¹⁵

Life aboard the ship was subject to the prevailing view that the transports provided opportunities for reform and reflection on the convict’s past and their potential for the future. Colin Arrott Browning, a surgeon on the *Earl Grey* in 1836 wrote of the need for spiritual discipline aboard the transports.¹⁶ In the absence of a chaplain aboard the ship, the Surgeon Superintendent took the role of spiritual guidance or alternatively the Matron. Matrons were appointed to Irish transports from 1846 and generally resided at Grangegorman to get to know their charges for a period before the voyage.

Matron’s “role on board the Irish female convict transports was to attend to the bodily comfort, education, work and moral improvement of the prisoners. The woman chosen was to be of good reputation and character. Her daily duties were religious instruction and supervision of the schooling on board”.¹⁷

Prayers took place at 10 am every day, on deck if the weather was fine or below decks if the convicts were not let out of their quarters.¹⁸

Although there is no direct information available in regard to the specifics of what happened on board the *Earl Grey* on this voyage, Cowley, McMahon and Bateson provide some insight into the way in which the ships functioned. Convicts were organised into messes made up of eight women. Each mess had responsibilities for various tasks on board, including cooking, cleaning and assisting in the hospital.¹⁹

The daily routine included the need to wash before breakfast, rolling and stowing bedding in the netting on deck. This implies that there may have been occasions on which convicts may have been sleeping with wet or damp bedding, not helping their general health. Washing was done weekly and provisions were provided for women to undertake needlework and reading, skills to assist them to be placed in service in the colony. The women had to take off their clothing to wash them when on deck, also exposing them to the risk of colds and respiratory issues.²⁰

The Surgeon was responsible for the distribution and appropriate use of food and John Ferrier had the experience of a previous voyage on the *Royalist* in 1832. The manual *Instructions for Surgeon-Superintendents and Masters of Convict Ships arriving in the River Derwent* outlined all the responsibilities of the surgeons set out precisely with the clear implication of responsibility and financial accountability for any shortfall or misuse of provisions. In the same publication precise instructions for the issue of salt beef, potatoes, flour, oatmeal, cocoa and tea to the convicts, steerage passengers and soldiers, depending on gender, state of health and age was prescribed.²¹ A standard issue was cocoa but it was noted that the Irish were more used to drinking tea and preferred to have this rather than cocoa to the point where Surgeons had written to advise that cocoa was a wasted provision.²²

“Irish convicts, in general were unaccustomed to cocoa, or chocolate as it was known throughout the period and there were complaints that they rejected it.....Tea, drunk with milk and sugar, had begun to spread to humbler Irish households at the end of the eighteenth century”²³

I think we can surmise that 240 women and 81 children in a cramped space may have generated some conflicts, if only arguments, particularly when confined below decks for extended periods. Given that the majority were affected by dysentery, catarrh and fevers, tempers may have been short and the changing climactic conditions a breeding ground for difficulties amongst the women. Apart from a scalp laceration and a couple of burns there are no injuries that point to any major fights.

Had any of the women needed discipline for being loud and argumentative, attempting to gain familiarity with the crew or fighting they may have been demoralised by having their heads shaved to identify them as offenders. Women were also disciplined by isolation in a “solitary box” where they were unable to sit or lie down and had to stand in the darkened box for up to twelve hours. This punishment may have been replaced by confinement in the coal hole, a dark and isolated place on bread and water rations.²⁴

The convicts were not the only people on board to lack discipline. Soldiers, according to Bateson, were often more unruly and their behaviours led to them being placed on the sick list after bouts of drinking.²⁵ However, there is no evidence from the Surgeon’s journal that would suggest that this was the case on the *Earl Grey* but soldiers of the time were military pensioners who were sometimes given free passage in exchange for guarding prisoners. There is also no direct evidence of any relationships between the women and

any of the crew or soldiers on the ship. Eleven convict women presented to the Surgeon due to genital diseases. Most were in the first month of the voyage and it is unlikely that they contracted syphilis (although for five it is a possibility) on board the ship. However, in March of 1850 there was a case of gonorrhoea that falls within the incubation period of the disease.

It is safe though to assume that the *Earl Grey* did not compare to the later voyage of the Duke of Cornwall, subject to an inquiry in which allegations of “pimping” by a convict to procure sexual services for the crew and a liaison, resulting in a child between the surgeon and one of the convicts.²⁶

An initial perusal of the records of the female convicts aboard the *Earl Grey* indicates that where they did marry it was an average of two to three years after arrival and whilst there is more work to be done on this there is little to indicate any pregnancies or children delivered shortly after arrival. Sadly there is no crew list for the *Earl Grey* so it is difficult to fully explore the relationship between any of the women and the crew or soldier guards.

After almost six months at sea, the sight of land in the form of South West Cape, particularly with the health issues on the voyage, must have been a welcome sight and greeted with a sense of anticipation, relief and dread at what was ahead for the women. The excitement was short lived though when the ship was blown off course as she began to tack around the southern tip of Van Diemen’s land into Storm Bay and lost her sails. During the 14 days it took to beat their way back onto the south east coast of Van Diemen’s Land, the female prisoners were confined under hatches and subject to a salt diet. Dysentery flourished at this time from the effects of wet and cold clothing as well as the inability to clean and air the contaminated prison.²⁷

By 8 am on the 9 May 1850, she was boarded by the pilot, Lucas, 6 nautical miles to the north west of the Iron Pot Lighthouse there to guide her into Hobart.²⁸ Imagine the relief of the convicts, crew and passengers of the ship when they weighed anchor in Hobart having endured a voyage of 142 days, fourteen days during which they would not have known whether they would make it safely to port. Perhaps it was this confinement that finally sent Mary Regan “over the edge” in terms of her mental health and led to two attempts on her life.²⁹

Sadly, four convicts did not survive the journey, dying on route from the impact of diarrhoea. Five of the children also did not survive, also compromised by diarrhoea. Fourteen other convicts were sent to the hospital at Hobart with the effects of diarrhoea.³⁰

On her arrival in Hobart the fittings were auctioned and she was readied for the trip to Sydney, California with horses and then on to London. What happened to the *Earl Grey* after this time is not known.³¹

The voyage of the *Earl Grey* in 1849-1850 is in some ways unremarkable. There are other well documented voyages that experienced higher levels of sickness and death, prostitution. However, the women and children who

survived the voyage were pioneers of this state and ancestors of some of us here today.

¹ <http://wwwFOUNDERS-storylines.com/mugsheets/voyages/view/BV0716>

² <http://wwwFOUNDERS-storylines.com/mugsheets>

³ Bateson, Charles, *The Convict Ships 1787 – 1868*, Library of Australian History, 1988 Sydney 299

⁴ Report to Hobart Town on arrival of Earl Grey 1850

⁵ Bateson 301

⁶ Woods, Christine, *The Last Ladies : the female convicts transported from England on the Duchess of Northumberland November 1852-April 1853*, Claremont, Tas. : C. Woods; 2004 256

⁷ McMahon, Anne, *Convicts at Sea*, Artemis Publishing Consultants, Hobart 2011

⁸ National Archives Record Summary of Surgeon's Journal: [item 1](#), [item 2](#), [item 3](#), [item 4](#), [item 5](#)

⁹ McMahon

¹⁰ *ibid* 23

¹¹ Bateson

¹² National Archives Record Summary of Surgeon's Journal: [item 1](#), [item 2](#), [item 3](#), [item 4](#), [item 5](#)

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Mawer, G. A., *Most Perfectly Safe*, Allen and Unwin, NSW 1997

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Browning, Colin Arrot, *The convict ship : a narrative of the results of scriptural instruction and moral discipline on board*, New York : Robert Craighead, 1856

¹⁷ McMahon 38

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Instructions for the Surgeon-Superintendents and Masters of convict ships arriving in the River Derwent

²² McMahon 21

²³ *Ibid* 21-22

²⁴ Bateson 78

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ McMahon 41

²⁷ McMahon

²⁸ Report to Port Officer on arrival

²⁹ National Archives Record Summary of Surgeon's Journal: [item 1](#), [item 2](#), [item 3](#), [item 4](#), [item 5](#)

³⁰ McMahon

³¹ *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954) 20th May 1850