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Man and Nature - An extract of "At the Summer School" by Donald McDonald

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Mention was made a few days ago of some pathetic relics of this station - the tombstones of the little wild cemetery which are the mute witnesses of bygone days. On that subject I have an interesting letter from Mr McRae of Boisdale, Gippsland. I referred to the names of his family, five of whom, the mother and four children, lie in one grave. Mr McRae adds some interesting particulars of the *Ticonderoga* time. He doubts whether the pestilence which swept through the three decks of that ship of the fifties was really the "yellow jack" of the southern states; feels assured, at any rate, that it first appeared in the emigrant depot at Birkenhead. Two other ships which left port after them, Albion & Priscilla - both suffered from the scourge, though neither of them was ravaged in the same way as the *Ticonderoga*, though they rode at quarantine before the plague vessel was cleared. She had 800 adults on board which with children meant probably 1000 people in all, and the lower decks were naturally in a bad state. One reason for believing the disease to be yellow is that the ship was just previously engaged in the American cattle trade. The voyage of 12 weeks was a fast one in those days, but it was a sad ship that came up the "roaring forties" to Port Phillip, for a hundred of her dead were buried at sea. The first few burials, says Mr McRae, were conducted with due solemnity, the ships bell being tolled, and the passengers mustered, but in the demoralization of ever-extending pestilence, ordinary forms and ceremonies fell away and the dead went swiftly to the deep - six bodies being the most that Mr McRae can remember as being given sea-burial upon one day. He mentions too, a sad holocaust as having taken place upon one of the emigrant ships which reached Melbourne ports in the early stirring fifties, when Victoria was rough-hewing her destiny in the gold mines. There were 15 families on board from the rock of St. Kilda of the Scottish Hebrides, the home of sea birds and sea fishers. The rough open life of these hardy Highlanders had fitted them for ordinary privation, but not of the seething, sweltering plague dens

of these over burdened ships. Of the fifteen families, only as many individuals survived. At home they lived chiefly on fish and sea-bird eggs - the change of diet as much as anything broke them down.

Even the little tombstone which is the memorial of the McRae family here has its story. As a lad amongst the survivors of the *Ticonderoga*, Mr McRae cut the names of his beloved dead upon a deal board and placed it at the head of their grave. When the station was being built afterwards, a stonemason at work there saw the little loving mark, and was interested in it, for he was a kinsman of the McRaes. So he cut and lettered the stone which now excites the interest and sympathy of all who pass through this quiet place of the dead - though the station is all a graveyard - lost, almost forgotten. There is one other interesting circumstance. Mr McRae and two of his brothers survived that holocaust of 57 years ago - and all three are still living. There are some bright patches in that old story.