

The



Argus.

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED FOR THE PROPRIETOR, BY JOHN ANDREW MCIVOR, AT THE "ARGUS" PRESS, 111, CROSS STREET, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

TERMS FOR ADVERTISEMENTS.—Thirty shillings per line for the first week, and fifteen shillings for each subsequent week. Single insertions at a special rate. For particulars apply to the Proprietor.

The Argus, Melbourne, August 4 1934

“Whose Name Unknown” by John Andrew McIvor

Eighty-two years ago there was talk in the streets and markets of Melbourne of an emigrant ship at the Heads with 300 cases of fever on board – such a plague-ridden ship that she had landed all but sick passengers on the beach at Nepean. A hundred emigrants had died at sea, the ship’s doctor was in a dying state and all medicines and medical stores had long been exhausted. This was the immigrant ship Ticonderoga, long to be remembered as the worst of the “fever-ships” of the ‘fifties. The captain of a coastal vessel brought news of her plight to William’s Town – as that important shipping centre was then styled – and the schooner Empire was at once dispatched by the immigration authorities with fresh food and medical supplies. Two doctors and the harbourmaster went with her. It was four days before any further report reached Melbourne. Nepean was then remote in respect of the transmission of news, and the Ticonderoga had lain two days at the Heads before being reported in Melbourne. On the fourth day the harbourmaster returned to confirm the first report in full. Seven more deaths had occurred; the passengers ashore were camped in tents made of spars and sails of the ship. A quarantine ground had been marked out, and the houses of two settlers, who were lime-burning at Nepean – the only residents at the date – had been purchased by the Government to be used as hospitals. (One of these houses still stands, dwarfed by the extensive quarantine buildings of to-day, but solidly built of limestone blocks, and weather tight enough to be used as a storehouse to-day). The ship Lysander was sent down to be used as a hospital ship, carrying another doctor and further food supplies. Melbourne sympathised with the unfortunate travelers, most of its inhabitants having themselves recently dared the perils of the sea, which included famine and pestilence as well as fire and shipwreck in 1852.

Returning in leisurely fashion from Haymarket, in Melbourne, to the scattered cottages of Coburg, Grandfather McIvor (he was the author’s grandfather) retailed in Gaelic such news as he had gathered. His neighbours – all new settlers- heard with concern of the fever-ship, and wondered what friends and neighbours from their native towns overseas might be among the thousand souls said to have embarked in her at Birkenhead.

For eight weeks the ill-starred ship swung at anchor inside Point Nepean. The fever raged among her company in spite of all measures of relief; vague rumours reached Melbourne that deaths were



still occurring at the rate of two and three a day. These were confirmed by a doctor who returned. The rumour that the infection was yellow fever was contradicted, and it was declared to be scarletina, but many survivors afterwards maintained that it was the dreaded "yellow jack" of the American southern coasts. They gained some support from the fact that ship had traded in those regions on previous voyages, and from the high mortality attending the outbreak.

No passenger list was available in Melbourne. The unfortunate new arrivals were as remote as though on a distant island; but a few days before Christmas a young stranger stood at Grandmother McIvor's door, at Coburg, and said, "Your cousin, the wife of Malcolm McRae, came on the ship Ticonderoga. I am her son, but my sister Janet and my two young brothers died of the fever since we were landed at Point Nepean, and I have walked from that place with another young man, and we follow the beach till we came to Melbourne." So there was young McRae, at the end of a 60-mile walk, during which he saw very few white people, but one or two blackfellows gathering shell-fish. Granny, with many exclamations (in Gaelic), brought him inside and sat him down to the table, bringing forward new scones and buttermilk, and a large round pat of butter stamped with a thistle-head design. And as she did so she mourned for little Janet and the two boys, and asked many anxious questions about her cousin Helen – all the way from Inverness, and only 60 miles away now! Alas, they never met! On New Year's Day, 1953 the Ticonderoga came up to Hobson's Bay with about half her original number of passengers, leaving the sick and convalescent ones in the quarantine station. And Helen McRae was in her grave there when, 10 days later, the ship came down the channel with cargo for Akyab ("no passengers," the brief shipping notice of clearance records). As she passed out the sea Captain Boyle looked long at the cluster of tents above the white beach, for he had buried his young brother there. His grave may be seen to-day – "late third officer of the ship Ticonderoga, of New York."

A week later John McRae, aged 16, died at the station, and was buried beside his mother, leaving, of a family of nine, only the husband and three sons.

So ended the sorrows of Helen McRae at the age of 41 years. These few facts connected with her history, renewed from time to time in the memory of one and another, survive – by the same chance that has preserved her grave where the graves of her shipmates have vanished. An old colonist writing of the Ticonderoga, in 1909, said: - "Whole families were wiped out: in some cases both



parents died, leaving young children. Of 15 families from St Kilda – [that ultima thule of the Scottish Isles flung out toward Iceland] – only 15 individuals survived.”

Donald McDonald, who visited Nepean first in 1884, writes of graves that were then “scattered all over the flat fronting the bay”, some marked with wooden slabs, some with blocks of sandstone from the beach, even then moss-covered and beginning to crumble back to sand. Half obliterated as the inscriptions were, the words “of the ship Ticonderoga” were readable on many. A woman’s name that would otherwise have vanished in the crumbling sandstone, as a hundred or more did in the next few years, was preserved in his memory by the strange coincidence that it was Mr. Macdonald’s mother’s name; and that losing his way one night in the thick tea-tree scrub, he struck a match and saw it stand out clearly from the undecipherable names on a sandstone slab – “Margaret McDonald.” The next time he visited Nepean, in 1909, the sandstone blocks had vanished, dust to dust.

“Some there be that have no memorial.” As I looked back over the smooth buffalo grass lawns of the quarantine station last week at Helen McRae’s almost isolated grave, I thought of her hundred or more shipmates, “persons whose names are unknown,” who shared her sorrows through those burning summer days of 1852 – men and women, who fought with what poor means they could command, in that desolate beach encampment, for the lives of those dear to them, and who in their turn were overtaken and died here, very far from their homes, on the threshold of a new land.”

Higher on the backbone of the peninsula, remote from the road, surrounded by dense green tea-tree, is the “new” cemetery. “Here” – in the leafy shadows and listening to the surf on the ocean beach, I read – “lie the bodies of the Saunders, Kelly, Foster, and other persons whose names are unknown, drowned in the wreck of the Cheviot, Oct. 19th, 1887.”

There were doings on the Nepean peninsula that stormy night. A weather report from Sorrento described it as “very rough, and a strong south-westerly blowing.” At 9 o’clock the look-out at Queenscliff saw “five rockets Explode over the hills nearly abreast of the quarantine station, as though from a vessel in distress on the outer beach.” The Queenscliff lifeboat crew, finding it impossible to get outside the Heads, landed at Portsea and crossed to the ocean beach. Wind, spray and rain-squalls swept over them out of inky blackness; they patrolled the coast for miles but



nothing could be seen, though they may have passed abreast of the rocks where a ship was broken in two and nearly 50 people, shut up within her as she rocked under hammering seas, waited for the hour or minute when the timbers that protected them would crash inwards and they be thrown to the destruction that roared outside.

More than 20 steerage passengers (including two women and a girl), with the seamen and some officers, were crowded into the forward saloon. Successive rollers thundered on the deck above; there was nothing to do but wait. "there was no panic among the passengers." The third engineer said afterwards. "The women were calm and courageous. It was three hours from the time we struck till the forepart of the ship broke up ... The only light we had was a lamp. "We have a glimpse of a very steadfast lamp of human courage lit in storm and darkness that night in Cheviot Bay. Two seamen talked quietly of the small chances of survival, and arranged that if either lived he would take a message to the relatives of the one lost. "My mother is arriving from England next week," the younger one said, and his mate promised, if saved, to meet the ship. The younger one was saved, and met his mother in Melbourne a few days later; the other party to the agreement was Saunders, who lies with his messmates Foster and Kelly and those others "whose names are unknown" in the little clearing here on the ridge.

About midnight the forepart of the cheviot suddenly broke up and the sea pushed in. Archie Laing, the third engineer, by some marvel was not crushed among wreckage; happened not to be drowned, as he was carried inshore; chanced to be washed up on a sandy beach instead of among jagged rock crevices and crawled out alive. He sent a few hails into darkness, and getting no reply reasonably supposed that his companions were all drowned. Staggering with weakness, he made his way across through scrub and sand to the bay beach, where he lay down exhausted and slept for a while with the rain beating on him. Rousing himself again, he followed the beach to the cattle jetty, and from there saw a lighted window. It was Purdy's cottage, near the quarantine jetty, and here the members of the lifeboat crew were sheltering. He stumbled out of the darkness into their arms. Eagerly they heard his story, and set out across the peninsula, and from some high point on the sandy track a mysterious bonfire guided them down to the beach. Here they found the artillerymen from Fort Nepean, who had lit the fire and were piling brushwood upon it. The leaping flames fitfully illuminated a few yards of beach piled with wreckage and rolling surf choked with floating timbers, cases and bags of chaff from the ship's cargo. The body of a drowned sailor was laid high up on the



sand. When taken out of the surf it had seemed still warm, and the rescuers had tried to restore life, but a more careful examination revealed the injuries in the head that made death certain.

These artillery-men from the fort had turned out in response to a telephone message relayed from Queenscliff asking them to look for a wreck between the Heads and Sorrento. They might have searched as vainly as had the lifeboat crew, but as they set out they were hailed from the darkness, and a man hastened toward them – a forlorn figure in the lantern light; hatless his clothes and hair saturated with sea-water and rain. This was Calcraft, the lamp-trimmer from the Cheviot. Thrown into the sea when the fore-part of the ship broke up, he had found himself ashore with the breath still in his body, and somehow, in rain and darkness, discovering the telegraph line that runs along the rugged backbone of the peninsula, had followed it to the barracks, where he met the search party setting out. It was at this juncture that the first definite news was dispatched to Melbourne; along that same telegraph line (which had been out of order, by the way, but had been repaired on the previous day); - “the vessel ashore is the steamer Cheviot! She is about one mile on the Portsea side of Nepean. One man is ashore from the wreck.

This news, appearing as a second edition in the Thursday morning papers, was received with consternation in Melbourne, for the Cheviot was a household word with interstate travelers; and her passengers named in the list following the above report were Melbourne people who had left Queen’s Wharf on the previous afternoon, expecting an uneventful run to Sydney, Newcastle, or some Queensland port in the well-known coastal steamer.

Through the remaining hours of darkness the fire blazed on the beach; the watchers fed it with broken timbers that the waves tossed up, and the roaring south-westerly fanned it, but whether there was a living soul on the wreck to see their beacon of hope, or whether, indeed, anything was left of the ship in the darkness beyond, they could not tell. One of the party said afterward the hours seemed like days as they waited for the light of morning.

A beclouded daybreak at last showed the stern of the ship, black against white surf, and upended at an angle that had made it possible for Captain Richardson to get the saloon passengers (numbering 11) out of the after-cabin on to the sloping deck, where they clung, through hours of darkness, to the railing that was above the highest wash of the seas. Some of the women were in night attire, with



coats thrown over them. Captain Richardson's coat was given to one and his boots to another, and, above all, he sheered them into the belief that they would be saved when daylight came. With what bursting hearts they saw the rescuers fire flicker out of the darkness about 2 o'clock! The captain kept their eyes on it, as a positive guarantee that all would be well; and at daylight his faith was vindicated. A rocket was fired from the beach; directed by a steady hand and experienced eye, it carried a line that fell into Captain Richardson's extended hand. The "bosun's chair" was rigged, and one by one all were brought safely to the beach.

Daylight, bringing salvation to the little company in the stern of the ship, revealed the full tragedy of the night. The bodies of three seamen and an elderly woman were drawn up on the sand. The gale had abated; but the wreckage and seaweed were piled thick on the beach, and even suspended on the rocky face of the cliff to a height of 25ft. A searcher along the beach, lifting some boards, uncovered the body of a girl of twelve, with fair curls, her face peaceful and unmarked. The good ship Edina, coming to Quarantine jetty that afternoon, took on board this sad freight, as well as the survivors, and returned to Queen's Wharf that night at 9 o'clock.

Many bodies were never found. A sister of one of the missing seamen came from Geelong and searched along the beach on Saturday, and waited for flood tide, in the hope that the sea would give up her brother's body. A drowned seaman was found that day, but not the one she sought. Two other bodies were carried in by the tide through the Heads and washed up on the Quarantine beach. These were not identifiable, and are the "persons unknown" buried with Sanders, Kelly and Foster. The funeral moved from the Quarantine buildings on Sunday, October 23, past the graves where rested the peaceful dead of the Ticonderoga – "Their storm gave over," thirty years before that night of tempest, in which the Cheviot's company "calmly courageous," faced death by the light of a lamp. Standing near the Cheviot grave last week I read on a neighbouring headstone –

"No mortal woes

Can reach the quiet sleepers here."

- and the words followed me home; turning over in my mind with a quiet rhythm, like ripples on a sheltered beach.