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Emigrant Ships of the 'Fifties – Some Floating Horrors by C.R.C. Pearce

When the eyes of the world were turned upon Australia by the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in the 'fifties and by the remarkable "finds" which followed one another in quick succession, a tremendous impetus was given to the shipping trade. Every old hulk which could float was manned, and many of these vessels which succeeded in laboriously crawling across the ocean were left to rot in Sydney Harbour and Hobson's Bay. New ships were built with feverish haste. A procession of steamships from the Sarah Sands to the Chusan and the Formosa, and then the Great Britain (3,500 tons), crossed the seas; and splendid clippers, graceful and speedy, adorned Australian ports. From Liverpool alone, during July, 1852, 68 vessels, with 26,000 passengers, were dispatched by the British Government to Australia. Ships were leaving London and Plymouth, Sunderland and Aberdeen, San Francisco and Cape Town also.

Crowds daily assembled at 309 Regent street, London, to undertake the great voyage and to visit the diggings in imagination. They gazed in wonderment at a moving panorama of the diggings painted by Mr. J. S. Prout, an artist, from sketches made by him in Australia. The seascapes were the work of Mr. T. S. Robins, and the animals were painted by Mr. C. Weignall. The spectators were supposed to begin the voyage at Plymouth, and to touch at Madeira, Rio de Janeiro, and the Cape of Good Hope. Many incidents of such a voyage were shown – flights of birds, flying fish, porpoises, and even the capture of a whale. The shifting scenes included Melbourne, the valley of the Yarra, the Goulburn, Geelong, an Australian road, the diggings at Mount Alexander, a kangaroo hunt on the Illawarra, Sydney, the Parramatta River, the Blue Mountains, and the diggings on Summerhill Creek.

The arrival of treasure ships in British ports stirred the imagination of the people, and writers in the newspapers declared that their stores of gold surpassed the wealth which the stately galleons brought to Spain from South America in the days of Sir Francis Drake. "The ship Medway has arrived in the Thames from Melbourne, Port Phillip, with no less than 67,000 oz. gold dust, valued at £270,000," stated "The Times" on October 10, 1852. "Immediately on the vessel arriving at Limehouse she was surrounded by a complete fleet of small boats filled with crimps, lodging-house keepers, and others of the longshore fraternity, who made numerous ineffectual efforts to get on board to remove the seamen's effects under the impression, from the valuable nature of the ship's



cargo, that the men must be equally well stored. In anticipation of such an attempt, however, police officers were on board, and all their endeavours were fruitless. The Medway brings one of the most valuable cargoes ever imported by a private vessel into the port of London. It amounts in the aggregate, with cargo and gold dust in the hands of passengers, to nearly £600,000. The Ganges arrived in the river on Tuesday from Sydney with a cargo of gold dust and wool valued at £100,000." A month later the Roxburgh Castle departed from Melbourne with 170,900 oz. gold. Early in the next year *1853) the escorts were bringing to Melbourne each week gold worth from £170,000 to £200,000.

The Death Roll.

It was no wonder then that thousands of people were eager to reach this land of gold. Few thought of the risk to health of crowding into ships on long voyages when there were few of the comforts and conveniences now provided for passengers on very short sea trips. Emigrants with high spirits, ready for song or jest, assembled on the decks and cheered the Government medical officers who gave them words of advice before the ships sailed. But even the doctors did not seem to realize the horrors to which they were dooming the unsuspecting voyagers, who saw visions of gold even in the dull grey skies of the grimy port in which they were bidding farewell to their native land, most of them for ever. Grim scenes of misery and disease and death were witnessed on some of these vessels before they reached Australia. Brief items of shipping news in "The Argus" in 1852 and 1853 tell tragic stories such as:- "The ship Theodore (1,063 tons) from Liverpool, brought 439 immigrants. Twenty-four children died from various diseases." "The ship Persian brought 619 immigrants. Thirty-four deaths from fever and dysentery occurred. There is still much sickness on board, and the vessel went into quarantine." "The Anne Mylene arrived at Portland with 276 immigrants. There were 20 deaths, chiefly of children."

"God in His mercy preserved myself, wife, and family (eight in number) during the whole voyage, so that we did not have one day's sickness," wrote one man. "On board there was illness of every description, especially small-pox." When this family arrived there was no available housing accommodation in Melbourne, and the father could not pay the exorbitant rents charged for shelter in "canvas town," so that husband, wife, and children had to sleep under a dray, to the wheels of which horses were tethered. The horses snorted and stamped all night, while a drunken driver shouted blasphemies and obscenities. The master of a schooner conveyed from New Zealand 23 persons in



a compartment 12 ft. square and only 3 ½ ft. high. He was fined £25. As the passengers on one ship could not eat the “flavourless and undistinguishable stuff out of tins said to be pressed meat,” they ate rice and salt, with a variation of rice and sugar. For many days the allowance of water was reduced to one pint a day for adults and half a pint a day for adults and half a pint for children. Throughout one voyage the passengers received only about half the quantity of food they were entitled to under the regulations.

The Ticonderoga.

A floating horror was the disease-stricken emigrant ship Ticonderoga, 90 days out from Liverpool, which anchored at the Heads on April 3, 1853. News of the fearful conditions on the Ticonderoga was brought to Williamstown by Captain Wylie of the brig Champion, from Adelaide, who reported that the vessel had left Liverpool with 714 immigrants on board, that disease, principally typhoid fever and scarlatina, had spread among the passengers and that 100 deaths had occurred during the voyage. The ship's surgeon and his assistant had been unable to stop the spread of the disease, and the surgeon was so ill that it was feared that he, too, would die. All the medicine and medical comforts had been exhausted, and the ship was urgently in need of fresh provisions. In the midst of all this sickness nineteen births occurred, and more children were born as the ship lay at anchor. The authorities at Williamstown dispatched the schooner Empire with live stock and supplies of beef and mutton, milk, vegetables, porter, wine, and spirits, and a medicine chest in charge of a doctor from the ship Otilia to the relief of sufferers. The doctor was faced with 300 cases of sickness, principally scarlatina, and he had to send for more aid. The ship Lysander was requisitioned and converted into a hospital ship, and with the aid of sail and spars tents were erected on a quarantine area marked out at Port Nepean. In addition a house occupied by Messrs. Sullivan and Cannon, lime-burners, was purchased and turned into a hospital. It was hoped that fresh air, a liberal diet of fresh food, and healthy exercise would restore the sick, but there was further mortality. Five deaths took place on one day, and for nearly three weeks two or three persons died daily. The total loss of life must have been nearly 150.

For six weeks, the survivors were in quarantine. Then, just before Christmas, the healthy passengers re-embarked on the Ticonderoga. Their berths had been taken down and burnt, and the passengers, more than 500, had to lie on the decks for a few nights. The Ticonderoga anchored in

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Hobson's Bay on December 22, and when a steamer came alongside to take the immigrants to the pier there was a rush to leave the ill-fated ship and go ashore.

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