

‘Steerage or stay behind’

Paper presented by Alice Meredith Hodgson, 5 November 2011.

The seas and oceans of the world evoke strong descriptors of both their condition, and the experiences that travellers have while crossing them. History writers have drawn on these emotions, pulling the reader into a watery world of sentiment and sensation. Many travelers would come to view the sea as a vast unassailable wash.

I want to talk about a particular type of voyage: a below decks voyage but not a convict one. Contrary to popular opinion, most of our forebears were immigrants and they had no choice but to travel steerage. Steerage passengers had to badly want to leave where they were or arrive where they were headed. Hassam called them ‘travellers of necessity’.ⁱ Their steerage voyage aboard a transport under sail was perhaps difficult and trying. My plan today is to fill out the impression with some descriptions from those who travelled in this way.

Most surviving accounts of sea voyages in the days of sail are from cabin passengers.ⁱⁱ But nine out of ten passengers travelled steerageⁱⁱⁱ and there are examples from these less privileged travellers. Today I have drawn mainly from their letters, logs and journals. For many, their narrative helped them make sense of the journey. All paint a similar picture: the voyage was crowded, tedious, confining, dangerous to body and mind, and often heartbreaking. Mostly they wrote of the long haul from Britain to Australia, but some recalled other journeys.

The step from dock to deck was often the first experience of being afloat. It was a time of great anxiety: there was the mystery and often fear of the ocean, the strangeness of the cramped vessel, the new physical sensations of being afloat, and the dread of seasickness. Embarking passengers were greeted with bedlam, even before they glimpsed their accommodation. Amid passenger and cargo loading, shouts of the crew, tearful farewells, creaking timbers and slapping halliards stung all ears. The scene was dirty and confused, and every part of the deck and wharf were stacked, as one put it: ‘[with] trunks, chests, cases, bags, hampers, hen-coops, pigs, dogs, coils of rope, sailors and passengers ...’^{iv}

Of course, not everyone had a terrible time of it. For youngsters like Edwin Crowther and Willie Bettham, the journey was an adventure. For others, the hope of new opportunities made the most trying physical conditions bearable. Travellers took aboard musical instruments, cards, books, and other entertainments. There was singing and dancing, when the conditions permitted, and a constant hum of conversation or snoring pervaded the cabin gloom.

Steerage is an accommodation class, usually the worst: if you don’t count stowaways. Steerage is synonymous with below deck, with all the implications of confined, dark, musty space that the hold conveys. On many vessels, steerage was converted back to cargo space for the onward journey: the furniture a nineteenth century seagoing equivalent of Ikea flat-pack. The length of steerage accommodation was generally divided into separate spaces: for single men, for families, and for single women. It was often identical in layout to that on convict ships, but convicts frequently had the better time of it in terms of food, health care, occupation and often space.

I visited a reconstructed steerage hold in the museum on the Liverpool docks. This exhibition was stark in terms of space, layout, furnishing, and light even considering the fake ‘cabin’ was not on a rolling swollen ocean nor filled with its capacity of passengers. This reconstruction showed the timber berths, each able to accommodate 4-6 people: men and women, children and infants. They were platforms, about 6 feet square, built bunk style, two high. The lower was at about shin height, the upper at about my shoulder. You wanted an upper berth, no matter how short the journey.

This reconstruction presented a vivid image of the confining and uncomfortable aspects of steerage with tables, benches, water barrels and chests of cooking and eating equipment squeezed between the rows of bunks. Personal belongings in baskets and bundles would have added to this jumble.

Edwin Crowther’s description of the cargo and passengers aboard the *Isabella* in 1862, on a journey from Hobart to Otago, gives us a feel for the overcrowded conditions:

‘In the hold were sixty cart horses. The decks lined with the whole water supply of horses, passengers, grooms and helpers and crew. On top of the water casks were hay for the horses, carts, ships gear, and sundries... We got away all right with a fair wind and then where to stow all the Gold Diggers and sundries was a work of art.’^v

Beside the horses, there were 226 people aboard, 100 of them, mostly ‘gold diggers’ listed as crew as this was one way to circumvent the regulations about passenger numbers. Crowther, in a delighted rather than frightened tone, reported that two great troubles were constant: ‘The hatches could not be battened down or the horses would have suffocated; and on one tack the *Isabella* leaked like a sieve.’^{vi} As an aside, young Crowther was paid two shillings for his efforts, there and back. His father, Dr William Lodewyk Crowther, pocketed one thousand pounds as his share of the profits for this risky venture.

Steerage passengers provided for themselves – including bedding, mess kits, personal belongings and supplementary food. William Hodgskinson, a passenger to New Zealand on the *Phoenix* out of Liverpool in July 1860, took all he needed with him: ‘everything,’ he wrote, ‘that is likely to contribute to health and comfort during a long and wearisome voyage.’^{vii}

The anonymous ‘Yankee’ who travelled steerage on the *Oscar* from London to Dunedin in 1862, ‘was shown a rude bunk, that had not a rag to cover the nakedness of its rough boards.’^{viii} As a passenger in the single men’s section, the ‘Yankee’ was concerned that the *Oscar* was too crowded:

‘Its tonnage was nine hundred and seventy-four tons,’ he wrote, ‘and on it were over three hundred and fifty people, besides the officers and crew... owing to the arrangement of the berths, we had but very little room. The berths were ... so narrow that a man could not move without kicking one or two of his neighbours.’^{ix}

Lack of light was a continual problem. Little made its way down the hatch in the daylight hours and at night lamps made a feeble effort to brighten the gloom. Aboard the *Oscar*, three lamps were asked to light the length of the cabin, each making no more than a smudge on the darkness.^x

The physical conditions contributed to the discomfort of those below decks. Moore points to some of the most aggravating: rats and other vermin multiplying on a diet of poorly protected stores; brackish or foul water unrelieved unless replenished by rainwater, grossly inadequate sanitation facilities; all coupled with filth and stench.^{xi}

John Hedges, sailed to Sydney from Liverpool on the *Admiral Lyons* with 447 government emigrants and 47 other passengers and crew in 1858. Hedges travelled with his pregnant wife Harriet and their two small sons. All endured seasickness, prickly heat, and the effects of bad food: jammed together in the bunk they shared. Hedges suffered boils, as did his wife and he attributed this to the heat. Later in the voyage, as the weather turned, colds and influenza were a problem. Chilblains on his feet were so bad he had to cut the tops out of his shoes.^{xii}

For many travellers the voyage was their first, and likely last. Some voyagers saw sights they could hardly believe: a magical moving ocean, weird and exotic sea creatures, and brilliant starlit skies. But, in foul weather as the seas rolled so did the passengers, their water barrels and their slops pails. In the meanest conditions, the hatch would be firmly shut to exclude the torrents of water that streamed across the decks as the ship tilted under the weight of creaking sails. Not that the water was kept out completely. Sea water mixed with the wash across the floor, working its own tide, side to side, as the ship heaved, as happened aboard the *Phoenix*: when the ship lurched so violently that she threatened not to right again.^{xiii}

Anne Gratton was part of a group of female emigrants traveling to Victoria on the *Conway*, in 1858. Young women in steerage were often virtually incarcerated, locked in their accommodation under the control of a matron.^{xiv} Gratton reported extreme weather, seasickness and the tedium of the diet. When the ship rolled and water poured down the closed hatchways some of the young women screamed and climbed up the hatchway calling to the seamen to be let out. She wrote about the disorder:

‘Our water barrels rolling from side to side and our cans, teapots, plates, and cooking utensils adding to the confusion by bouncing down one after another...’^{xv}

In wild weather the noise was terrific: the wind combined with the shouts and swearing of the crew and the shrieks and screams of the terrified passengers.

And, for many, the sea was synonymous with sickness. This was one aspect of the dangers to body and mind and it could seem ceaseless. Ellen Moger suffered seasickness for weeks after the journey began which without doubt contributed to the dismal plight of her children with three of the four of them dying of starvation during the voyage.^{xvi} Willie Beetham, on his journey aboard the *William and Jane* from England to New Zealand in 1855, spared no descriptor to his diary: ‘I must say the wretchedness and misery far surpassed anything I imagined... everyone as ill as could be; the table covered with dirty pots, the pos full, the slop pail do [too]; everyone calling for the spueing utensil at the same [time] and none well enough to pass it; the ship pitching and rolling terrifically; everything tumbling about in the greatest confusion’^{xvii}

Newly wed Louisa Meredith, although travelling to Hobart Town in the relative comfort of a cabin, was eight days in her bunk seasick before she made it onto deck. She would later recount: ‘To the novice at sea, every hour, nay, every moment, brings some greater or lesser misery. Even

in comparatively still weather, the motion of the vessel, however slight, seems almost intolerable...^{xviii}

The cabin she shared with her husband, Charles, was about 9 feet square. She was greatly amused, but later very grateful, that Charles, with the experience of two voyages to his credit, nailed or tied down every moveable object. She was also appreciative for the aspect of their cabin – in the stern, with a skylight and windows allowing fresh air that she admitted reduced unpleasant odours, despite the leaks in the skylight and windows that allowed the ‘dirty seawater’ to saturate her bedding.^{xix}

John Clark aboard the *Nepal* in 1852 described the shipboard food, provided as part of the ticket price, and the arrangements for cooking and serving it. Once fresh provisions were exhausted, salted and dried food were staples. The passengers were divided into mess groups. Each had a ‘captain’ who was responsible to get boiling water for breakfast and tea, the stores from the purser, and most importantly, steeping salt provisions overnight.^{xx} Mess ‘captain’ was a rotating daily job. The duties began at six each morning with getting the water ration to the mess, lasted most of the day and ended with cleaning the shared utensils to hand over for the following day. Clarke complained that, coupled with his personal chores, being ‘captain’ left little time for relaxation.^{xxi}

Clark also described the menu:

‘Let us begin with Sunday,’ he wrote, ‘Morning coffee, dinner Preserved meat & Potatoes; tea or coffee, there is no supper. Monday Salt Pork and peas. Tuesday Soup Bouillon. Wed. Salt Pork and Peas. Thursday Pres. Meat & Potatoes, Friday, Salt Beef and Salt fish. Saturday, Salt Beef & Peas...’^{xxii} With 370 to cater for, there was much other cooking going on as well: bread, cakes, and tarts.

In the endless voyage, the behaviour and habits of other passengers were often cause for grumbling and whining – to the diary and to those around. Hedges complained about his travelling companions:

‘... we should be more comfortable here if it was not for the Irish, they are so dirty ... and I hope we shall soon have them a little cleaner.’^{xxiii} He was to be disappointed. His family was attacked by louse, which Hedges attributed to the Irish neighbours. He was further distressed when he got short shrift from the doctor who suggested they could expect to get louse on any voyage. Steerage passengers washed themselves and their clothes on deck, in seawater, behind temporary privacy screens, if the weather permitted. When travelling with a baby, which many women did, the rags used as nappies went overboard once sodden and fully soiled.

Other bodily dangers came with the weather, and with the way people managed their boredom and temperament over the long journey. William Greenhalgh was aboard the *Marco Polo* out of Liverpool to Melbourne in 1853. A rough and violent captain led this voyage. Greenhalgh gives accounts of verbal and physical altercations between crew and captain, resulting in some crew being put in irons, on bread and water, or gagged. Drunkenness in the crew climaxed in some being detained in irons.^{xxiv}

Illness abounded: heat stroke, seasickness, insanity, and injuries. Many diarists described deaths aboard ship during their voyage. Greenhalgh attended burials at sea for a man dead as the result of breaking a leg, and another who expired of consumption. He wrote of a young woman who had become insane during the voyage who died 7.45 pm and was, in his words, ‘thrown overboard’ at 10pm. Her burial service was read by one of the passengers.^{xxv}

Gratton, described a mountainous sea and the price one sailor paid:

‘It kept stormy all night and one of the poor sailors was washed from the rigging. It was too Rough [sic] to lower the life boat, but the life buoys were thrown out to the poor fellow, but all to no purpose. It is supposed that he broke his back in the fall as he never attempted to lay hold of them.’^{xxvi}

Hedges wrote of the fate of an unnamed woman who declined, apparently from homesickness, leaving a husband and 11-month-old baby.^{xxvii} Hedges melancholia was later greatly extended for he lost his own child, two-year-old Basil, who died the day the *Admiral Lyons* anchored at Botany Bay’s quarantine station. The child had been ill most of the 96 days of the voyage. Hedges only comfort was that his child was buried in a grave on land, not at sea.

Just as every good story has a beginning and end, so does a sea voyage no matter how benign or difficult; how long or short; how pleasant or trying. The shifting seas and interminable horizon eventually gave way to a distant smudge of terrain and the cry of ‘Land Ho!’

As land neared, passenger emerged from the foetid cocoon of the hold. For most it was excitement, coupled with sheer relief that they had accomplished the journey: be it night when at last tiny pricks of light from shoreline cottages gave way to the brightness of town wharves, or daytime when the cliffs and beaches flowed into a harbour anchorage.

Imagine, for a moment, the impact on the worn out traveller of the aroma of vegetation wafting over the seas.

‘How we leaned over the vessel’s side smelling the shore!’ wrote Meredith, ‘enjoying the fine earthy, fragrant smell that our sea-seasoned noses were so quick to detect in every puff of wind...’^{xxviii}

ⁱ Andrew Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995). p. 3

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p 12

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 9

^{iv} Louisa Anne Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales During a Residence in That Colony from 1839 to 1844* (London: John Murray (facsimile produced by Penguin Books, 1973), 1844).p. 1.

^v Edwin Lodewyk Crowther, ‘An account of a voyage to Otago, at the time of the Gabriel’s Gully gold rush’, c 1930, Typescript, TAHO, CRO Q 993.1, unpagged. Edwin Crowther, son of Dr WL Crowther, at 19 in 1862, travelled to Dunedin aboard the barque of 300 tons *Isabella* – a former whaler. The journey, from Hobart to Otago taking passengers to the Gabriel’s Gully diggings, was a money making enterprise for Dr Crowther

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} William Hodgkinson, ‘Diary of Passenger William Hodgkinson aboard the Phoenix’, Maritime Archives and Library, Liverpool National Museums, c 1860, DX/1481

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- ^{viii} Anon, 'Otago: or, a rush to the new gold-fields of New Zealand', c 1862. Originally published in three episodes in *The Leisure Hour*, circa 1862, p. 424. A copy of this serialized account is included with Crowther's account of his voyage, but a reason for this is not offered. The anonymous author is assumed to be an American for he refers to himself as a 'Yankee'. TAHO, CRO Q 993.1
- ^{ix} *Ibid.* p. 423
- ^x *Ibid.* p. 424
- ^{xi} Bryce Moore, Helen Garwood, and Nancy Lutton, *The Voyage Out: 100 Years of Sea Travel to Australia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991), Paraphrased, p. 4.
- ^{xii} John Hedges, 'Transcript of a Letter from John Hedges to his Mother', Maritime Archive and Library, National Museums Liverpool, c 1858, DX/243/1. unpagged
- ^{xiii} Hodgkinson, 'Diary of Passenger, unpagged
- ^{xiv} Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants*. p. 72
- ^{xv} Moore, Garwood, and Lutton, *The Voyage Out: 100 Years of Sea Travel to Australia*. p. 50.
- ^{xvi} Cited by Lucy Frost, *No Place for a Nervous Lady: Voices from the Australian Bush* (Fitzroy VIC: McPhee Gribble, 1984).
- ^{xvii} Cited by Lydia Wevers, *Reading on the Farm: Victorian Fiction and the Colonial World* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010), p. 38.
- ^{xviii} Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales During a Residence in That Colony from 1839 to 1844.*, p. 2.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.* p. 3.
- ^{xx} Cited in Moore, Garwood, and Lutton, *The Voyage Out: 100 Years of Sea Travel to Australia.*, p. 71
- ^{xxi} Paraphrased. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.* pp 69-70.
- ^{xxiii} Hedges, 'Transcript of a Letter from John Hedges to his Mother' c 1858.
- ^{xxiv} William Culshaw Greenhalgh, 'Diary of passenger William Culshaw Greenhalgh aboard the Marco Polo', Maritime Archives and Library, Liverpool National Museums, c 1853, DX/1676
- ^{xxv} *Ibid* unpagged
- ^{xxvi} Moore, Garwood, and Lutton, *The Voyage Out: 100 Years of Sea Travel to Australia*. pp 50-51.
- ^{xxvii} Hedges, 'Transcript of a Letter from John Hedges to his Mother' c 1858
- ^{xxviii} Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales During a Residence in That Colony from 1839 to 1844.*, p. 31.