An 1884 oil painting by John Charles Dollman depicts passengers, including a young family, aboard an emigrant ship.
For passengers journeying to Australia by ship in the 19th century, rough seas, rats and drunken outbursts were daily realities. But these raucous voyages also involved dancing, theatre and wildlife spotting as they waited for a glimpse of land.

STORY BY ROSLYN RUSSELL

The Great Britain leaves the pier at Liverpool in 1852 (above), with its two steam funnels clearly visible.
The rats I frighten away by throwing books or anything hard at the spot at which they commence their gnawing. Two or three blows are generally sufficient to send them flying with dreadful squeals,” wrote emigrant Janet Ronald in a journal she kept on board Invincible in 1857. “I often hear them nibbling away, and will always have to keep a look out, which is not a very pleasant occupation. I have a great horror of them, I must own, and feel afraid too.”

Janet, who recounts in her scribblings the war she engaged with rats attempting to gnaw their way into her cabin, was one of about 1.6 million emigrants, including about 160,400 convicts, who travelled to Australia by ship between 1787 and 1900.

Invincible was among the great many ships that transported free settlers from Britain and Ireland to Australia in the 19th century. Even if you were a first-class passenger occupying a cabin on the deck, you were tossed around by seas during storms. You endured days of seasickness, and were dazed by the heat of the tropics, then chilled to the bone as the ship journeyed into the southern latitudes.

But people on these ships also formed communities, putting on plays, developing sometimes lasting relationships and taking part in wild nautical rituals. The vessels that brought them halfway around the world were sailing ships, and, by the mid-19th century, also steamships, which travelled under sail for stretches of the journey to conserve coal.

Gold discoveries in New South Wales and Victoria in the early 1850s saw the steady flow of emigrants increase drastically for most of the decade. Emigrants continued to come to Australia in the latter half of the 19th century, as travel became faster and more comfortable and as the reputation of the Australian colonies as ‘A new Britannia in another world’ took hold.

It’s hard to imagine today, when many of us even dread the mere 24-hour flight required to get from Australia to the UK. But if you read the diaries written by those who came by ship in the 19th century, the brief and relaxing flight home from London’s Heathrow (in an air-conditioned cabin, with food and inflight entertainment) can’t be compared with what these people endured.

The same journey 150 years ago could take more than 100 days, non-stop. If you were an assisted emigrant or a convict you were cramped up for all that time in crowded quarters on the lower decks (although you were allowed to come on deck at times). Single women and men were housed in separate areas of the ship, to preserve respectability, and families lived in close proximity to each other, making privacy impossible.

Many people are under the impression that most voyages to Australia were unrelieved ordeals, and passengers routinely suffered extreme privation while making the journey to the new land. While this was undoubtedly sometimes true, it was by no means the universal experience. Indeed, for many of those who came to Australia in the 19th century, the biggest problem was staving off the boredom of the days and weeks at sea.

One of the many ways of filling in time was to keep a diary. It is thanks to these works penned at sea, and now in the collection of the National Library of Australia and other repositories, that we have a better understanding of what it was like to voyage to Australia. Passengers sometimes wrote to let off steam, and to vent their feelings about people and circumstances on board that vexed them. For others, a diary was where they recorded their philosophical or religious reflections.

The accounts are written mostly in purchased notebooks with cardboard or leather covers. An exception – one of the most evocative as an object – is John Gregg’s diary of his voyage as a carpenter on a convict ship in 1862, which is bound in canvas and carries water stains. Some diaries are meticulously handwritten in ink, others are in pencil, and there are wide variations in the legibility of the writing and literary styles.

Some of these diaries feature sketches and paintings, often depicting scenes of shipboard life. These include caricatures of the captain and other crew members, fellow passengers and their activities, the islands they passed, phenomena such as waterspouts and phosphorescence, and – favourite subjects of many diarists – birds and marine life. Many diaries carry representations of albatrosses, flying

Dr Roslyn Russell
is a Canberra-based historian, museum curator and the chair of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee. She is the author of High Seas & High Teas and The Business of Nature: John Gould and Australia.
Some of the more literary bent turned to words to capture their wonder at the sights they observed from the vantage point of the ship. Margaret Walpole, wife of a ship’s doctor aboard SS *Pothos* on the way to Western Australia in 1883, wrote a lyrical description of sunset over the Spanish coast:

“It became rather rough later on in the day and I spent most of it in my cabin, but came on deck in time to see the sunset... Mountains after mountain peak after peak as far as eye could reach while the sun like a globe of fire sank down behind them & dashed their dusky shadows with a golden glory. The deep blue water of the Mediterranean stretched out before us & met in hazey [sic] distance the horizon line, the sky was dotted from end to end with tiny crimson clouds.”

Other passengers were not content with such sedentary activities, and blazed away with their guns at anything that moved, taking pot shots at passing whales, sharks and dolphins, and bringing down seabirds, including large numbers of albatross, clearly unperturbed at the possibility that they might suffer the fate of English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, cursed for shooting one of these majestic birds.

The biggest problem was staving off the boredom of the days and weeks at sea.

If you were an assisted emigrant (one of those who came to Australia in response to emigration schemes that attracted free settlers to the expanding colonies), you became a member of a ‘mess’ in which you would take turns to cook meals from the rations supplied. If you had planned ahead, you would have brought some condiments and other foodstuffs to vary the monotonous diet. You would experiment with ways to make the rations more palatable, before taking your concoctions to the cook to boil or bake them. A manual for emigrants warned that it was “useless to prepare boiled puddings on baking days, or bread and cakes on boiling days, and it should be ascertained what can be done before commencing, to prevent disappointment.”

If you were a first-class passenger, by contrast, you would be served by a steward in the cuddy or saloon, eat several-course meals, and enjoy fresh meat from animals...
The sight of a shipwreck, as painted here by Haughton Forrest in 1860, could inspire fear in passengers, and cause them to reflect on the uncertainties of life at sea.
Parents, and sometimes nurses or nannies, cared for ill children as best they could on board, with limited remedies, but with the supervision of the ship's doctor.

Misfortune and disaster

Long sea voyages in the 19th century carried their share of risks for both vessels and passengers alike.

WHILE SHIPWRECKS WERE not as common en route to Australia as people may think, fear of them, or of attack by hostile ships, was ever-present. Ships that sailed the Great Circle route deep into the southern latitudes were particularly vulnerable. One emigrant ship, Guiding Star, disappeared completely in 1855, with 543 people on board.

Other emigrant vessels wrecked with large losses were Catarqua (1845, 400 dead); Tayleur (1854, 340 dead); and Kapunda (1887, 298 dead). Dunbar was wrecked at The Gap, Watson’s Bay, Sydney (1857, 121 dead).

Personal disasters were also an unavoidable feature of life at sea. Some diarists penned poignant accounts of their feelings at seeing loved ones, or even shipboard acquaintances, sicken and die during a voyage.

One harrowing account by Joseph Pettingell describes the decline and death of his two-year-old daughter, Georgina, just days out of Hobart. Like others who died en route, she was buried at sea. After their funerals, the ships sailed on, leaving behind those who would never make landfall on the shore to which they were bound.

brought on board to be slaughtered (albeit well away from your quarters on the upper deck). Helen Roland, travelling aboard SS Great Britain in 1861, wrote that the style of dining on board was “decidedly grand”, and “I do not know how it is that everyone seems able to eat so much”. On other voyages even the first-class diet could be bland and unvarying. Steamships were considered to have superior food to sailing ships. Edith Gedge on SS Sobraun in 1888 wrote that “the feeding is not at all equal to that on board a steamer, water is more scarce, & the whole thing is in a different style”. This complaint did not deter Edith from reproducing a “Bill of Fare” for dinner on 23 December 1888 that included mock turtle soup, jugged hare, beef scollops, forced onions, giblet pie, stewed oxtail, curry and rice, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, roast goose stuffed with apple sauce, plum pudding, blancmange and apricots, sandwich pastry and shortbread.

All classes shared their quarters with unwelcome visitors such as rats and cockroaches. Even more sobering were the life-threatening situations that could occur. You and your loved ones could be exposed to disease or accidents. Many people died and were buried at sea (see box, left).

Passing ships could be either friendly or hostile. Long periods at sea meant being out of touch with news, and there was always the possibility that Britain might have declared hostilities against another nation. Another ship coming into view on the horizon could either be an enemy or a welcome opportunity to send mail back home. Until the status of the vessel was established, both passengers and crew had some nervous moments.

For example, John Carter, on the East Indiaman General Hewett in 1844–45, described the quandary he was in when a “rakish looking” vessel hove into view. The crew thought it might be “either a slaver, or pirate”, and “preparations were made for putting the ship in a state of defence by loading the Guns”. John added that:

“I hardly knew what to do first, whether to load my gun for a foe; or in case of her being a friend to finish my letter; however, I adopted the latter alternative, & as it turned out the wiser, & preparations were made for putting the ship in a state of defence by loading the Guns”. John added that:

“...a foe; or in case of her being a friend to finish my letter...”

O R E D O M, AND BEING CLOSELY CONFINED with other people, led at times to outbreaks of domestic violence and other anti-social behaviour. A passenger known only as ‘Mr Rankine’, on Clifton in 1838, had drunk himself into a state of delirium tremens, and began to threaten passengers and crew. After putting up with physical and verbal attacks from Mr Rankine for some days, the captain had him restrained in a straitjacket. This did not prevent him from biting “any person against whom he has taken a dislike”. Finally, he took advantage of the fact the captain and crew were at lunch to persuade his keeper that he needed fresh air.
1 An 1890 postcard showing cells on the lower deck of the convict ship, *Success*; 2 sailors take sightings from the deck to ascertain the ship’s position; 3 these passengers take no heed of superstitions about shooting albatrosses, blazing away from the deck with pistols and rifles; 4 groups of like-minded people found ways to deal with the tedium of the voyage – such as this Shakespeare Reading Society aboard *Sobraon* in 1888.
These sketches of sailors hauling in a sail, and of emigrants sleeping among their belongings, appeared in the shipboard newspaper published on the Blue Jacket in 1855; passengers and crew on board the S.S. Orient on their way to Australia in 1885; a watercolour, pen and ink sketch, by emigrant Harold John Graham, shows the deck of the Sobraon in 1881.
The vast majority of emigrants survived the journey...and, at times, even enjoyed it.

Passengers, such as those shown here on board the S.S. Orient in 1885 (left), while away the time by engaging in chess and card and deck games; Collins Street in 'Marvellous Melbourne' in the 1880s (above) – the destination of many immigrants, including rat-fearing Janet Ronald in 1858.
Once on deck, he threw himself overboard and drowned. His body was retrieved and he was buried at sea.

Every journey came to an end. The Australian coast appeared, and passengers speculated about this new land.

William Nicols, arriving in 1849, wrote of Sydney Harbour that “it far exceeds the grandest scene that England can produce”. William Harbottle, arriving that same year, admired “one of the most beautiful places on earth”, then wrote: “I am impatient for breakfast and then for Sydney.”

Mary McConnel, encountering Moreton Bay in 1849, wrote “It seemed really to me as if we had come to the end of the known world, and no other had dawned upon us.” Mr Barton, who came to South Australia on Irene in 1853, was far more optimistic. His last diary entry reads: “Hurrah for the land of Canaan.”

Fortunately for rat-fearing Janet Ronald in 1858, Invincible reached Melbourne a few weeks after she’d written about the war she was waging against the rodents, and all thought of the creatures was dispelled by her joy at arriving there and being reunited with her family.

The vast majority of emigrants survived the journey, endured it mostly with equanimity, and, at times, even enjoyed it. Reading their firsthand accounts allows us to share their fear, joy, boredom and wonder as they crossed oceans on the way to a new world.

Onboard entertainment

Passengers on voyages to Australia in the 19th century faced the challenge of how to pass the days, weeks and months of the voyage.

TWO NAUTICAL CEREMONIES provided welcome diversions during the voyage. A month out from sailing, the crew held a ceremony called ‘Burying the Dead Horse’, when sailors celebrated their first payday on board. The ‘Crossing the Line’ ceremony, when the ship passed the equator, was the cue for sometimes raucous celebrations. For much of the time, though, passengers had to make their own entertainment.

Lectures on life in Australia were organised, although Edith Gedge, one listener aboard the Sobraon in 1888, complained that “we heard a good deal about the drawbacks of climate”. Convicts aboard York in 1862 heard lectures on astronomy and “the customs and religion of the aborigines”.

Passengers staged concerts and amateur theatricals in which aspiring singers and thespians displayed their talents. Mock trials were popular, particularly ‘Harwell vs Pickwick’ from Dickens’s Pickwick Papers. The Midshipmen’s Amateur Comedy Company performed ‘Cool as a Cucumber’ for Sobraon’s passengers in 1881.

There was dancing, for free passengers and convicts alike, deck and card games, and reading. Clubs such as the Shakespeare Reading Society on Sobraon in 1888 brought like-minded people together to share their interests.