Migrants’ long sea voyages brought to life

**NAUTICAL HISTORY**


Reviewer: ROBERT WILLSON

If your ancestors arrived in Australia in the 18th or 19th centuries, they would have had a long sea voyage. My ancestors did, and it is fascinating to find out their ship, try to get a picture of it and perhaps a diary of the voyage.

Many passengers kept diaries. Did you know that between 1787 and 1900, more than 1.6 million immigrants, including more than 160,000 convicts, made that long voyage, mostly from the British Isles?

Historian Roslyn Russell has written *High Seas and High Teas* to give us a panorama of what it was like to voyage across the world in a sailing ship, battling bad food, cramped quarters, gales, disease and boredom for perhaps three months. She has gathered a marvellous collection of images to illustrate her travellers’ tales, and the book is beautifully produced by the National Library.

So many stories cry out to be quoted. When a ship was sighted heading homewards to Britain, passengers would scribble letters to family members. The captain would undertake to post them when the ship arrived in England or at a friendly port.

John Carter was travelling in 1844-45 on the ship General Hewitt, an East Indiaman carrying 14 guns. There was great excitement when another ship was sighted, thought to be homewards bound. All the passengers were frantically writing letters to be sent by her. Then a horrible suspicion spread that she might be a slaver or a pirate. She altered course to be parallel to their ship and her appearance was “rather rakish looking”. As she drew closer, suspicions grew, and the guns and muskets were charged.

Carter writes in his diary that he was torn between loading his gun for a foe and finishing his letter. There was trepidation for crew and passengers as they prepared to repel boarders. Eventually he chose to finish his letter and only then loaded his gun.

Only when the General Hewitt drew alongside the other ship did they discover that it was just a small Portuguese brig from Lisbon, wanting to check longitude. The relief must have been palpable. The Portuguese captain agreed to take their letters and they exchanged gifts. Carter writes: “Thus ended this terrible encounter that might have been.”

Even if your ancestor’s ship is not mentioned here, this evocative book will help you to imagine what was endured on the long voyage to Australia.

Robert Willson taught religion and history for many years at Canberra Girls Grammar School.