Ups and downs in crossing over

Tom Gilling

High Seas & High Teas: Voyaging to Australia
By Roslyn Russell
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On March 15, 1858, the convict Thomas Smith, already implicated in the theft of a cask of salted beef, attempted once again to supplement his wretched diet, this time with a hunk of fresh turkey. According to John Bower, the surgeon-superintendent on the ship Lord Raglan, Smith was discovered “close to the turkey pen with a quantity of feathers on his clothes, and apparently engaged in plucking the birds which were stolen from the coop’’. Caught red-handed, Smith not only missed out on his turkey dinner but was thrown in the punishment box for three days on a diet of bread and water. “He threatened that it would not be for nothing,’’ Bower noted in his diary.

Between 1787 and 1900, about 1.6 million immigrants sailed to Australia, nearly half of them government assisted, the majority from the British Isles. Just 10 per cent were convicts. During the 19th century the development of steamships slashed the length of the voyage from months to weeks, but that still left the passengers with plenty of time to kill. Many whiled away their days and nights scribbling and sketching in diaries, leaving us with a vivid record of their time at sea.

Roslyn Russell has drawn on the National Library’s collection of about 100 diaries and firsthand accounts to produce a fascinating book about the first wave of colonial migrants. While some of the writers, such as Surgeon Bower, occupied positions of authority, most were simply passengers prepared to risk the hazards of a long voyage for the chance to build new lives in Australia.

The colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia were keen to encourage immigration, but they wouldn’t take just anyone. Some trades were more in demand than others (agricultural workers were always sought after). As well as being “sober, industrious, and of general good moral character”, eligible migrants were required to be healthy and “free from all bodily or mental defects”. Due to the lack of single women in the Australian colonies, single men were not accepted “without a corresponding number of young single women of good character to equalise the sexes”. (As the book is strictly concerned with those emigrating from the British Isles, Russell does not explore the vexed question of racial eligibility, especially as it applied to the Chinese.)

Social class was the key factor that determined how passengers experienced the voyage to Australia. The rich and high-born could travel the ocean in style, dining on fresh meat at the captain’s table; the lower classes forced down mutton fat pudding while gagging on the stench from the ship’s bilges. Not surprisingly, epidemics of diseases such as measles and scarlet fever tended to take a higher toll in steerage than in the first and second-class cabins above.

Given the foul conditions endured by some of the poorest emigrants, the complaints of the scribbling classes often seem laughably trivial. Reverend John Wollaston, an Anglican clergyman sailing to Western Australia on the Henry in 1840, fell out with the ship’s captain and its surgeon. While dismissing the former as “a screw and a little of a bully”, the chaplain was more withering towards the surgeon: “Doctor
very cross about rice pudding at dinner which rough weather spoilt — sad weak mind to fret at such a thing”.

Janet Ronald, who sailed on the Invincible in 1857, changed her favourable opinion of Captain Johnson when he stopped joining them for meals. After Johnson put a stop to the breakfast “muffins, rolls and waffles”, forcing her to subsist (at least until lunch) on “tea, very hard toast, and thin slices of cold ham or tongue”, Janet could only assume that the captain was “subject to temporary fits of insanity”.

Away from the hardships of the breakfast table, the migrants faced genuine perils, especially in the deep southerly latitudes where
some captains were prepared to risk icebergs and mountainous seas for the promise of a swifter passage. Sailing on the Genghis Khan in 1853, Joseph Tarry experienced a storm that the captain described as the worst he had seen in 20 years. “The wind increased and the Waves ran fearfully high – they seemed almost to mingle with the Clouds,” Tarry wrote in his diary. “Down below there was the utmost confusion … The floor between decks was strewn with Biscuits – Flour – Suet – Oatmeal – Rice – Meat – Butter – baskets – Tinware &c &c – And sometimes we were rolling amongst them.”

At least four emigrant ships were known to have sunk with death tolls of at least 290. According to Russell, “passengers’ behaviour during such emergencies at sea gave the lie to the chivalrous notion of ‘women and children first’” although she does not supply evidence of this from the diaries.

If the written entries are, on occasions, a little flat, Russell more than makes up for it with captivating sketches drawn from diaries or the on-board newspapers that flourished on some passenger ships. In their spontaneity and sense of mischief, these often rudimentary drawings sometimes get us closer to the grit and bustle of life at sea than the words they illustrate.

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The Main Deck, Sobroan (detail), (1881) by Harold John Graham, above; Graham’s Cool as a Cucumber, Midshipmen’s Amateur Commedy Coy, Sobroan (detail) (1881), left