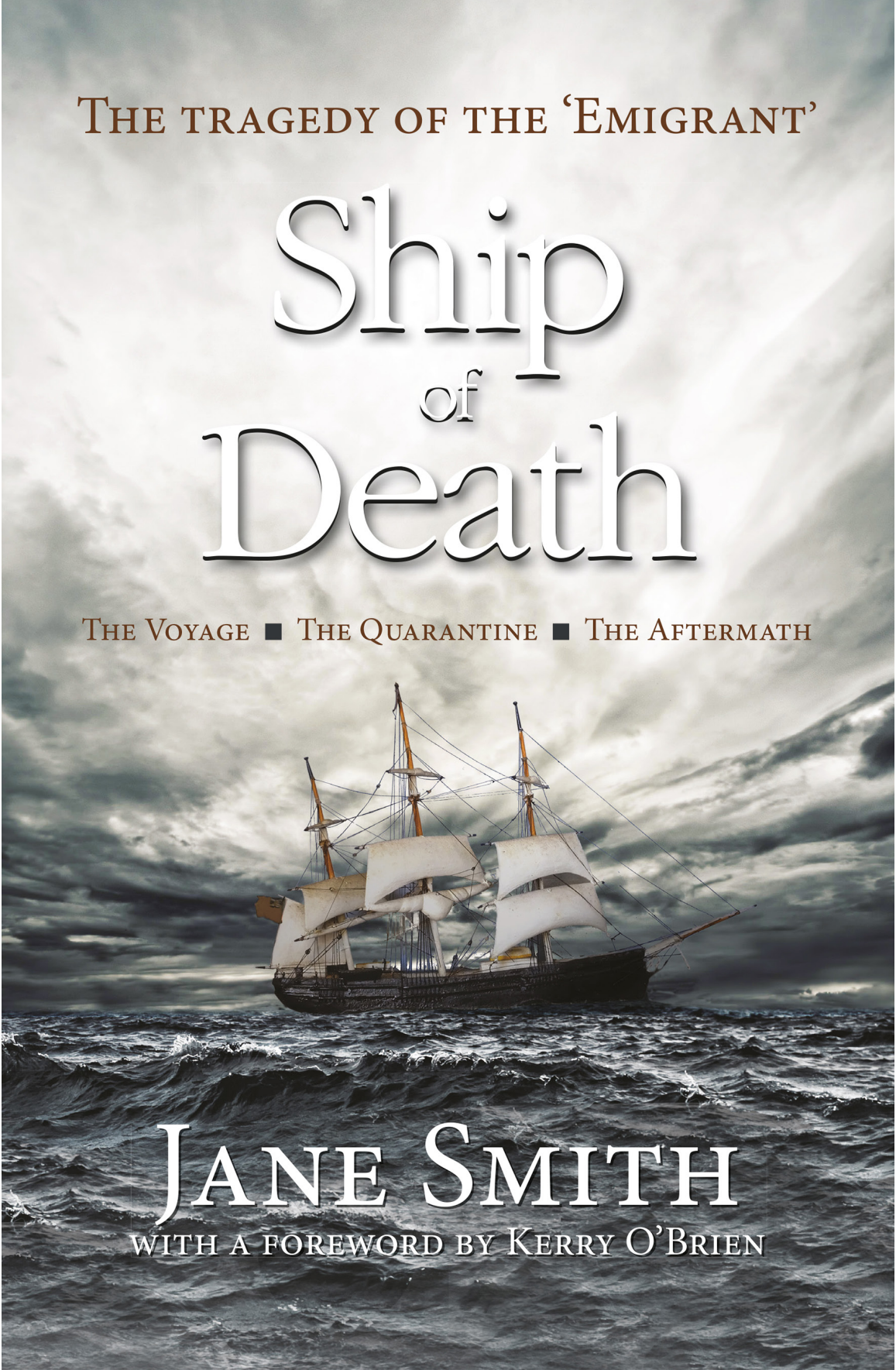
THE TRAGEDY OF THE 'EMIGRANT'

Ship of Death

THE VOYAGE ■ THE QUARANTINE ■ THE AFTERMATH



JANE SMITH

WITH A FOREWORD BY KERRY O'BRIEN

Contents

Many children of the *Emigrant* died prematurely – at sea, in quarantine, and in their adopted land. I find it hard to imagine how so many parents of the Victorian era bore the loss of so many of their children, and feel grateful every day that mine have made it to adulthood.

I dedicate this story to my children, Lucy and Eddie, who have grown into beautiful, creative and kind adults.

I also dedicate it to the memory of Mary Connor, the poor, young, illiterate, plucky and wise Irishwoman who took pity on six little orphans.

Chapter 1

Arriving at the gateway to a better life

Early April 1850

PLYMOUTH, DEVON, SOUTHWEST ENGLAND

An undercurrent of fear tempered the excitement as they converged upon Plymouth. They were farm hands and carpenters and servants; they were newlyweds and families and singles hoping to find a mate; there was even a bigamist amongst them. In their midst was a child who would become a Supreme Court Judge, a future wife-beater, a handful of mayors and alcoholics in the making, countless pioneers who would shape a new nation. There were unborn babies, children who would never be adults, and a half-dozen waifs who would become orphans. There were some who would lose their lives and others who would lose their minds.

They came from the eastern counties – Kent and Essex and Surrey – and from nearby Somerset and Devonshire; from London and Cambridge, and as far north as Lincolnshire. They came from Ireland: from Queen's County and Galway, Tipperary, Limerick and Clare. Whatever their origins, they were united in purpose.

Hope drove them on: hope for a better life in which hard work might lead to material gain. Their home lands offered little. They were poor workers – men, women and children – whose overcrowded and impoverished homes promised nothing but unending drudgery. There was hope in the colonies: a chance of prosperity. But there was also risk.

They came by rail and steam packet to the busy port town of Plymouth. They wove their way through the narrow, crooked streets, down steep inclines towards the harbour where the vessel that would transport them to new lives waited.

The town of Plymouth had been shaped by its proximity to the sea. It had begun as a fishing village and grown into a thriving place of trade. It was a bustling town: teeming with life and squalor, overcrowded and riddled with disease. The gateway to a better life. For these two hundred odd souls, it was the beginning of the adventure of a lifetime. For some, it was the last adventure they would ever have.

Chapter 3

Australia bound

THE VOYAGE BEGINS

'Imagine a lofty barque, perhaps with all sail set and the sunlight and shadow playing over her fabric in delightful patterns of sheer loveliness.'

The barque *Emigrant* sailed on southward beyond the protection of the sound and out to the open sea, guided by the Eddystone Lighthouse past the treacherous rocks of a hidden reef. She passed homeward-bound ships that, with shortening sails, glided northward into the sanctuary of Plymouth's harbour, their journeys all but over.

Before long, England slipped from view. There was nothing to see but sky and water. For many of the emigrants, this was their first encounter with the ocean, and for some it was a terrifying experience. '[I] was very much frightnde [sic],' wrote a young voyager in 1863, 'when I looked at the water and seen the sea so hight [sic] and it was very Dangerous.'

The immensity of their undertaking would cause some, at this

point, to quail, and be overcome with emotion. For the young unmarried women travelling alone, leaving behind a family and the only home they had ever known, venturing to a rugged land peopled by ex-convicts and Aboriginal people whose customs were so strange to them – a land of exotic marsupials and venomous snakes and screeching birds, of vast deserts and bush-land, of arid heat and flood – the future was a daunting prospect.

'Nearly all the single women sit down and have a cry the first thing,' wrote a passenger of the *Conway*, 'and I feel very much inclined to join them; but first ask myself what there is to cry about and as I cannot answer it to my own satisfaction, think it would be very foolish so [I] begin [sic] to put things in order in our berths.'

For young ladies like Elizabeth Wade, the company of her mother and step-family was a blessing. Likewise, Mary Connor may have been comforted by the presence of her uncle and aunt on board and cheered by the prospect of reuniting with another uncle in Sydney; and Catherine Maunsell must have taken heart from the proximity of her brother.

Other brave young women who had embarked on the voyage alone must have trembled as they contemplated the future – women like Mary Anne Mahoney, a 19-year-old domestic servant from London, whose brother and sister had emigrated to Melbourne before her. For others, like Ellen Walsh, emigration was less of a gamble, for her home country offered so little hope. Ellen was a poor, illiterate, orphaned Irish Catholic who, at 30, might improve her dwindling chances of marriage by venturing to the male-dominated colony. And yet, leaving behind everything that was familiar was a terrifying thing.

Emigrants commonly settled their nerves by trying to create order in their living quarters. They didn't have much space, but

what little they had would be turned into tiny nests of their own; they hung their canvas bags, stowed their few precious belongings, and settled in. The steerage quarters became a muddle of industry as emigrants slung their coats and hats upon pegs, arranged their foodstuffs on the shelves, and claimed their places at the long, wide central table – all in a dim half-light – as they tried to turn this strange, noisy, rocking cavern into a home.

But once the ship was out in the open sea, its motion would take a toll, and it was not long before seasickness would strike. Seasickness was not a trivial matter. It was ghastly and debilitating. Typically, it struck early in the voyage and it struck hard. Most passengers succumbed in varying degrees. Seasickness destroyed the appetite, sapped the energy and crushed the spirit; its effect was pure misery.

In steerage, the bunks were full of men, women and children gripped by nausea. Some were bedridden for days, unable to eat and vomiting up the little they did ingest. Imagine the stench in the closed confines of steerage. 'We had not been at sea one week,' wrote Herman Melville in his novel *Redburn*, 'when to hold your head down the fore hatchway was like holding it down a suddenly opened cesspool.'

For women with young children, these days were hellish. The nausea was compounded by loneliness, homesickness, and the fear of the sea and its perils. Pregnant women suffered most of all. The dangers of prolonged seasickness to an expectant mother and her unborn child were grave; the stress, dehydration and malnutrition might have serious – even fatal – consequences.

Seasickness visited the passengers of the *Emigrant* as a matter of course. There wasn't much Dr Mitchell could do. If the vomiting was accompanied by nausea or diarrhoea, he might administer medicines, but for the nausea itself he could offer little relief. Lying

down helped somewhat, as did eating, although the patients had no appetite. They would suffer in their berths until the nausea subsided and they found their 'sea legs'. As soon as they were able, Dr Mitchell would encourage them to venture onto the deck to take in the fresh air.

Thankfully, seasickness claimed no lives on the *Emigrant*'s voyage. For most of the voyage the weather was fair and the passage smooth, and once the travellers were accustomed to the constant rolling of the ground beneath their feet, they found health and strength restored to them.

For the children, who were typically less prone to seasickness than their parents, it was an exciting time. Not only was the prospect of life in a new land an adventure, but the voyage itself presented novelties every day. There was plenty of fresh air – for all passengers were required to stay on deck during daylight hours – and there was leisure time: a new treat for many. For some of the poorer families, the food was more plentiful and nutritious than they had ever eaten at home. And there were other children to play with – children of all ages, from a range of backgrounds. From the Catholic Watersons to the Anglican Farmers, all played upon the same deck, sharing the same routines and rules, and marvelling together at the wonders of the sea.

THE MATRON AND HER CHARGES

The passengers were governed by a strict set of rules. Chief amongst all was the law preventing single women from mixing with the men. This rule was not negotiable. Tracts advising potential emigrants were full of exhortations to young women to maintain their 'purity of heart and conduct'. When a woman has lost her good name, they reasoned, she has lost her most valuable

possession.

'The very appearance of evil,' insisted one such tract,

> will cause a maiden's virtue to be doubted. You cannot be too careful on board as to your conduct, your deportment, and your dress . . . Let nothing, then induce you to flirt with the crew, or passengers, or to go about the forecastle. Never be seen on deck in the morning before the decks are thoroughly washed and dry, which will not be much before breakfast. Rise early by all means; but spend the time in your own apartment, preparing yourselves, by reading and prayer, for the duties and temptations of the day. Never linger on deck in the evenings, after the order is given for you to go below. Dress neatly and modestly, and do not let the hot weather induce you to throw off your neckerchiefs, or expose your arms: attention to these points will guard you from improper remarks, and render you much more likely to marry well, than light, foolish conduct.

Elizabeth Wade and her companions had a daunting set of standards to meet. They were warned not to gossip, not to be idle and not even to 'listen to an impure song or jest'. They must pray often and earnestly, and spend their time doing needlework and reading and writing. They had a duty not only to themselves but to their adopted country to be modest, diligent, obedient and godly.

As far as the young women were concerned, there might just as well have been no men on board, for all they saw of them. 'The highest crime a girl can commit is to be seen speaking to one of them,' declared Fanny Davis in 1858, and her claim was no exaggeration. Transgressors could be – and were – punished.

But transgressions *were* made. On the voyage of the *Conway* a girl was ordered below for a whole week for speaking to a sailor;

on the same voyage, a sailor was sent to work aloft all day for addressing a young woman. It was human nature to seek companionship and romance. The passengers of the *Emigrant* were just as inclined to take risks for the sake of love as any.

A young female passenger named Mary Ann Mahoney struck up an illicit friendship with the seaman James Hall. Mary Ann was 19, born in London in 1831. She was a small, compact woman with a round face and protruding lower lip; her straight brown hair was worn with a central part and tied back in a severe bun. Like most of her unmarried female companions, Mary Ann was a domestic servant. Her brother and sister had emigrated before her and settled in Melbourne; it may have been the young woman's intention to join them there.

James Hall was a 20-year-old sailor from Liverpool; a young man with curly dark hair, kindly eyes and a straight nose, who wore a beard and clean-shaven upper lip. Exactly when Mary Ann and James met is not recorded, and whether their shipboard liaison was noticed is likewise unknown. If it *was,* they would surely have been punished. Mary Ann's reputation would have been damaged and she might have found it hard to secure a job in the colony. And yet she was not the only young woman to form a relationship with a fellow-traveller.

One of the means of protecting the reputations of the female emigrants was the selection of a woman of 'good character' as chaperone: a ship's 'Matron'. A matron might receive a free passage for her efforts, or she might earn a gratuity of perhaps £5 on arrival if she had served satisfactorily. It was the matron's duty to 'obviate the evils consequent on the long period of undisciplined idleness during a four months' voyage, and to promote the moral and religious improvement of the emigrants, by providing them with suitable employment for the voyage, and by introducing an

organised system of industrial classes on board.' It was also her responsibility to report on the women's conduct for the benefit of their prospective employers in the colony. The matron would be Elizabeth Wade's and Catherine Maunsell's protector.

Matrons were usually middle-class single women or widows. Before departure, the proposed matron had to satisfy the chaplain that she met a strict set of criteria. She had to be 'physically robust and active, of a decided character and firm bearing, and of a high moral and religious tone of mind. She must also be of about the same rank in life as the young women among whom she is placed, yet sufficiently superior to them in education and acquirements to secure their respect.'

Before the *Emigrant*'s departure, the ladies of the Emigrant Employment Society had selected Mary Burberow (or Barberrow) as matron. They were well pleased with their choice. Mrs Burberow was a 56-year-old Londoner who had been twice widowed. Born Mary Foster Hill, her first – brief – marriage was to William Hackett in 1818. Nine years later, she married widower William Burberow. When William died at the end of 1831, he was only 31 years of age; his grieving wife, Mary, was some six years older. William may have died never having met his daughter. Frances Jane Burberow was born sometime between April 1831 and April 1832. Now a young woman of only 18, she was accompanying her mother on the voyage to Australia.

Matron Burberow was poor but respectable. Life for a woman in her position was not easy and held little hope of improvement except through her daughter. Frances, on the other hand, had the possibility of a brighter future. If she worked hard and married well she had a chance of advancement and the means to support her aging mother. And while a person of Mrs Burberow's demographic was not the type of immigrant the colony sought, she

was *exactly* the type required to chaperone the young ladies on the voyage.

It was Matron Burberow's responsibility to see that her charges arrived at their destination with their reputations unblemished.

Above all, she was required to ensure there was no fraternising between the single women and men. But the matron's job was not easy. She was expected to supervise cleaning, food preparation and mealtimes, and to keep her charges occupied with useful activities such as needlework, embroidery and knitting. She might engage literate girls as 'Sub-Matrons' to read 'improving' texts to the others or to teach Scripture, which must be done daily. She was in charge of their instruction, entertainment and industry, and the guardian of their virtue. It fell to the matron to mediate quarrels and settle complaints; to protect her charges against the dangers and temptations of idleness, and to comfort, calm, encourage and reprimand when required. She had no respite; she was expected to remain vigilant at all times. Her work was seen by Christian organisations as 'of a missionary character', requiring both 'firmness and gentleness'. She was expected to inculcate 'pure and Christian feelings' in her charges and guide them in worship, teaching them by example the virtues of prayer, patience and self-denial.

It was a demanding job, and some ships' matrons proved unequal to the task. Some were ignorant of basic hygiene practices. Some were bullies who abused their power, while others were poor disciplinarians. Some were drunks. There is no reason to believe that Matron Burberow didn't perform her duties capably or conscientiously. But matrons were no more immune to seasickness than any of their charges, and Matron Burberow was not in robust health. And with 50 young women to supervise – including her own daughter – it is reasonable to suspect

that some minor misbehaviour escaped her notice.

Some matrons had dreadful journeys. They complained of the insolence, laziness, disobedience and dishonesty of the young women in their care. They had little sleep and faced opposition and resentment. The matron of the 1857 voyage of the *Fitzjames* was so appalled by the behaviour of her emigrant women that she wrote: 'I am ashamed to call myself a woman so depraved are many who are here'.

There is no evidence that the women of the *Emigrant* caused Mrs Burberow any such strife. Petty squabbles they may well have had; perhaps Elizabeth was fretful, maybe her sister Emma reckless; and without doubt, Mary Ann Mahoney and others secretly defied the rule forbidding them to communicate with the men. But not a negative word has been recorded of any of the emigrants' behaviour during the voyage or quarantine. It appears they were a well-behaved lot.

Every night, the cooking fires that had been burning all day were put out, and the voyagers descended the ladder into the steerage quarters, where they picked their unsteady way through the shadows of beams and bolts, around chests and barrels and bags, and climbed onto tiny benches padded with mattresses of straw. By 10pm all were cocooned in their little berths, rocked to sleep by the motion of the ship. The darkness was incomplete; an oil lamp burned by each hatchway all through the night.

There were many perils, perhaps the most serious being the ever-present danger of fire. A fire on board would be disastrous. To guard against it, the married men were rostered on night watch, monitoring the hatchways, scuttles and ventilators. From 8pm to 8am they prowled, reporting every half hour to the officer on duty.

The girls, of course, did not do guard-duty, for to lurk around

at night was, for them, unthinkable. Once the young women had descended between decks for the night, Matron Burberow locked the door to their quarters and secreted the key upon her person. There would be no sneaking out.

The noise and motion never stopped, not even at night. The girls lay in their berths while the vessel rocked and creaked 'like an old wicker cradle'. The waves slapped against the ship's hull and the masts groaned above; the sails cracked and snapped, and their neighbours murmured and wept and snored.

The proximity of others at night was nothing new; these were the working poor who were used to cramped living conditions and sharing rooms – even beds – with others. And it was not long before they grew accustomed to the ship's motion and the noise and settled into their new lives.

'I little thought we were about to proceed on so disastrous a voyage…'

Ship of Death

' Jane Smith, excellent historian that she is . . . has added a rich vein to our understanding of the personal, individual legends of early white settlement in Queensland.'

KERRY O'BRIEN

When 276 poor British emigrants sail away from Plymouth on the ship *Emigrant* in April 1850, seeking a better life in Australia, they know nothing of the ordeal that lies ahead. For four terrible months at sea they endure cramped and squalid conditions, insufferable heat, bitter cold . . . and a mounting death toll from the dreaded disease that rages through the ship: typhus.

When the *Emigrant* arrives in Moreton Bay, the nightmare continues. The immigrants are sent to the newly proclaimed quarantine station at Dunwich, Stradbroke Island, where a handful of leaky tents and disused convict buildings provide the only shelter. For three long months, their hopes of escape from typhus' deadly clutches are raised and dashed, and raised and dashed again. In the face of such adversity, an extraordinary, and until now untold, story of heroes and victims unfolds.

Impeccably researched and poignantly told, *Ship of Death* unfurls the saga of the ill-fated voyage, quarantine and aftermath. For the first time, this stunning book reveals the human stories of some key players in the drama – their backgrounds, their suffering, and their fates – and in doing so, brings to life a remarkable journey common to many of Australia's early settlers.

Their stories are tales of hardship, resilience, courage and despair.

Jane Smith is a Queensland librarian, historical researcher and author of non-fiction and fiction. She is the author of *Captain Starlight: the strange but true story of a bushranger, impostor and murderer.* Her books have been short- or long-listed for CBCA, ABIA and Speech Pathology Australia awards.

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