The Voyage of the Convict Transport *Lord Melville*

From London on 29 August 1816, to Sydney on 24 February 1817

The *Lord Melville*, having taken on the last of its cabin passengers[1] at Gravesend on the previous day, sailed down the Thames on August 29th of 1816 and soon ran into a violent gale. For most of the 101 convict women on board this would have been their first voyage on an ocean-going ship, and their predicament and fears were without doubt immediately multiplied by the horror of being battened below decks in their crowded quarters during a storm. Their fears regarding the long trip to New South Wales were further elevated the next morning when the *Lord Melville* took on board five men and a boy from a sloop, laden with Portland stone from Weymouth, labouring in the heavy seas. Not long afterwards, it sank within their sight.

It was a difficult start to a long and tedious voyage, but the unusual weather was one of the reasons that 1816 became known as the year without a summer. In April the previous year the Indonesian volcano Tambora had blasted dust high into the stratosphere and as it spread around the globe, temperatures dropped dramatically. *In Britain the summer of 1816 was wet, cold and wretched. The foul weather rotted crops and led to shortages of food. Farmworkers were left unemployed, grain prices soared and mobs went on the rampage for food - in one riot, some 2,000 people in Dundee ransacked more than 100 shops and a grain store. In Ireland, rain fell on 142 out of 153 days of summer, potato crops rotted and an estimated 60,000 people died of famine or typhoid.*[2]

Eventually the wind began to abate and, as the ship was near Cherbourg, it was able to tack north to the sheltered waters off Spithead to repair its shredded topsails, the only canvas that had been offered to the gale. The morning of September 2nd dawned calm and fair, perhaps allowing groups of convicts up on deck for their first fresh air and a view of the Isle of Wight.

A day later the *Lord Melville* anchored in St Helen's roads on the east coast of the Isle of Wight, where further mending and repairs could be carried out during the 12 days that Captain Wetherell waited for propitious winds. This was a time for the women to get to know each other, to form groups within which the members would support one another, perhaps to change from one mess to another if they found difficulties with some of the other women. In short, the below-decks culture began to form. Of course the cabin passengers knew nothing of this and cared even less – whenever an opportunity presented

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[1] Those passengers included Barron Field Esq., and his newly-wed wife Jane. Field had been appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, and kept a journal on the voyage. A version of the journal was published as *Narrative of a Voyage to New South Wales* in *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales; by various hands* edited by Barron Field. London, John Murray, MDCCCXXV (1825). Field did not mention the name of the ship, its captain or any passengers in his account – even his wife did not warrant comment. This essay is based closely on his narrative and unattributed quotes are drawn directly from it.

[2] The Times, London. 1 October 2008.

itself during a break in the voyage, they would immediately go ashore and seek lodging with those of their own class, where such could be found.

Historians have given us a good sense of life on board a convict vessel at this time. The women were divided into messes, each comprising between six and eight people, with an elected Monitor. They were allocated to berths measuring six square feet, each of which held from four to six women. These were close quarters. Then the ladies (of Elizabeth Fry's British Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners) *distributed sewing kits which, together with the ship's allocation of bibles and hymnals, were meant to keep the passengers quietly occupied on the long voyage south. Some women were allocated specific tasks. One was made a school mistress to the children on board. Two women from each mess were required to do the laundry; some were chosen to cook. When the* (Harmony, 1828) *vessel finally sailed it carried 100 convict women, as well as 22 free passengers, 70 children and 26 crew members.*[3]

On September 16th the *Lord Melville* weighed anchor and within three or four days it was truly goodbye to home, as they passed Land's End. There was little time to regret the last link to England, as before long the ship was being belted through the notorious Bay of Biscay by another gale. Even after the wind died down, the huge swells it had generated continued to heave and drop the wooden vessel, and its human cargo for the most part had their first unwelcome extended dose of deep-water sea-sickness. The below-decks shambles of 101 women and 41 children, too ill to even want to survive, can barely be imagined.

The ocean's heaving continued for the best part of a week, and it wasn't until September 26th that the *Lord Melville* escaped the clutches of *this eternal sea quake* to sight the island of Porto Santo, followed soon afterward by Madeira (32.50N, 16.35W, 1300NM from Portsmouth). Sailing between the two islands, the Master intended to lay into Funchal Bay on Madeira for a short sojourn. But someone had forgotten to complete the ship's paperwork by obtaining a bill of health from the Portuguese consul in London, thereby saving ten shillings and sixpence, but causing the ship's boat to be rowed fruitlessly for 10 miles through the sultry weather to a fort on the Ilheu da Cal where the lack of documentation had them turned around to row straight back to the ship.

Fortunately a fresh breeze sprang up and the *Lord Melville* sailed away, making good time for the next two days, and on October 3rd passengers enjoyed the sight of the lofty peak at La Palma, on the Canary Islands. Strange fish began to be seen, and to the amazement of the urban and countryside women, some of them could fly. Shoals of flying fish sparkled in the sunlight and escorted the *Lord Melville* across the Tropic of Cancer on October 6th. By now some of the women were undoubtedly engaged in illicit relations with the sailors, giving them night-time access to the deck from which – if they were paying any attention – they would have seen another harbinger of the tropics in the phosphorescence of the ocean.

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[3] *Human Remains: dissection and its history.* Helen MacDonald. Yale University Press, 2006.

Otherwise, shipboard life would have settled into a familiar routine, differing only in detail from that described by the Surgeon of the *New Grove.*[4] Each morning, as soon as the upper deck had been swabbed, each woman's name was called and she was allowed onto the deck, carrying her neatly lashed bedding to the gangway netting, where it was stowed by a sailor and remained for the day, except in inclement weather. No bedding was allowed to remain below unless the weather was wet. Between 8am and 9am the breakfast was served out and, if the surgeon superintendent was doing his job, he would regularly inspect the food to ensure it was being properly prepared.

Immediately after breakfast the women were employed in cleaning all of the between-decks spaces, supervised by several women appointed to that position, and inspected by the surgeon-superintendent. Mostly cloths were used, but with as little water as possible to reduce the humidity in the cramped space. When the air was dry, sails were used to funnel fresh air between decks. About 1pm dinner was served, and then tea at about 4pm. At 5pm the beds were taken below, and before sunset the roll was called again to ensure every prisoner was present. As each answered her name she was sent below, and the prison was then secured for the night.

A respite to the journey offered on the evening of the 9th when the Cape Verde islands came into sight. But something was wrong in the Master's cabin and despite his experience, Captain Wetherell confused Maio and Fogo islands, so instead of calling in to Port Praya for water the ship had already passed it by, and it was impractical to turn back against the wind.

The convict women coming onto deck for their daily exercise, and to do their washing and sewing, were now entertained by bonitos and albacores leaping from the water, sometimes to a height of almost two metres, before turning in the air and plunging back into the sea again. Meanwhile, it was getting hotter, and the benefits of being allowed on deck became more and more apparent. By October 13th the Master recorded the highest temperature of the voyage, a stultifying 83F.

The heat was made worse by the lack of wind, as the *Lord Melville* languished for a fortnight in the dreaded doldrums. The storm petrel, far from any storms, was seen frequently from the ship as it skimmed just above the swell, sometimes hovering with its wings extended and its feet treading the surface of the sea. The sailors called them Mother Carey's Chickens, and imagined (incorrectly) that they could not swim.[5]

By now the women would have settled into shipboard life, and would be suffering from boredom and a feeling of hopelessness. It was vital to keep them busy, as far as possible. *The voyage to Australia was long and tedious, and it was no easy problem to keep the prisoners occupied. Indeed, in the early convict ships…… the women were left very*

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[4] Surgeon's Journal of the female convict ship *New Grove* from 24th November 1834 to 1st April 1835, written by Surgeon David Thomson – www.femalefactory.com.au.

[5] In fact the storm petrel as a surface feeder hovers in horizontal breezes with its feet on the surface of the water so that the hydrodynamic drag balances the aerodynamic lift on the wings, much like the tension applied through the string of a kite (Withers, P.C., Duke University)

much to their own devices. The beneficial effects of keeping the prisoners out of mischief was soon recognised, however, and within a few years a marked improvement was effected. The women were supplied ……with needles, thread and cloth, and those who conducted themselves well were in some, but not all, cases permitted to sell such articles as they made for their own profit on their arrival in Australia. Dancing and singing were encouraged, and eventually small libraries were shipped, although these were mainly confined to works of a religious, devotional and moral nature.[6]

Not long out of the doldrums, on October 26, the *Lord Melville* encountered a Spanish or Portuguese pirate ship. The *Lord Melville*, as a convict transport, was of no interest to the pirates, and in response to the usual signals they gave no information, showed no colours, and responded to "origin?" with "from sea" and "destination?" with "to sea." It was probably literally true, but until their intentions – or lack of them – became clear, the proximity of a pirate ship would have sent a shiver of fear through the vulnerable women below decks.

Two days later the passing *Millwood* of New York, bound from Canton to Europe with tea, was much more inclined to sociability and accepted the passage of letters back to England. We know that many female convicts were illiterate, and it is perhaps unlikely that any of the convicts were equipped to write, even if they were allowed.

The equator was crossed on November 4th and the reliable winds of the southern hemisphere sped the *Lord Melville* on to Rio de Janeiro, the Atlantic crossing broken by meeting two transports from Rio and the usual exchange of letters. On November 18th the lookout called down the sighting of the coast of Brazil, and to the vast relief of the women on board the *Lord Melville* had safely crossed the Atlantic and stood in the Bay of St Ann.

The next day was enlivened when the crew caught a dolphin on a hook and line. The passengers were greatly impressed by *its colours shifting into an endless variety of blues, greens and yellows – its back blues and greens – its belly yellows, orange or gold, spotted with blues and lilacs – its fins like a peacock's neck.* Less poetic, but no doubt with equal appreciation, many of the *Lord Melville's* complement would have enjoyed the novelty of fresh meat after weeks of salt meat.

Lying down the coast, the *Lord Melville* came within sight of the harbour of Rio de Janeiro on the morning of November 21st, and by evening under a glowing sunset[7] and a light fair breeze they came to anchor. *It was like sailing in a ship of heaven, into a new planet.*

The cabin passengers went ashore to see the sights and to sleep on terra firma for almost two weeks, while the *Lord Melville* was reprovisioned and carefully checked out ahead of

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[6] *The Convict Ships: 1788-1868.* Charles Bateson, Library of Australian History, 2004.

[7] Field made a number of references to the colourful sunsets, which were another result of the volcanic dust load in the atmosphere. The vivid skies of 1816 became a trademark of the English painter, William Turner.

its pending encounter with the Southern Ocean. Refreshed, and no doubt a little more relaxed than the first time they had ventured out into an ocean, the *Lord Melville* and its cargo of women was towed out of the harbour at first light on December 5th, and by night's fall they had lost sight of Cape Frio.

Early the next morning they crossed the Tropic of Capricorn with a fair westerly behind them, and pointed towards their ultimate destination. Whales, albatross and petrels were their traveling companions. Within sight of the remote English outpost of Tristan da Cunha almost mid-way between Rio and the Cape, albeit obscured by rain, the ship was briefly becalmed and eight albatross alighted on the ocean near the stern. The crew, ever hopeful of a source of fresh meat, threw baited lines to them. But the birds managed to claim the baits without becoming hooked, so salt meat was once again the order of the day.

Christmas came and went on the vastness of the Southern Ocean, and we can imagine the women lamenting the fate of the families and children they had left behind. In many cases, mothers had been separated from large families of young children, even babies. Their fears and lack of any hope of being reunited with them must have tormented these women for yet another night.

The New Year, 1817, came upon them and by January 2nd, either through improved technique or better luck, the crew caught nine large albatross by the same hook and line method, one of which measured 10 feet from wing tip to wing tip. On the same day the *Lord Melville* reached another milestone by doubling the Cape of Good Hope. There was no respite, however, as the ship was on a course taking it south to a latitude where strong and predictable winds would speed their voyage.

On January 8th they saw a strange sail, the only vessel sighted since Rio except for one whaler. By daybreak the next morning the ship was overhauling the *Lord Melville* and lay only 10 miles astern, while a second ship had appeared and was even closer. One proved to be the *Galatea* of Boston, bound from Gibraltar to Calcutta, and the other also showed American colours but did not pass near enough to identify.

By January 13th the *Lord Melville* was in the region of an island known as Necklegal[8] but did not see it. Far to the south of any land in the zone of the Roaring Forties, by January 28th the thermometer managed a maximum of just 52F, the coldest maximum of the voyage, despite it being close to mid-summer. The Southern Ocean showed its true colours with a south-westerly gale on February 1st and the women huddled below as the *Lord Melville* pushed steadily eastwards, overtaken by swell after swell and rocked by towering waves breaking from the stern.

The southern circle route having carried the *Lord Melville* close to its destination, Captain Wetherell turned to the north-east and before long, on February 15th, a phosphorescent sea and Portuguese men-of-war jellyfish denoted a warmer latitude.

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[8] This name cannot be identified, but Field is probably referring to the Crozet Islands, 46.25S, 51.59E

At daybreak on the 17th the call came – "land ho!" – Australia[9] had been sighted, the first land seen for a long 73 days. The women on deck crowded the rail, eyes fixed on the cliffs and woodlands of their new home as the ship lay in calm waters off Cape Bridgewater, near the yet-to-be established town of Portland. Clouds of smoke from Aboriginal fires rose from the shore, but once the wind returned the *Lord Melville* continued on its way, and the next day the land was lost below the horizon.

Way out to sea, a single penguin swam up to the ship and looked up *with wonder and pleasure, like a savage man. It was cruelly shot for its curiosity.*

On the 19th the *Lord Melville* passed King's Island, barely in sight, and entered Bass's Strait accompanied by a great pod of dolphins. The next night a strong gale blew them through the strait and into the Tasman Sea, with the *Lord Melville* passing north of Curtis Island, and south of the Hogan group to avoid a dangerous sunken rock, the Crocodile, over which the cautious Captain could see the sea breaking about four miles to the south, near the Slipper Islands. Behind stretched Wilson's Promontory.

By 2 o'clock the following morning the *Lord Melville* was sailing up the coast of New South Wales, close enough to shore to see white beaches, and more columns of smoke rising from the green and woody countryside. In the forenoon they passed Ram Head and in the afternoon doubled Cape Howe, where many seals lay basking on the rocks. Green Cape came and went in the evening light.

By the evening of February 23rd the log showed that the ship had run its distance, so Captain Wetherell ordered it to lay to all night off Botany Bay. At daylight on the 24th he made sail for Port Jackson, and before noon the *Lord Melville* had dropped anchor in Sydney Cove. After 152 days at sea, and 15,335 nautical miles by the log, the ship had safely delivered its complement[10] and cargo to the other end of the earth. Barron Field commented, at the end of the voyage: *I am not ungrateful enough to forget all the beautiful sunsets and moonlights of the first half of the voyage, nor the frequent reliefs to the eye which the sight of islands afforded: but no landsman can form an idea of a three weeks calm near the line; and if the first half of the voyage was too hot, the second was too cold and cloudy; so that we had no sunset or moonlight scenes at all; and then we saw not any land for seventy-three days, nor any ship for forty-four.*

What were the women's first impressions of Sydney? Probably "rain, rain and more rain." When the *Lord Melville* arrived, Sydney was enduring a February deluge, and the *Sydney Gazette* reported that Mr Justice Field was unable to enjoy an official landing and welcoming ceremony until 28 February *in consequence of the incessant heavy rains for some days past.* No doubt the 99 convict women were intrigued to see Field go ashore in the Governor's Barge to the sound of a 13-gun salute from the Dawes battery. A few

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[9] The voyage pre-dated common use of "Australia" and the women would have heard the land described as "New Holland" or "New South Wales." However, it was in this year that Macquarie first used the word Australia in official correspondence – having been impressed by a comment in Matthew Flinders' journal – and expressed the wish that it become the official name of the continent.

[10] Two convict women died on the voyage.

days later, after completing the formalities of arrival inspections and record-keeping, the female convicts were at last able to leave the *Lord Melville* and set foot on land for the first time in six months.

Frances Johnson, one of the 99 female convicts who arrived on the *Lord Melville,* is an ancestor of the author. She had two children born in the colony, and eventually was reunited in Sydney with at least two sons and a daughter (by then married) who had been left behind in England.

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