

# Shipboard stories

by Andrew Matheson

A pivotal point in many of our family stories is a long sea voyage half way around the world to New Zealand. For most of our early ancestors it was to be a one-way journey, and they left knowing they would never see their parents, siblings or friends again.

What were their farewells like? What did they encounter on the journey? What were their emotions on reaching their destination? The most direct answers to all of these questions lie in diaries kept on the voyage, if you happen to be fortunate enough to have access to one from your relatives.

Graeme Matheson of Christchurch holds a diary kept by his grandmother Mary Todd Russell. Just two months after she married Kenneth Matheson in 1885, the couple travelled from Scotland to Plymouth in England to board the steamer *Bombay* for Australia. They later moved to New Zealand.

Mary's diary starts with a matter-of-fact "Left Kincardine half past 3", with no mention of any family farewells. Her account is a fascinating description of shipboard life: bad weather, rough seas, the novel heat of the tropics, sickness and death, how the Sabbath was (or was not) observed, domestic chores and disagreements among the passengers and the crew.

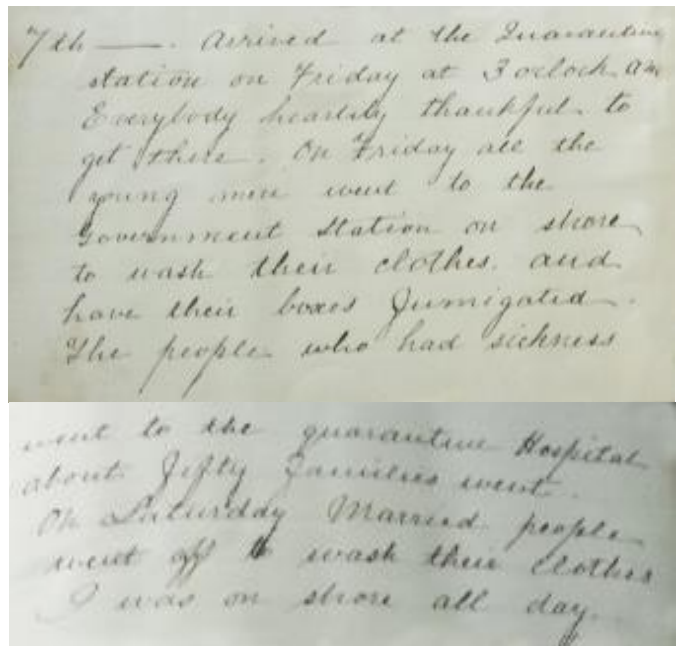
It was a tough voyage, as the diary records.

24 April. The heat today is oppressive. We take all our meals on deck — now have awnings up which keep us much cooler. School was dismissed this morning on account of the heat. The Doctor told us at the Plymouth Depot that a good number of the children would die on the voyage.

20 May. Have not written for a week as Kenneth has been poorly with a heavy cold, also toothache and swollen face — he was in bed for 3 days. The doctor pulled the tooth for him. He was very weak as the dispensary keeper gave him an overdose of castor oil. The ship has rolled dreadfully — I thought we would be tossed to pieces and one can scarcely walk on deck without being wet with spray.

The voyage doesn't seem to have been a very sociable one for Mary, either. Not long before arriving in Sydney she reflected:

27 May. This boat has been a regular slowcoach and very uncomfortable. I do not like any of the passengers well enough to have any intimacy with them with the exception of the Goods.



Mary's early experiences in Sydney

7th Arrived at the quarantine station on Friday at 3 o'clock am. Everyone heartily thankful to get there. On Friday all the young men went to the Government Station on shore to wash their clothes and have their boxes fumigated.

The people who had sickness went to the quarantine Hospital about fifty families went. On Saturday married people went off to wash their clothes. I was on shore all day.

## ... shipboard stories ...

You can supplement personal records such as a diary with official records, given you know the ship's name and voyage date.

Newspapers are an invaluable source: in New Zealand PapersPast, and in Australia through Trove. Passenger lists may be available online, though in general the earlier the voyage, the harder to find and less informative these are.

But what if you don't even know what ship your relatives travelled on?  
Finding that out is a much harder, but not impossible, task.  
More on that in a future issue.

## The Steamer Bombay.

EPIDEMIC OF MEASLES.

140 IMMIGRANTS SICK.

SEVEN DEATHS.

The death record of the Orient Company's chartered immigrant steamer Bombay, which arrived in port on Friday, is a painful one. Sickness has prevailed to a greater or less extent during the whole passage, which occupied only fifty-one days. On the eight day out the first case of measles appeared, and the disease spread with alarming rapidity until the doctor had no less than 140 cases under his care. Several cases of scarlatina also occurred. Seven deaths were recorded on the passage, all of young children. Three died from measles, three from exhaustion and one from scarlatina. The papers show that on leaving Plymouth there were on board 160 single men, 112 single women, 73 married men, 100 married women, 79 boys, 79 girls, and 23 infants: total 626. Two births took place on the voyage. Dr. Beattie, assisted by Dr. Crusse, had the health of the immigrants in hand, while Mrs. Eagen and Miss Pinkerton filled the positions of matron and sub-matron respectively. On her arrival the Bombay was boarded by Dr. Sibley, who ordered her into quarantine, from where she will probably not be released till Tuesday. Everything was found to be neat and clean on board.

*Evening News, Sydney, 8 June 1885*

LIST of IMMIGRANTS per Ship <i>S.S. Bombay</i>										Arrived on the <i>5</i> day of <i>June</i> 188 <i>5</i>									
NAME	MARRIED		AGES										Calling	Native Place and Country	Religion	Read or Write	Remarks		
			13 Years and upwards		7 and under 12 Years		4 and under 7 Years		1 and under 4 Years		Under 1 Year								
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F							
<i>Matheson</i>	<i>Kenneth</i>	<i>M</i>												<i>Garden Suburbs</i>	<i>New South Wales</i>	<i>Presby</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>✓</i>	
	<i>Mary</i>	<i>F</i>													<i>Perth</i>	<i>Presby</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>✓</i>	

*From the official record of Mary and Kenneth Matheson's arrival in Sydney*

An original diary is a treasure for you and future generations.

As custodian, consider getting a high-quality digital copy made for archiving and for sharing with others.

Store the original in a suitable place. Think about donating it to an appropriate museum or archive, so it can be looked after professionally and available to all.



*North Head quarantine station, Sydney*



## ... shipboard stories ...

Twenty-four years before Mary and Kenneth Matheson travelled on the *Bombay*, my great-great-aunt Margaret Matheson left Scotland for London, where she boarded the sailing ship *Velore*. She was bound for Otago to join her fiancé, who had left earlier to find a job and a place to live. This was quite a common pattern of emigration.

Margaret's diary starts in Scotland almost a month before her ship departed. At the time she was staying at Rogart with her mother's brother, the Rev Alexander McLeod. She noted:

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 1861 I went to Golspie to hear the sermon. Heard my dear Uncle preach from the words, 'Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world'. Felt very much affected, being the last time I was to hear my Uncle.



Margaret Matheson

After leaving London there was a day ashore at Plymouth, but after that no more stops in the voyage of five months.

As a very devout Christian Margaret was horrified by the way the Sabbath was not observed: "No respect for the Lord's Day ... Never passed such a Sabbath as this before in my life".

Drunkenness was also a shock: "The new steward drunk last night and again this morning. Our cook and some steerage passengers drunk. It is fearful to see them. I felt dull".



*Velore, which brought Margaret Matheson to New Zealand*

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### "Felt very much affected, being the last time I was to hear my Uncle"

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Margaret's diary records her journey by coach, train and steamer to London, where she sampled big city life and prepared for her voyage to New Zealand.

Saturday 2nd March. Felt very dull after parting with the last of my dear friends, my darling brother. Passed the day reading and writing. Deafed with the noise from the streets.

Like Mary Matheson's diary, Margaret's is a detailed account of life on board the ship that was taking her to a new life.

The *Velore* crossed the southern Indian Ocean in winter, which at times made for an exceedingly uncomfortable journey.

Thursday 11th July. Blew a tremendous gale all last night and blowing hard all day. Blessed be God who is sparing us from day to day. Moderated a little in the evening, ship rolling a good deal. I did not sleep much for the last two nights. Did not undress last night.





## ... shipboard stories ...

After nearly five months at sea the end of the voyage was tantalisingly near:

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> July. The first part of New Zealand in sight this morning, which is Stewart Island. Passed through a great many rocks last night. The Captain and some of the passengers did not go to bed at all. I did not undress but slept little. The moon up at 1/2 past 9 — a beautiful sight, cannot describe it.

Because of unfavourable winds it was almost another two weeks until the ship berthed at Port Chalmers.

August 8—Dunedin, Stewart, from Newcastle, N.S.W., with coals.

Same day—Veloce, 484 tons, Hayes, from London, with general cargo. Passengers—Cabin; Mr. and Mrs. Mackean and family (2), Mrs. and Miss Nodding, Miss Mathieson, Messrs. Hudson, Chas. Smith, Robt. Smith, W. H. Whalley, John Ross, and R. Duncan. 2nd Cabin: Mr. and Mrs. Kilgour and family (6), Jas. Scrimigeour, and Maclachlan. John Jones and Co., agents.

*Otago Witness, 10 August 1861*

Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> August. This is a fine day and the wind favourable. Got a Pilot on board at 2 p.m. and got safe to Port Chalmers at 5 p.m. ... the passengers went ashore. Did not take a drop of water today till a boat went ashore and brought some water at seven. And had a good drink.

Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> August. Mr. Johnstone, the First Church Minister, came aboard by the steamer this morning and brought me to the Manse, where I am to be for a week. Mrs. J. a very nice person. My dear K. came in the evening and remained in the Manse all night.

**THE Clipper "VELORE."**—The long-looked for "Veloce," sent out here by Shaw, Savill, and Co., dropped anchor in this port on Tuesday last, having cleared from London on the 7th March, thus making a long passage of 152 days, of which the passengers inform us they were heartily sick, and no wonder. The "Veloce" has brought upwards of 20 passengers, and a large general cargo, which should have been landed months ago. Shaw, Savill, and Co. certainly deserve praise for the fast-sailing class of vessels they send to this port with goods, and we trust merchants at home will note it. We can obtain no particulars of the voyage.

At the Manse, Port Chalmers, on the 15th inst. by the Rev. William Johnstone. Mr. KENNETH MORRISON, teacher, Upper Harbour, to MARGARET M'LEOD, daughter of Mr. Angus Mathieson, Carloway, Ross-shire, Scotland.

*Otago Witness, 31 August 1861*

If you don't strike the jackpot finding a relative's diary, it's worth searching for the next-best thing.

Did someone else keep an account of the same voyage? That would give you one perspective on the conditions your relatives encountered.

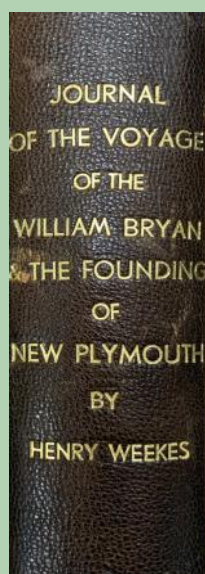
For example, some of my English relatives, Edmund and Lucy Sartén, left Plymouth in England on the *William Bryan* in November 1840.

This was the first immigrant ship to the infant New Zealand Company settlement that was called New Plymouth, and it arrived there at the end of March 1841. The Sartens didn't keep a diary, to the best of my knowledge, but the ship's doctor (surgeon), Henry Weekes, did.

The original diary is in Taranaki Museum, but a nicely bound transcript is in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. It was published in 1940, perhaps as a centennial project.



## ... shipboard stories



As with other diarists, Weekes describes life on board in some detail: the novelties such as the tropics and seeing flying fish, the difficult conditions encountered en route, and the dangers faced — particularly fire from the kitchen and the lamps and candles on board.

It was a tough trip: "The Wm Bryan is a terrible roller. Much sickness among the children". Eventually they arrived: "Landed all the Emigrants, having beautiful weather for the purpose".

When searching for related diaries, be careful to look for the same voyage as your relatives were on, as many ships made repeated return journeys to New Zealand. You might also find out more about the journey from accounts in newspapers.

Even in the absence of a diary, you can still get a very vivid picture of shipboard conditions experienced by the early Scottish immigrants to New Zealand.

John McLean is a New Zealand historian with a deep knowledge of Scottish migration. For instance, his book *Sailors and settlers* is a very thorough account of the migration of Highlanders to Waipu.

In *Voyages of the pioneers to New Zealand 1839—85* he gives a detailed insight into the long voyage down the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope and through the rough southern ocean to New Zealand. He draws on a variety of sources, including shipboard diaries.

Another good reference is by David Hastings. In *Over the mountains of the sea: life on the migrant ships 1870 — 1885*, he draws heavily on shipboard diaries and archival accounts to develop a narrative of the voyage and the way in which the space on the ship was allotted according to gender, class and marital status — describing how the ships were a microcosm of the society that British migrants were from.

The long journey to New Zealand was a momentous part of the lives of early immigrants to New Zealand. Finding out more about it is a significant part of researching our family stories.

