An Emigrant Ship

LADY MACNAGHTEN

Cork 5.11.1836 -- Port Jackson 26.02.1837

Looking back to *Alick Osborne and The Adam Lodge*, the reader may remember that Alick was called away from his labours in Northern Ireland to oversee the work of the Cork Emigration Committee, which had been charged with the task of selecting a shipload of emigrants for Australia. This summons was received on 12th September, at a very unfortunate time for Alick: since 8th September he had been laid up with an injury sustained when his horse shied, bringing his leg into contact with the wheel of a cart. To make matters worse, his wound developed erysipelas, so he was not able to leave for Cork until 10th October. Even then it was not plain sailing, as the coach overturned on the way and Alick sustained severe bruising. With the aid of a stick, he finally hobbled in to Cork on 15th October, more than a month late.

Although critical of the selections made by the Cork Committee, Alick had no choice but to accept them. The *Lady Macnaghten* was already in harbour, so he was able to inspect the bedding and food supplies, and later sent a package of smallpox serum to the surgeon. In his journal, Alick made no reference to the change of rules during the selection of these Emigrants. In early September, 1836, mainly due to the urgings of Governor Bourke, the policy of sending only women emigrants was changed in favour of family units. In conformity with past practice, the Committee had begun selecting single women before the emphasis changed, so this shipload consisted of 30 young women and 68 families. In effect, this was the first emigrant ship to carry a large number of women and children on the long

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voyage to Australia. It was subsequently revealed that the quota of passengers for a ship of 558 tons had been exceeded by the equivalent of two adults.

**Lady Macnaghten Sails**
When researching the story of the *Adam Lodge* in 1997, I had followed the *Lady Macnaghten* (spelt *Lady McNaughton* in Alick’s journal), only far enough to find that it sailed from Cork on 5th November, 1836; and on arrival in Port Jackson on 26th February, 1837, it went straight to quarantine because of fever on board. This ship not being part of the *Adam Lodge* story, that was where I left it. ³

Although no official record could be obtained, it was worked out later that on embarkation the *Lady Macnaghten* carried not less than 444 persons, consisting of 30 crew, plus the Captain’s wife and the surgeon, and 412 emigrants. The latter included:

- Adult men and boys 15 years and over: 72
- Boys 7 to 14 years: 47
- Boys under 7 years: 6
- Women 15 years and over: 144
- Girls 7-14 years: 44
- Girls under 7 years and male infants: 99

**Total 412** ⁴

**Lady Macnaghten meets HMS Rattlesnake**
As was the custom for emigrant ships in those days, this was a non-stop voyage, so after leaving Cork the next news of the *Lady Macnaghten* was from a point about 200 miles south of Port Jackson. There it was discovered by **HMS Rattlesnake**, in the process of conveying Governor Bourke to Port Phillip. Having ascertained that there was a serious outbreak of fever aboard the *Lady Macnaghten* and that even the ship’s surgeon [Dr J A Hawkins] was one of the sufferers, assistant Surgeon Bowler, R.N., from the *Rattlesnake* was placed on board the stricken ship before the vessels proceeded on their respective journeys.⁵

**Quarantine**
Notwithstanding the fact that 10 adults and 44 children had already died on the passage, on arrival at Port Jackson, the *Lady Macnaghten* carried at least 90 cases of typhus fever. The ship was directed to Spring Cove, which had been used on previous occasions for infected ships but had no permanent facilities on land. In conformity with custom, the sick remained on board ship, whilst the healthy and convalescent were put ashore to live in tents.

³ Several different spellings of the ship’s name exist. I have adopted the version used in official correspondence.
⁴ Historical Records of Australia, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 16. (HRA XIX, p. 16)
⁵ HRA XVIII, p. 726, Bourke to Glenelg, 10.04.1837.
The Colony had never faced such a calamity as the condition of the *Lady Macnaghten* and its occupants. A small steamer was chartered to ferry equipment, medicines, rations and other supplies to the quarantine area. Dr James Stuart was put on board the fever ship to assist Dr Bowler, a military guard was stationed on North Head to seal the perimeter, and a cutter was used to guard the shoreline. Elaborate precautions were taken to fumigate any written communication between ship and shore, mostly in the form of requests for supplies.

**Buildings on Shore**

In the usual heat, humidity and rain of Sydney’s February-March weather, those in tents were suffering so much it soon became evident that something more substantial was required. The Sydney Gazette of 11th March reported that “The late rains are much against recovery, as those in the tents are exposed to their influence, and should they continue, the prospect held out to them is again embarking on board the floating pest house.” One surgeon reported a temperature of 63°F at sunrise and 100°F at 1pm. Considering the westerly exposure of the site, the temperature would possibly be higher before the day ended. As soon as possible, the Government arranged for the hasty construction of wooden sheds and houses which became the temporary nucleus of the quarantine station.

**Deaths in Quarantine**

The first death after arrival was that of the ship’s surgeon, Dr Hawkins. Other deaths followed, and by the time the ship was released from quarantine the total number had risen to 67: 14 adults and 53 children. During the quarantine period, Captain Hustwick and assistant surgeon Bowler both contracted the fever but recovered. By 30th March the remainder of the parties from the ship were put ashore at the quarantine ground and the ship was fumigated.

**Bourke returns from Port Phillip**

On Saturday, 8th April, Governor Bourke and *HMS Rattlesnake* arrived back from Port Phillip, where “The site of two townships had been chosen, and the streets marked out.” Bourke wasted no time in assessing the situation in respect of the *Lady Macnaghten*, as on Monday 10th April he wrote to Lord Glenelg, giving a summary of all that had taken place. This letter concluded with the opinion that a permanent lazaret should be erected to save the heavy expenses of quarantine as occurred with this particular ship.6

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6 HRA XIX, p. 16. The full text of this letter may be found on page 35 of this Bulletin.
Cost of Quarantine
On 7th July, in a further letter on the subject of costs incurred by the quarantine of the Lady Macnaghten, Bourke gave a detailed account amounting to £5,000, already met from Colonial Revenue. This was exclusive of the costs of demurrage for the ship, which he hoped would be met by the British Treasury in London. To put this into perspective, it may be compared with the total of £6,497-15-8 for the whole voyage of the Adam Lodge, which arrived on 13th July, just six days after this letter was written. On that same day, another “family” ship, the John Barry from Dundee, became the next occupant of the quarantine ground.

End of Quarantine
Hoping that the reader has pardoned this digression on the question of quarantine costs, let us now return to the main topic. On 13th April, the Sydney Gazette reported: “The emigrants per Lady M'Naughton (sic) will come up from Quarantine this morning and be quartered in the premises at the rear of Government House. The bedding and any suspicious articles will be burned. Their clothes, &c., after undergoing the process of fumigating, will be returned to them.” Thus, eleven weeks after their arrival, the emigrants finally cleared quarantine, and the Governor was free to appoint a Board of Inquiry.

THE BOARD OF INQUIRY
This inquiry produced many interesting insights into the arrangements on board ship, revealing many details which may never have been recorded but for the misfortune of this particular voyage.

Capacity of the Ship
Regulations restricted the number of people allowed on a ship to “three persons for every five Tons of her Registered Burthen, including her Master and Crew, as prescribed by the Act of Parliament.” In this case the ship’s registered burthen was 558 tons, entitling it to carry 334 adults. On its voyage the previous year it had embarked 300 male convicts and delivered 298 of them, under the supervision of Surgeon George Foreman, R.N.. Considering its crew on that occasion numbered 37, with a military guard of 49, the ship must have exceeded its quota by a considerable amount. From these figures, one must assume that different rules applied to convict ships. The Committee calculated that the adult equivalent aboard the Lady Macnaghten amounted to 336, two more than its nominal entitlement.

7 HRA XIX, p. 21.
8 ibid, p. 15.
Accommodation

Berths to accommodate two persons were usually 6 feet by 3 feet, separated from the next berth by a plank, and arranged in two tiers. Some berths were slightly smaller and others a little larger, in which case an extra child could be squeezed in. In the space allotted to the men, there were 50 berths, occupied as follows:

- 72 males aged 15 and over \( \equiv \) equivalent to 72 adults
- 47 males aged 7 to 14 years \( \equiv \) 23.5
- 6 males under 7 years \( \equiv \) 2

**Total 122 males, equivalent to 99.5 adults.**

Hence it appears that the figures for the men’s quarters complied with the Act.

For the women’s quarters, there were 112 berths, of which 6 were required for the hospital and 8 were below average size, leaving 106 berths deemed to be sufficient for 204 adults. These were occupied by

- 144 females aged 15 years and over \( \equiv \) equivalent to 144 adults
- 44 females aged 7 to 14 years \( \equiv \) 22
- 99 females aged under 7 years & male infants \( \equiv \) 33

**Total 287 females, equivalent to 199 adults.**

Because there are conflicting figures, even within the report, the author has chosen to adhere to the numbers used by the Board of Inquiry in relation to the food rations. These discrepancies are not surprising, because at the end of the voyage the ship was in such disorder that no official list of passengers was ever found. The list that did emerge was pieced together by Dr Inches and one of the passengers, Jeremiah Ledsam, who had acted as School Master on board, but there still remained enough doubt about the ages of the children to make the berthing figures imprecise. Accepting these figures, it appears that the number of bunks within the women’s quarters was within the guidelines, even though the total load of persons on the ship exceeded the ruling limit by the equivalent of two adults. However, the Board used its commonsense when it expressed the opinion “that the number of Emigrants embarked, considering the number of very young Children, was too great, even if proper regulations had been established and enforced.”

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9 The Board of Inquiry noted that the Act defined an adult as 14 years and over. Mr Marshall had varied this.
10 HRA XIX, p. 16.
11 Dr Charles Inches was an experienced Naval Surgeon who had been placed in charge of the people on shore.
Organization
The ship’s surgeon, Dr J A Hawkins, aged 26, was a well qualified and conscientious young man who had never been to sea, and so lacked the experience that Governor Bourke had frequently stressed as a necessity for this type of work. Feeling his way amidst this sea of emigrants, he was slow to establish regulations for the smooth running of the ship, and by the time he attempted to do so it was too late to enforce them. The ship’s captain, George Hustwick, had no experience of family emigrants, having previously carried convicts, so he was not equipped to advise Hawkins. It was three weeks before the emigrants were properly organized into 36 messes, with the equivalent of 8 adults in each. At the inquiry, some of the witnesses claimed that during this period they were half starved, and that this contributed to some of the early sickness.

Food Supplies
The Board of Inquiry concluded that sufficient food supplies had been shipped, that there was no complaint about the quality, and that after the first three weeks “there were no materially deficient issues of any of the articles,” even though they thought the scheduled daily beef ration of two thirds of a pound was barely adequate. They suggested that in future it could be increased to three quarters of a pound. However the Board was very critical of the inclusion of 25 tons of potatoes, the supply of which they found “greatly too large,” partly because of the low food value, but mainly because they occupied too much room in the hold, to the exclusion of Emigrants’ luggage which had to be stowed between decks, “obstructing ventilation and causing accumulation of filth.....On this occasion, the use of them continued daily for about half the duration of the Voyage, until they became unfit to be used, to the exclusion of about one fourth of the ration of Bread and the whole ration of Flour.” 12

Ventilation
Apart from potatoes, there were other factors acting against good ventilation of the ship. Captain Hustwick, who owned the ship, in association with the shipping agent, Mr Marshall, had loaded not only the supplies for the voyage, but had also taken up much of the hold with private cargo, leaving insufficient room for emigrants’ luggage. It appears that Hustwick, being more accustomed to convict ships, had sadly underestimated the extent of family luggage. Foley writes that a lot of luggage had either to be left behind or unpacked on the deck to fit into fewer boxes, some being thrown overboard. In addition to heaps of luggage on the upper deck until depletion of food supplies allowed it to be placed in the hold, stacks of

12 HRA XIX, p. 17
luggage were piled from floor to ceiling down the centre of the accommodation deck, leaving a virtual hallway only three feet wide on each side in front of the berths, seriously impeding ventilation. As if this were not enough, the portholes were never opened, there was lattice around the hatchways, the emigrants were locked in at night and locked out during the day, the latter being much to the discomfort of the women. It was only after a recent inspection of the *New Endeavour* that the author realized the significance of the last few words.

**Medicines**

All witnesses agreed that the supply of medicines and "medical comforts" was inadequate. The shortage of supplies was frequently mentioned in his journal by the surgeon, who blamed his own lack of foresight for this. For example, the supply of castor oil had been exhausted within the first month. "On the 9th of December, he attributes the great Mortality among the children to the change of their diet, the deficiency of Medical Comforts for their nourishment, and an insufficiency of the Culinary Apparatus, adding that Sixty or Seventy dozen of Bottled Porter would have been of infinitely more value than the useless Superabundance of potatoes."

**Medical Inspection**

No means were taken to determine the state of health of emigrants before boarding the ship. Captain Hustwick attested "that there was no medical examination of the passengers prior to embarkation; and that a Boy, brought into the Ship on the back of his Mother, died three days after of Scarlet fever."

**Clothing and Hygiene**

Witnesses agreed that no inspection was made of clothing, to determine if emigrants were adequately outfitted for the voyage. One female witness stated that "many of the women were very dirty from want of a Change of Clothes. I believe, having partly seen it myself, that some of the Women had not a Second Chemise. There was no general order to enforce their washing their persons, and I believe washing was generally neglected, except on Sunday mornings." Before sailing, Hawkins had noted in his journal: "The number of adult males consisting of 77, of these I should say about 50 might be called useful, respectable men in their walk of life; the remaining 20 seem in appearance and habits a very inferior class, being

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14 HRA XIX, p. 18.
ill clad and most of them entirely unprovided with any change of wearing apparel.”

**Cleanliness of Ship**

The Board of Inquiry judged the ship itself to be “a very superior one of its class” with more than six feet of headroom between the decks, but criticized the lack of clearance below the boards of the lower bunks, which had been fitted up under the instructions of the shipping agent, Mr Marshall. This clearance was only three inches instead of the regulation six inches, making it impossible to clean beneath the lower berths. In addition the bottom boards were nailed down for most of the voyage until the carpenter took them up. Many remarks were made about the general state of filthiness that prevailed aboard the ship. The cluttered deck, overcrowding, want of space and ventilation, the scarcity of co-operation from the emigrants when the surgeon made efforts to have them clean the living quarters, the lack of regulations and of the firmness to enforce the ones they had, all contributed to the unhealthy atmosphere within the ship.

**Causes of Mortality**

The Board attributed the high level of mortality to the following causes:

1. The improper selection of the Surgeon Superintendent, who was “wholly deficient in the knowledge necessary for the establishment of proper regulations and the firmness to enforce them; in consequence of which, no proper rules for the preservation of Order, cleanliness and ventilation were laid down; dirt and filth accumulated in every direction, and disease naturally was the consequence.”

2. “The very improper filling up of the hold of the Ship in such a manner as to cause the Stowage of nearly the whole of the Emigrants’ luggage between decks, thereby completely obstructing ventilation and preventing the proper cleaning of decks and berths.”

3. The lack of pre-embarkation medical checks, especially to detect infectious diseases.

4. Insufficient supply of “Medicines and Medical Comforts” such as bottled porter; and a complete absence of foods like sago and arrowroot, which could have been used to accustom young children to ship’s fare.

What the Board did not mention was the nature of the food supplies, which were the same as regularly supplied on convict ships: flour, rice, biscuit, tea, sugar, salt beef and salt pork, plus the ubiquitous potato. Neither did the Board produce any

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15 Foley, op. cit., p. 25.
analysis of the actual causes of death throughout the voyage, even though they included the surgeon’s journal in the documents accompanying the report.16

Newspapers Blame Mr Marshall
Sydney’s newspapers had for long been critical of the London shipping agent, Mr John Marshall, who throughout the 1830s had played the major role in the selection and shipping of emigrants to Australia, much to the dissatisfaction of the Colonists.17 Following the debacle of the Lady Macnaghten, their attacks gained renewed intensity. The Sydney Gazette of 11th April, 1837, devoted a leading article to the subject. Referring in favourable terms to the emigrants brought recently by the ship Brothers, by way of contrast with the Lady Macnaghten, the Gazette remarks that “these being selected at the request of different gentlemen here, by their agents in England, have, fortunately escaped Mr. Marshall’s clutches,” and later adds: “The unfortunate Lady Macnaughten was the first vessel to arrive here with families under the new regulations before referred to; and Mr Marshall, by a special order from the Secretary of State, was empowered in this single instance ...(one line unreadable)... for the Colonists, receiving for his pains an additional Bounty, viz., five pounds for each child, besides the thirty pounds for the parents, --- the old regulations only allowing thirty pounds for the married couple, and nothing for their children. We are however glad to find that he will not be again employed in the same capacity.”

This extract illustrates the poor regard in which Mr Marshall was held by the colonists, and at the same time reveals added incentive for that gentleman to stack the ship as full as possible, with scant regard for the quality of the clientele.

Conclusion
This unfortunate voyage appeared to have been doomed before the ship sailed. Even the Mayor of Cork predicted disaster, and the surgeon expressed his apprehension in his journal.18 An avaricious shipping agent, an overloaded and overcrowded ship, an inexperienced surgeon, the lack of medical inspection, and a Master and crew accustomed to the carrying of convicts, combined to form a recipe for tragedy. This being the first experience of carrying a large number of families, nobody was aware of the nutritional need of nursing mothers and small children. This was underlined by the experiences of the next two emigrant ships, Adam Lodge and John Barry, which in the hands of experienced Royal Navy

16 HRA XIX, p. 13
17 Osborne, op. cit., pp. 4-7
Surgeons, suffered losses of 7% and 11% respectively. Compared to these, the Lady Macnaghten’s 16% appears a little less horrifying, especially, as the saying goes, the cards were stacked against the new player, Dr Hawkins, before the ship left Cork.

Frank Osborne, April 2001.