

# Perilous Voyage: Irish Famine Orphans' Journey to Australia<sup>1</sup>

Jeff Kildea

I wish to thank the organisers of the 2023 International Famine Commemoration for inviting me to speak here today.

Six years ago, in 2017, it was my great privilege to address Sydney's annual famine commemoration and to speak about my great-great grandmother Rosanna Fleming, one of the more than 4000 Irish famine orphans who came to Australia between 1848 and 1850 under the Earl Grey scheme. Her name is among the 420 names inscribed on the glass panels that form part of this city's beautiful but understated famine monument.

Today I want to zoom out from the story of that single individual to look more broadly at the experience of those who came from Ireland to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, full of hope for a better life but full of fear and trepidation at the prospect of the long and perilous voyage needed to take them from the old world to the new.

This theme came to me during a visit I made to King Island last week. For those who do not know, King Island lies at the western entrance to Bass Strait, the body of water that separates Tasmania from the Australian mainland. Lying on the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel of latitude, King Island is halfway between Cape Otway in Victoria and the north-west coast of the island of Tasmania.

Sailing ships travelling from England or Ireland to New South Wales would sail south of the equator to the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel and take advantage of the strong winds known as the 'Roaring 40s' to race across the Southern Ocean. Initially those ships sailed south of Tasmania, or Van Diemens Land as it was then known, before turning north to complete their journey. But with the discovery of Bass Strait in 1798 by George Bass and Matthew Flinders, mariners could reduce by a week the sailing time to the colony by passing through the strait.

The problem was, however, that they had to thread the needle, passing either north or south of King Island, which at 65 kilometres in length occupied 13 per cent of the width of the strait, right in the middle, thus posing a significant obstacle in the days before modern navigation aids. Even old technology was lacking until mid-century. It was not until 1848 that a lighthouse was built at Cape Otway and another 13 years would pass before one was built on King Island.

Strong winds, uncertain currents, and inadequate charts of the coastlines made the passage through the strait treacherous. As I learned on my recent visit to King Island, many a ship's captain failed to thread the needle and the rugged west coast of King Island is the site of several shipwrecks from those times. Frequent stormy weather, blocking out for days on end the sun and the stars on which those early mariners relied for navigation, meant many ships were dashed on reefs or on the razor-sharp rocks that are a feature of King Island's west coast.

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<sup>1</sup> An address by Dr Jeff Kildea, Honorary Professor in Irish Studies at UNSW, to the 2023 International Famine Commemoration at Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney on 21 July 2023.

In January 1835 a ship called the *Neva* left Cork carrying 150 female convicts, nine free women, and 55 children. Four months later it struck a reef off the northwest coast of King Island and broke up. Of the 239 passengers and crew, only fifteen survived. It was then Australia's worst shipping loss.

Ten years later an even worse disaster occurred. In what remains the highest loss of life in a civil disaster in Australian maritime history, 400 lives were lost when in the early hours of 4 August 1845, the *Cataraqui* struck a reef off the west coast of King Island, 100 metres from the shore. Storms had prevented navigational observations for four days, and the captain thought he was further north, near to Cape Otway.

The *Cataraqui* was an immigrant ship that had sailed from Liverpool on 20 April 1845 carrying British and Irish passengers, men, women, and children. Its living quarters were crammed with families full of hope for a new life in a new land. After almost four months at sea, they were less than a week from their destination.

In many shipwrecks, such as that of the *Hive*, which ten years earlier had run aground at Jervis Bay, 200 kilometres south of Sydney, the passengers and crew could float or swim or wade ashore to the safety of a sandy beach. In the case of the *Cataraqui* those not trapped below deck were dashed against the jagged rocks. Of the 409 passengers and crew, only nine survived.

I have taken the time to describe the wrecks of the *Neva* and the *Cataraqui* not as a lesson in Australia's maritime history but to highlight the fact that sea travel in the days when the Irish famine orphans were shipped out to Australia was a perilous activity. Today, travellers from Ireland to Australia who board one of the four or five daily flights out of Dublin Airport do so in the complete expectation that within 24 hours they will touch down at Sydney Airport safe and sound with little to contend with apart from jetlag. Even so, there are still plenty of nervous aeroplane travellers.

So, it is difficult for us to imagine how those young women whom we remember today, must have felt when they set out on that long and perilous journey, their heads no doubt filled with horror stories of the many ships that had been wrecked making the same journey – the *Cataraqui* just one of many recent examples. Now, I am not aware of any of the Earl Grey ships having been lost at sea, but several ships carrying Irish famine refugees foundered on their way to North America. The most notable was the *Carricks of Whitehaven*, which sailed from Sligo and was wrecked on a reef off Quebec in May 1847 with the loss of more than 120 lives.

Last week, standing on the shore of King Island at the wreck sites of the *Cataraqui* and the *Neva*, it struck me how 'heroic', in the true sense of the word, were those young women who chose to come to Australia under the Earl Grey scheme. As Evelyn Conlon pointed out in her novel *Not the Same Sky*, their 'choice' was not exactly a free one: either remain in the workhouse where death and disease were a daily occurrence or take the gamble on a perilous sea voyage. What an awful predicament in which those young women found themselves.

Plucked from their noxious, overcrowded workhouses, many had not even seen the sea before boarding the small wooden sailing ships that would be their home for the next four months. And small they were. The *Lady Peel*, on which my great-great grandmother

travelled across 20,000 kilometres of ocean, displaced just 593 tons and was 36 metres long and 6 metres wide. By comparison, today's Manly ferries, which ply the 11 kilometres across the relative calm of Sydney Harbour, are almost twice the size, displacing 1122 tons and measuring 70 metres by 13 metres.

So, it is right that we gather here each year to commemorate, indeed, to celebrate, the more than 4000 young women, 'the mothers of this land' as the poet Pamela O'Connor dubbed them, who made that perilous journey from Ireland to Australia. And in doing so we should not forget the pioneering work of Tom Power and his faithful band of supporters who, inspired by the call of President Mary Robinson in 1995, commissioned this evocative memorial to those women and to all those forced to leave their homeland by the ravages of the great Irish famine.