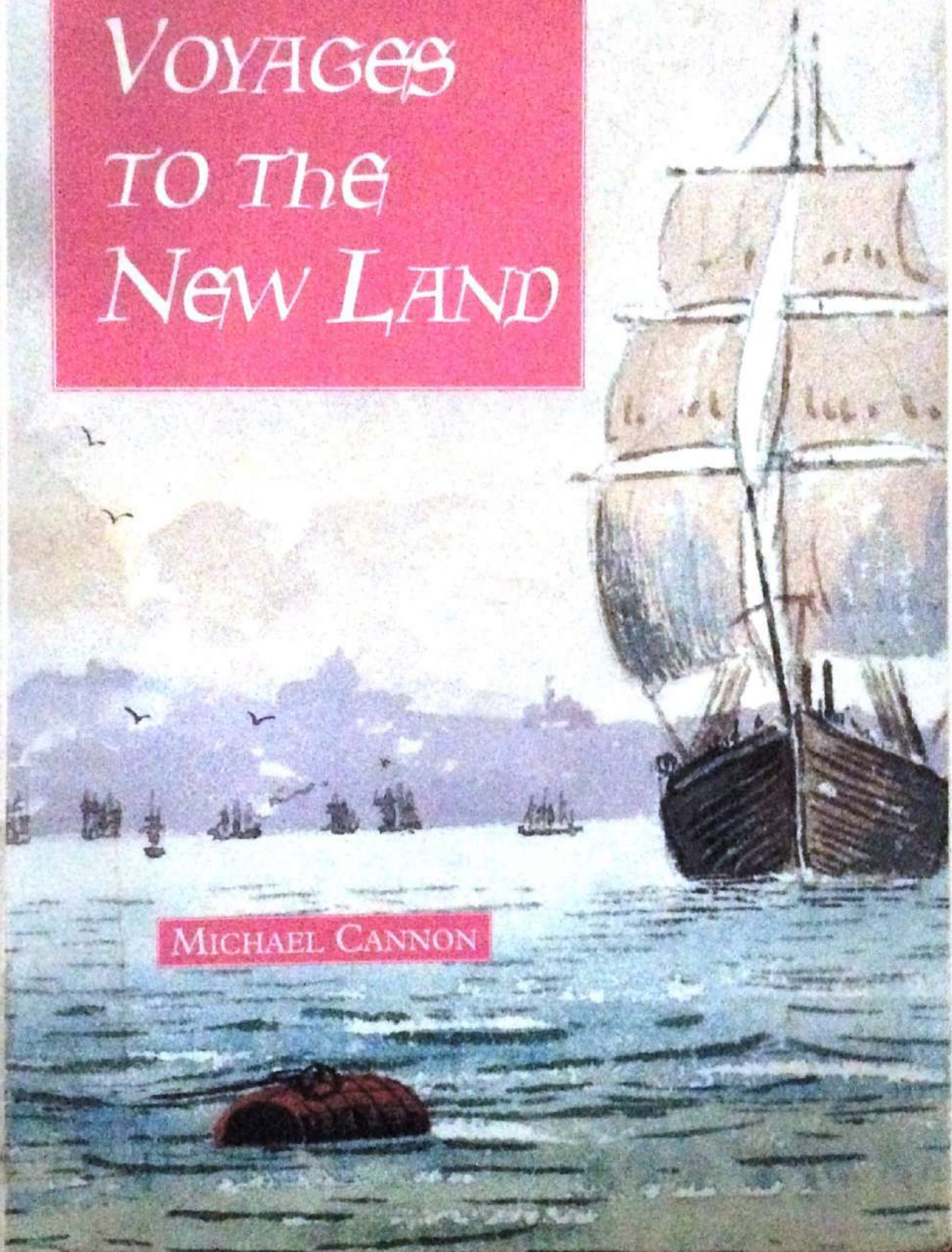


PERILOUS  
VOYAGES  
TO THE  
NEW LAND

MICHAEL CANNON





### The worst cholera ship afloat

When all six members of the Starbuck family from Nottinghamshire boarded the 790-ton barque *James T. Foord* at Gravesend early in July 1849, infant Emma looked a bit peaky, and four-year-old Selina was also running a temperature. Never mind, a healthy sea voyage would soon fix them up.

Baby Emma died before the *James T. Foord* got as far as Plymouth. On 16 July, as the vessel anchored, Selina Starbuck died as well. The ship's surgeon, Dr Hayes Kyd, diagnosed the problem as cholera. He informed the captain, Henry Charles Elliot\*, expecting him to pass the grim news on to port authorities, who would inevitably quarantine the vessel until all signs of the disease vanished.

Instead of incurring an expensive delay, Captain Elliot decided to make a run for it. Winds and tides were unfavorable, so he hired one of the newfangled steam tugs to tow the ship out to sea early on the morning of 17 July, and set forth with his consignment of 295 emigrants from Ireland and the Midlands.

\* Elliot gave at least three different names to officials. He was charged under the above name in Melbourne.

Next day, one-year-old Elizabeth Westmeat died of cholera, soon followed by her twin brother Jonathan, leaving only one child to Ezra and Mary Westmeat of Hampshire.

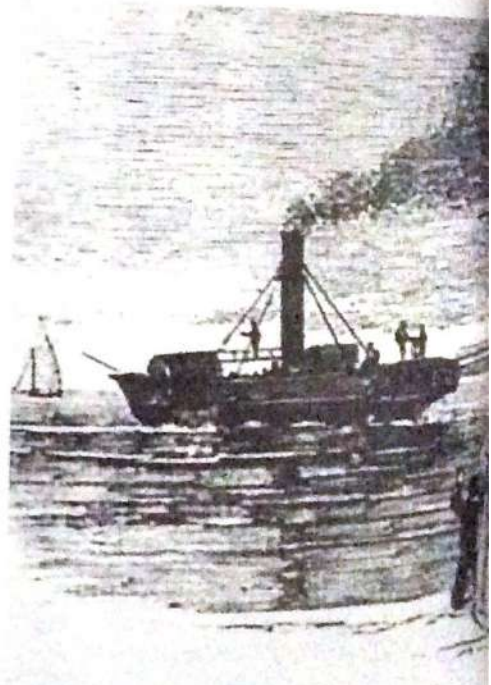
Two days later the adults started dying. On 20 July alone, there perished Mrs Margaret Wheeler, 28, of County Limerick; Bryan Toole, 29, of County Wicklow, leaving a pregnant wife and four-year-old daughter; Letitia Hammell, 22, single, followed by her twin sister Margaret; and a three-year-old girl named Ellen, daughter of Robert and Elizabeth Gee of Devonshire.

As the vessel sailed out of the English Channel, more of the Starbuck family died of cholera now raging out of control through the steerage and forecastle. The mother, 27-year-old Mrs Jane Starbuck, died on 22 July, followed by her two-year-old son Thomas.

The father, 27-year-old laborer Joseph Starbuck, had been robbed of almost his entire family within a few days. Only he and his seven-year-old daughter Mary survived the voyage.\*

The Brown family was similarly shattered. Francis Brown, 27-year-old bricklayer, first lost his nine-year-old daughter Eliza to cholera, then his infant son Henry, and died himself of the disease on 25 July. The

\* On arrival in Melbourne, Joseph Starbuck went to work for Matthew Bryan at Moonee Ponds.



*The safest way for an emigrant vessel to leave port was to be towed out to sea by a steam tug.*

28-year-old widow, Mrs Hannah Brown, was left to face the new colony alone.

Mrs Phoebe Feakes, 30, lost her infant daughter Maria to cholera on 26 July, her seven-year-old son James on 28 July, and died of the same disease herself later the same day. Her husband James Feakes, 30-year-old Suffolk laborer, was left with only a three-year-old son, Richard.

The ship's surgeon, Dr Kyd, was a young man making his first voyage on an emigrant vessel. He worked night and day to alleviate suffering caused by the epidemic, but in doing so was forced to ignore some of his lesser responsibilities. 'The anxiety, harassment, and constant fatigue to which I was subjected, rendered it impossible for me to attend to many matters,' he wrote later.

The usual fairly useless treatment for cholera in those days was to try to induce constipation by dosing patients with an opiate mixed with peppermint water or brandy. An alternative was to administer a mixture of finely ground chalk and laudanum.

Dr Kyd also appointed teams of ten persons among the healthy emigrants to thoroughly scour the lower deck several times a week. Other passengers were ordered to wash regularly: if they disobeyed, he reduced their water ration by a pint per day.

At first it seemed that the battle was in vain. By 1 August ten adult emigrants, three seamen and twelve children had died of cholera. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, that disease vanished from the ship. Further deaths occurred from what was described as 'mesenteric disease', probably typhus or typhoid. All told, thirty-six individuals perished on the voyage.

While these tragedies were occurring, Captain Elliot was indulging in profitable sidelines. At the beginning of the voyage he told Dr Kyd that all supplies for the emigrants were to be kept strictly under his personal control. Dr Kyd was too inexperienced to know that this was contrary to the regulations.

Emigrants trying to keep themselves clean were forced to buy marine soap from the captain at sixpence per pound, although it should have been issued free. According to the report of a subsequent inquiry in Melbourne, 'When the master heard one poor man applying to the surgeon for soap, he called out to know what the row was about, and said the man should have none, unless he paid for it.'

The passengers were half starved: old beef was issued to them from crumbling casks, and often stank too much to cook or eat. Captain Elliot

even charged them for flour, at threepence a pound, and treacle and sugar at fivepence a pound.

Brandy normally kept in the stores for medical emergencies was sold by the captain at 2s 6d per bottle. Evidence showed that one man who had come on board with only £1 or so in his pocket 'bought flour, soap, sugar, brandy &c. until he exhausted his means', and on arrival did not even have sixpence to enable him to join friends finding him a job in Geelong.

Captain Elliot even denied emigrants in the dim steerage compartment the usual candles protected by safe lanterns. They were 'compelled to burn slush in bouille tins cut down', while 'on one occasion the mass of slush in one of these tins boiled over, and scattered in burning flames about the deck', almost causing total disaster.

The master used his third mate, a man named Sheridan Lindley, to make these and other economies to benefit their own pockets. When a few male migrants dared to complain to the mate, 'they received nothing but abuse, and some of them were assaulted by him.' Complaints made direct to the captain received the reply that 'they were troublesome, were served right, and were "damned insolent fellows".'

Eventually the unhappy ship reached Melbourne on 7 November 1849 after its 113-day voyage. The acting Tide Surveyor, J. W. Ring, immediately isolated the vessel in a new quarantine anchorage off Spotswood, at the mouth of the Yarra River. Here Thomas Richards, a carpenter from Penzance, died of tuberculosis and was buried on shore.

Dr John Patterson, Immigration Agent, noted that there had been no new cholera cases on board the *James T. Foord* for three months, while 'The amount of sickness from ordinary causes was not above the usual average.' At the initial interviews, only one immigrant complained of treatment during the voyage. Patterson saw no reason why the ship should not be released from quarantine and the normal gratuities paid.

However, as soon as the passengers were safely ashore and installed in the Immigration Depot, they lodged dozens of complaints. The Immigration Board was forced to hold a fresh inquiry, which began on 14 November under Dr Patterson and Dr John Sullivan.

After hearing extensive evidence, the Board found that Captain Elliot had 'defrauded the immigrants of some of the most essential of their rations' — flour, coffee, and soap. His action in unnecessarily cutting the water ration in the tropics was 'a most unfeeling and even cruel procedure . . . withholding from poor people the means of keeping themselves and their children clean.'



*H. F. Gurner, Crown Solicitor, charged the master of the James T. Foord with breaches of the Passenger Act.*

The Board also found that third mate Lindley regularly stole rations by measuring them out from bulk supplies with 'a tin pot' which was about a third below the regulation size. He was 'highly culpable' for helping to withhold rations, and for 'brutal conduct in assaulting some and abusing several in the coarsest language (and the master too on all occasions when they sought redress).'

The Board felt that Dr Kyd had 'discharged his duties with efficiency and humanity'. But he was not altogether blameless for events on board, as 'it was his duty to see that the immigrants were done justice.'

On receiving this report, La Trobe cancelled the gratuities of captain and third mate. He also decided to fine Dr Kyd one-third of his gratuity, until the surgeon submitted a further explanation of his actions. The Board and La Trobe then concluded that 'It is evident the Master did strip the Surgeon Superintendent of all control over the issue and management of the medical comforts, as well as the provisions generally.' Dr Kyd was cleared of all blame, and received his full £135 gratuity.

La Trobe was determined that Captain Elliot should not escape any punishment within his power. He instructed Henry F. Gurner, Crown Solicitor, to charge the master with a breach of the Passenger Act in selling spirits on the high seas. Elliot was brought before the magistrates on 10 December, and fined £50 with two guineas costs.

When the documents were sent to Sydney, Governor FitzRoy recommended to the Emigration Commissioners in London that Captain Elliot and Sheridan Lindley should never again be employed on any vessel in the emigrant service. It still seemed little enough punishment on behalf of all the people who lay at the bottom of the sea.