

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1512

Overcoming "Impossible"

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Migrants making long and dangerous sea voyages to this country need luck and courage. This is as true today as it was in the early years of the colony. Fortunately, my ancestor Lydia Moss had both. She was one of a tiny minority of convict wives granted permission to accompany her husband to the new colony. She was also able to take her three children. But in making the long sea voyage the family's lives were placed in jeopardy. Typhus, the 'gaol fever' threatened all on board.

Luck and courage but not much choice. Not to have petitioned the government for a passage, not to have made that voyage, to be left behind without her husband and with three small sons to support, would have placed Lydia in a desperate situation. Her husband Isaac had been caught with 40 shillings worth of printed muslin. As a receiver of stolen goods, a 'fencer', his sentence of 14 years transportation reflected the seriousness of the crime at the end of the eighteenth century. Finding herself without breadwinner and already in marginal financial circumstances Lydia faced a bleak future. She would have found work difficult to come by with her youngest child just a few months old, and without work she would have had to rely on the local parish for support. Assistance from the parish was so critical that if, for any reason a woman was unable to return to her local parish, her situation became desperate, so much so that some families faced destitution and sometimes starvation.¹

Many wives petitioned the government to grant them a passage but the British government showed little concern for their predicament. The success or failure of a petition for a passage to accompany a spouse was unpredictable and was considered an indulgence.² Most married convicts simply left their families behind. Only after the 1820s did the number of wives increase with every transport.³ Lydia was given permission to travel on the 1800 voyage of the *Royal Admiral*, a rarity in the early years of the colony.

In 1791 five convict ships carried just over 1,000 convicted men who were accompanied by seven convict wives, one of whom died on the voyage.⁴ The *Hillsborough*, which arrived at Port Jackson the year before the *Royal Admiral*, embarked 300 male convicts with six convict wives.⁵ Lydia was one of six convict wives on board the *Royal Admiral* with 300 male convicts.⁶ While most convicts were single, about a quarter of the men were married.⁷ These small numbers of convict wives given approval to travel were typical for the first 20 years of the colony.⁸

With passages secured for herself and her children Lydia needed courage to face the long voyage ahead. As it was, she embarked on one of the worst voyages in terms of mortality. The voyages of transportation up to 1800 recorded the highest death rates when an average of one in nine male convicts died (and one in 30 female convicts).⁹ The death toll on the voyage of the *Royal Admiral* in 1800 was one in seven.¹⁰

Dysentery, cholera and scurvy were all common diseases of the time but the greatest threat to the lives of those on board the transports was typhus, (a lice borne illness spread when a person scratches and lice faeces enters the wound).¹¹ Lydia may not have been aware of the extent of the illness and mortality on the voyages to New South Wales but she would have known that the voyage she was about to undertake was risky. Nor would it have been long before she realised the extent of the risk. At the initial embarkation of 191 convicts the captain reported they were “all in good health”.¹² Twenty days later the next group of prisoners boarded at Langstone Harbour where the typhus epidemic had been a problem for some time. Those embarked were in such a pitiful state that five were ordered off the ship while others died before the ship sailed.¹³

By the time the ship reached Torbay, the ship's last English landfall four weeks later, the carpenter's wife, three convicts and the surgeon, Samuel Turner had lost their lives.¹⁴ All those on board must have shared the concern of the passenger, James Wilshire who noted 30 convicts were "bad and some of the Ship's company with every one being at a loss considering his own safety, particular as the Fever began its rapid progress so early in our Voyage".¹⁵ At the end of the six month voyage fifty-two people had lost their lives: forty-three convicts, the surgeon, a missionary Stephen Morris, four seamen and the carpenter's wife. Half of the six convict families on board lost one of its members: George Howe's wife Mary who was pregnant and had a young son on board, Ann Cook's husband (she was also travelling with a child) and the child of Ann and William Holdness who died just a week before arriving at Port Jackson.¹⁶

Almost all the survivors required medical treatment on arrival at Port Jackson and four months later Governor King reported that the prisoners were "still very weak". A year and a half later, on October 30, 1802 he declared that many remained in a state of debility and would never recover the strength of men".¹⁷ Isaac was not one of them and, as luck would have it, was granted a conditional pardon in order to serve on board the surveying ship the *Lady Nelson* just eight weeks after he had arrived in the colony.¹⁸ With the odds against them the family had survived and arrived in reasonable health.

Isaac's fitness and a shortage of men needed to crew the *Lady Nelson* contributed to his receiving a conditional pardon. He was fortunate to arrive in the colony when he did. Although the conditions were primitive and difficult the small numbers of convicts between 1788 and 1810 (seven percent of those eventually to come), and very few settlers, made labour scarce and valuable.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Isaac and those pardoned with him represent a very small proportion of the population that was presumably eligible. Seventeen were pardoned that day in January, 1801 when hundreds missed out. The number of male convicts living in Sydney then was 1,291 and if those living and working at Toongabbie, Parramatta and the Hawkesbury are included the total becomes 1,895. In other words, the numbers pardoned were 1.3 percent of the Sydney men or 0.89 percent of the total.²⁰

In just under three years Lydia had seen her husband receive the forbidding sentence of 14 years transportation 'beyond the seas' to be given virtual freedom. The only constraints under the terms of his conditional pardon being that he serve on board the *Lady Nelson*²¹ which went on to survey much of the eastern coastline of New South Wales, Bass Strait, Tasmania and parts of New Zealand.²²

Lydia and Isaac built on their good fortune and by work and enterprise established themselves in colonial society. Lydia became one of the few female publicans in the colony and Isaac also became a publican after his absolute pardon in 1812.²³ They ran the *Fox and Hounds* and *Cherry Tree* Hotels, received land grants and acquired houses in Phillip and King Streets and by the "water-side".²⁴ Compared to the days of fencing in London, their financial situation was secure.

From her humble beginnings Lydia must have felt satisfied when D'Arcy Wentworth, the Superintendent of Police stood up for her and a number of others who had missed out on receiving wine and spirit licences when Governor Macquarie wanted to reduce the number of public houses. He pointed out at the Bigge Royal Commission in 1819 that some of the most respectable people missed out on their licences and had "suffered very great injury". Lydia Moss was among those named.²⁵

The impression from reading advertisements placed in the Sydney newspapers suggest a confident woman: in 1809 offering to communicate answers to letters and messages which she had brought back from her trip to England (a trip she made without her husband); in 1817 insisting that unless items of wearing apparel be removed from her house in Castlereagh Street immediately they would be sold at auction; and in 1822 offering a 40 acre farm for sale at Botany Bay, with the applicants to apply to her.²⁶

Perhaps the woman who sailed from England on the *Royal Admiral* that day in May 1800 never lacked confidence. It may have been the basis for her courage to take a hazardous voyage half way across the world with her husband and children to live in a penal colony. Whatever drove her – affection for her husband and desire to keep the family together, or fear of destitution if left behind – took courage. Her story also illustrates how dramatically the course of a person's life can be affected by luck. Luck and courage – what would have become of the family without them?

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