

Immigration to Australia in the 1850s

(An extract from *Leaving Home – the Emigration of John Macdonald & his Family from Tír na nÓg to Australia*, by Keith Dash & Barbara Hall, 2006)

The first European settlement in Australia was established in 1788, when 827 convicts and a detachment of marines landed at Sydney Cove after an 8-month voyage from England. In all, about 160,000 British convicts were landed in the Australian colonies before transportation ended in 1868. A trickle of free settlers began soon after the first settlement, but by 1830 convicts still accounted for about 50% of the total population, which was then just 70,000. It became clear that free migration had to be encouraged if the colonies were to be developed, so in 1831 the first government-assisted immigration scheme was started. From 1830 to 1900 about 1.5 million British and Irish immigrants arrived in Australia. The peak period was 1851-1860, following the potato famine in Ireland and Scotland and the discovery of gold in Australia, when almost 500,000 immigrants arrived. About half of these came as assisted immigrants, adults and children over 14 years of age paying 10/- to £2 a head and younger children travelling free. The others came as full-fare passengers, most of them paying £20-£25 for a steerage berth.

Until the mid-1850s, sailing time to Australia of 5-6 months was common. In England, companies advertised sailing times of 4 months, but few ships achieved this. It depended on the sailing speed of the ship and how long it was becalmed in the doldrums around the equator. Leaving England, the ships sailed south in the Atlantic Ocean to Cape Town, where they were re-provisioned, then sailed directly east across the Indian Ocean to Australia. After the mid-1850s the route was non-stop, sailing south of Cape Town to pick up the Roaring Forties for a high-speed dash east across the Southern Ocean to Australia. This new route reduced sailing time to Australia, which pleased the ships' owners but terrified the passengers because of the heavy seas, extreme cold and the occasional iceberg encountered in the Southern Ocean. From about the mid-1850s, many of the sailing ships were fitted with coal-fired auxiliary steam engines. The engines were small and powered only a single screw but they enabled the ships to make headway through the doldrums, thus saving weeks of passage time. Sailing times of 75-80 days could be achieved by using the non-stop route and the auxiliary engine.

All assisted immigrants, and most of those paying their own fares, travelled in steerage, a low-ceilinged space beneath the main deck. This was divided into three sections, separated by bulkheads: single men and youths at one end; married couples and young children in the centre section; and single women at the other end. In each section, the accommodation consisted of a double tier of bunks on each side and a long table with fixed forms down the centre. Commonly, the bunks were three feet wide and were shared by two people. It was cramped and noisy, and in the tropics it was stifling. There was little privacy.



An etching from the Illustrated London News showing family accommodation in steerage – narrow bunks to the left and right, a central table, and light from an uncovered hatch. It was crowded and there was little or no privacy. In storm conditions it was wet, dark and chaotic.

For the issuing of rations and preparation of food, steerage passengers were divided into messes of six to twelve people. Each mess elected its own captain, who was responsible for collecting and distributing the food. Rations were issued once or twice a week. Each mess prepared its own food, which was then cooked in a common galley. Shipping companies were required to provide rations according to a dietary scale, which was based on the allowance for sailors in the Royal Navy. Spoilage, pilfering by the officers or crew, or the use of short measures could reduce the amount of food actually issued. Women and children over 14 received the same rations as men; children aged 1-14 received a half ration and children under one year of age no ration except a quart of water daily. Flour, biscuit and preserved meat were the main staples. Substitution of a food with a similar type of food was allowed, so the rations issued varied between ships. A typical weekly dietary scale for each adult was:

Flour	3½ lb	Suet	6 oz
Biscuit	3 lb	Coffee	2 oz
Preserved meat	1 lb	Tea	1½ oz
Pork	1 lb	Sugar	¾ lb
Beef	½ lb	Treacle	½ lb
Fish	¼ lb	Butter	¼ lb
Soup & bouillon	1 lb	Cheese	¼ lb
Rice	¾ lb	Oatmeal	2 oz
Preserved potatoes	½ lb	Lime juice	1 gill
Carrots	½ lb	Pickles	1 gill
Pease	⅔ pint	Mustard	½ oz
Raisins	½ lb	Salt	2 oz
Preserved fruit	¼ lb	Water	5 gallons, 1 quart