


The 'Plague Ship'



Marco Polo, 1859
Thomas Robertson, *Australia's Defining Moments Digital Classroom*

In the Boiler House, you met John Cameron and Margaret Cameron. Both children were passengers on the ill-fated *Ticonderoga*. The *Ticonderoga* left Liverpool on 4th August 1852 with over 700 healthy passengers on board.¹ By the time it sailed into Port Phillip Bay three months later, about one in seven of its passengers was dead from either typhus or scarlet fever.²

When news of the 'plague ship' reached Melbourne, the authorities quickly sprang into action. A government ship was sent out to meet the stricken passengers, which included the *Ticonderoga's* own surgeon:

The Government schooner *Empire* was despatched with fresh supplies to the assistance of the sufferers, taking at the same time from the Bay a surgeon well qualified to officiate in room of the surgeon of the *Ticonderoga* (sic), who was totally unable to fulfil his duties from illness as well as from shortness of medicine, &c.³

Newspapers outside Victoria commented that the tragedy of the *Ticonderoga* was just 'another flagrant case of over-crowding emigrant ships on long passages'.⁴

With no quarantine station formally established, survivors of the *Ticonderoga* were brought to Point Nepean. Here, some rested and recovered in tents pitched on Patrick Sullivan's property. Others died. Sullivan, a local limeburner whose first name is unknown, allowed some survivors to recuperate in his own home while he stayed with his brother nearby.⁵

Reports of the *Ticonderoga* shocked the colony. However, this wouldn't be the last time readers would hear about the dreaded 'plague ship' and others like it:

Till an investigation has taken place, let no men in his senses trust himself on board a Government emigrant ship. He may easily calculate his chance of getting to the end of the voyage. Here it is...The chance of being flung to the sharks is, therefore, just one in eight.⁶

This scathing remark appeared in the *Australia and New Zealand Gazette* and other Australian newspapers just one year after the tragedy of the *Ticonderoga*. Here, the article's unnamed author questioned how the ship – and other government ships like it – was allowed to sail with such poor conditions for its travellers.

¹ 'British Shipping', *Empire*, 23 October 1852, p.2., accessed 22 March 2024, 11:09am, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/60134907?searchTerm=ticonderoga%20ship>.

² Lovell Chen, 'Conservation Management Plan: Non-Indigenous Cultural Heritage', Volume 1: Conservation Management Plan, 2008, p.28.

³ 'Victoria', *South Australian Register*, 18 November 1852, p.3., accessed 22 March 2024, 11:34am <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/38454640?searchTerm=ticonderoga%20ship>.

⁴ 'Victoria', *South Australian Register*, 18 November 1852, p.3., accessed 22 March 2024, 11:34am <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/38454640?searchTerm=ticonderoga%20ship>.

⁵ Lovell Chen, 'Conservation Management Plan: Non-Indigenous Cultural Heritage', Volume 1: Conservation Management Plan, 2008, p.28.

⁶ 'Overcrowding emigrant ships', *The Moreton Bay Courier*, 20 August 1853, p.4., accessed 22 March 2024, 11:54am, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3715257?searchTerm=ticonderoga%20ship>.