

**Department of Communication and Cultural Studies**

**“Cruel Capes”: a Novel; and the Nexus Between  
Fact and Imagination: a Discourse of the Historical Fiction Genre  
in Contemporary Novels: an Exegesis**

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**This thesis is presented for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**of**

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## Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. J. M. L.', followed by a period.

Date: 23 April 2014



## **Abstract**

In 1876, at Redgate Beach off the south-west coast of Western Australia, 16-year-old Grace Bussell and Aboriginal stockman Sam Isaacs are said to have ridden horses into pounding surf to rescue 50 passengers from the stranded *Georgette* steamship. Grace and Sam were hailed as heroes, even though some survivor accounts credited this rescue to the ship's crew. To this day the riders' celebrity has eclipsed the actions of several unsung heroes, crew and passengers who committed an astonishing act of bravery in this maritime tragedy.

Whatever transpired at Redgate Beach, the absolute truth can never be known. Such is my quandary in writing an historical novel (the creative component of my thesis), an account of the shipwreck based on extensive research and, as far as I am aware, the first long format narrative about the incident. As I negotiate the divide between fact and imagination, my approach is informed by the process of writing the exegetical component, comprising an analysis of literary and historiographical discourse on the disarticulation between fact and fiction in historical novels. The exegesis also informs the writing of the novel by exploring the creative and ethical approaches of historical novelists from Canada and Australia. These nations are prolific sources of acclaimed, revisionist historical fiction that challenges Eurocentric retellings of their respective histories.



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## Introduction

Months before his death in 1986, the French existentialist writer Jean Genet was writing a manuscript that would ultimately be published posthumously under the title, *Prisoner of Love* – a memoir about his experiences in Palestinian refugee camps a decade earlier. Striving to understand the elusive complexities of the Palestinian revolution, he found that the women – the wives who stayed behind in the camps while their husbands went off to fight Israeli forces – were under-recognised for their stabilising effect on the dislocated families living in the camps, and for their stoic resignation to raising male children “to die at twenty not in the Holy Land, but for it” (Genet 5).

The tacit courage of civilians enmeshed in conflict tends to be overshadowed by the documented, often hyperbolised deeds of warriors. In *Prisoner of Love* Genet observed: “The fame of heroes owes little to the extent of their conquests and all to the success of the tributes paid to them” (5). His statement is an epigraph to my historical novel, “Cruel Capes” – the creative component of this PhD thesis. Genet’s words resonate with the problem encountered when finding blanks, inconsistencies and anomalies in the historical records surrounding the *Georgette* shipwreck, the subject of “Cruel Capes”. A critical study of the available evidence has exposed the fabrication, by journalists and raconteurs, bystanders and hearsay witnesses, of heroic acts on the part of a privileged young girl on horseback and her ‘half-caste servant’. I postulate that the enduring legend of Grace Bussell, allegedly the saviour of passengers and crew stranded on the deck of the doomed S.S. *Georgette* on 1 December 1876, was largely created on the pages of newspapers, on artists’ canvases, and on the engraved surfaces of medals and commemorative plaques. However, in dismantling this myth in the course of writing the novel – emboldened by some compelling and plausible evidence in some areas, but constrained by the absence of evidence in others – I have encountered the epistemological problem of how to best apply inference and imagination to fill gaps in factual information. The problem is also an ethical one, since the conclusions that I have drawn have the potential

to falsely undermine or aggrandise the reputations and characters of prominent figures from the past.

The string of slim volumes published about the *Georgette* rescue continues to grow. These narratives tend to perpetuate the tale of a young girl repeatedly riding her horse into wild surf, her faithful but subordinate native helper Sam Isaacs at her side, to bring passengers to the safety of the beach. To date, it appears that no long format narrative for an adult readership has been written about this incident. I have taken up the challenge of writing this novel about the *Georgette* as the creative production component of this PhD thesis. The exegesis, which forms the theoretical component, completes the thesis. Both parts set out to address the central research question: “How can a writer of historical fiction ethically negotiate the divide between fact and imagination?”

As part of my research methodology, I have compared four works of revisionist historical fiction by Australian and Canadian writers from the last three decades – works that question the historical record rather than perpetuate the traditional narratives of their respective national histories. The various *modi operandi* of these authors have helped to inform my own approach as I have negotiated the challenges of adjudicating between differing versions of events, incorporating factual historical material into a fictional work and filling information gaps with invention.

I have compared the histories of both countries and identified close ethnogeographical parallels between the two, as well as similar social, cultural and political paradigms that have shaped Canadians’ and Australians’ attitudes toward national identity and the writing of history. Those similarities, I propose, have influenced a wave of contemporary historical novelists who, in the words of Herb Wyile, “have exposed, and pushed beyond the barriers of class, gender, race and ethnicity that ‘official’ history both constructs and naturalizes” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* iv).

In researching the story of the *Georgette* shipwreck, I have encountered many barriers to truth that could be attributable to such biases that Wyile mentions. The transcript of the inquest into the tragedy, held several weeks after the incident, abounds with such barriers. The transcript is confounding, full of contradictions and testimonial backflips under cross-

examination. As I have negotiated the meaning of this and other archival texts, inching along a slow path to discovering the past, I have found it edifying to conduct a parallel exploration of contemporary discourse around historiography and literary studies. Aspects of these historiographic theories – particularly R.G. Collingwood’s notions of historical re-enactment and Linda Hutcheon’s postmodern theories on the instability of historical knowledge and the *rapprochement* between factual history and postmodern historical fiction – have supplied useful scaffolding for my own ethical and epistemological decision-making. Walking the tightrope between fact and imagination, I have endeavoured to re-imagine this legendary episode in Western Australian history and, in so doing, illuminate the heroism of the unsung protagonists of this tragic maritime tale.



**COMPONENT 1: CREATIVE PRODUCTION****“CRUEL CAPES”**

An historical novel based on the events surrounding the wreck of the

*S.S. Georgette*

off Margaret River, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876

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The fame of heroes owes little to the extent of their conquests and all to the success of the tributes paid to them.

*Jean Genet*

This book is dedicated to the eight souls, women and children, who lost their lives on the final voyage of the S.S. Georgette

Master Herbert Osborne, eight years of age

Miss Ada Dixon, eight years of age

Mrs Elizabeth Hauxwell

Master John Hauxwell, two years of age

Miss Frances Hauxwell, eight years of age

Miss Isabella Hauxwell, four years of age

Mrs. Davis and child

**PART I****12<sup>th</sup> November to 29<sup>th</sup> November 1876**

## Chapter 1

*12<sup>th</sup> November 1876. The coastal waters of Western Australia between Fremantle and Bunbury.*

RUNNING parallel to the land, the *S.S. Georgette* steamed southward toward Bunbury. To her port side stretched a monotonous shoreline of scrubby dunes and white sands, the fraying edge of Australia's western extremity. To starboard, the Indian Ocean rolled and shimmered to apparent infinity, although a person with a rudimentary knowledge of geography would know that directly to the west lay the most southerly part of Africa, separated from Australia by an unthinkable vast body of water uninterrupted by islands or other landforms in between. On a map the two land masses looked intriguingly conformable, as if at some time they had been one. But somewhere in the tearing apart of the two, each coastline had been left with corresponding undulations: the lobe of Western Australia seeking the hollow of Africa, the island of Madagascar a shard in between, as if it had been cut loose in the scission.

Dry of mouth and tremulous of limb, Captin John Godfrey went up onto the bridge, feeling the weight of responsibility pressing down on him as solid and tangible as the 145 loads of hewn jarrah timber that would soon comprise the bulk of the *Georgette's* payload. Godfrey took his position next to the bo'sun just as the ship was passing the headland of the Leschenault Peninsula, an eight-mile-long thin splinter of land that looked (or so Godfrey thought) no different to the miles of dunal coastline that preceded it. But in reality the Leschenault was only a veneer of a coastline, a thin strip dividing the sea from the estuary that lay behind it. Godfrey had once gone up the estuary in the Captain's gig, and found it inhabited by strange squat trees that grew out of the muddy shore, their branches overhanging beds of spiky shafts rising out of the salty water. As the men rowed him past the beds, Godfrey could that see that the spikes were not independent plants, but upright extensions of the tree roots that curved upward from the estuary bed, breaking

through the surface of the water like breathing-tubes as if to keep the trees from drowning.

As he mused about the freakishness of Antipodean flora (so ugly and tortured it was, in comparison with the venerable yews and oaks and mannered topiarised hedges of England) and wondered whatever had possessed him to go exploring up that bleak estuary, Godfrey was feeling a little the worse for wear. He was still suffering from the after-effects of a drinking session the evening before with the sole cabin passenger, a commercial traveller. His guest, name of Stevens, had started out at dinner bleating about a wetting he had suffered the previous night from seawater seeping into his cabin. But by the time pudding course came, Godfrey was well on his way to turning Stevens around with a bottle of good merlot and numerous tots of the ship's best whiskey. The grog delivered a dose of liquid patience – it allowed Godfrey, whose demeanour with passengers was customarily short and sharp – to listen amiably and nod empathetically as Stevens ranted on about the deteriorating state of the *Georgette*. ‘Why, only three years ago she arrived from Glasgow in record time, all taut and trim. She was the pride of the colony. Now look at her!’ Stevens swept his right arm in a counter-clockwise arc, gesturing indeterminately around the ambience of the Captain's cabin, a spray of amber jettisoning from the half-filled whiskey glass in his hand. ‘She's shabby, she leaks and she can't keep to schedule. For a cold pickling in seawater I've paid one pound ten! It's a disgrace!’

Godfrey offered his commiserations and Stevens, who was also mellowed by the liquor, declared the deplorable state of the ship to be not the current Captain's fault at all. ‘I've sailed with all the previous skippers and I'm surprised the ship is still afloat at all,’ he said. ‘That bungler Wilson – he ran her aground a few months after she got here. Turns out the fellow wasn't even certified. The next one, McKinnon, lasted no more than nine months. Then there was Shand, I think his name was – hardly stepped over the gangplank before he died of a paralytic stroke. And of course, there was the notorious Michael O'Grady, your predecessor. What a grubby business that was.’

Godfrey had taken over the helm from O'Grady, the mariner from New York who had skippered the *Georgette* in a failed pursuit of escaped Fenian rebels on the American whaleship *Catalpa*. O'Grady had receded into the shadows after that ignominious incident; some said he was an accomplice of the Fenian agents who had masterminded the Fremantle Prison breakout; others said he'd fled the colony out of shame. In the early months of Godfrey's watch, he had hoped for a reversal of fortune for the chequered ship, but instead her prospects became even gloomier. Her contract to carry Her Majesty's mail expired and was not to be renewed. The mail was her bread and butter, a constant source of income for Connor & McKay, the *Georgette's* owners. But it was not as though the loss of the contract had been Godfrey's fault. As Stevens had intimated, her service was unreliable. She was prone to missing her rendezvous with the British mail steamer in King George's Sound, causing the colonial mail to languish in her hold for weeks on end. And so the loss of the mail contract came as little surprise. It left the owners with an urgent need to take on more cargo and passengers to make up for their diminished revenue. Finding himself master of a coastal steamer with a suddenly more urgent commercial imperative, Godfrey bore a heavier burden than any of his predecessors had done.

And so it was, on the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> November, with the *Georgette* running into a light sou'westerly wind, that Godfrey stood on the bridge as she made her final approach into Bunbury port, the furry taste of last night's whiskey repeating on him; the whingy words of Stevens resonating in his aching head. The steamer passed the tip of the peninsula at Point McLeod and made for the main channel of Koombana Bay. Godfrey went into the chart room to read the latest ship's log entry. The wind and seas looked normal until the final comment: *Barometer falling*. He went up on the bridge to observe the sky. A discrete blotch of high, ragged cloud, wafting in an apparently unhurried fashion from the north west, was the only sign of trouble in what was an otherwise unblemished field of blue. The conditions were not yet ominous, but the direction of the barometer could not be ignored. Godfrey decided his choice of anchorage must be a precautionary one. He ordered the ship's mainsail to be brought in and pulled the lever on the ship's telegraph to *SLOW*. The *Georgette* advanced another 150 yards at two knots till she

reached the position favoured by the Captain, 400 yards off the shore, north-east of the seaward end of the jetty. In the event of bad weather, Godfrey judged, this location would offer plenty of sea room. He pushed the lever again to *STOP* and ordered her foresails hauled in.

All in all, he was satisfied with her run from Fremantle. With calm seas and light winds in her favour, the *Georgette* had completed the 78-mile voyage in sixteen hours, maintaining an average speed of five knots along the route. The weather had behaved as one might expect it to at this time of year. The cusp between late spring and summer was bringing with it the prevailing pattern of morning easterlies, changing to a sou'westerly sea breeze by early afternoon.

Godfrey checked the sky again. Now, he could discern not just a single cloud, but a procession of them advancing briskly on the coast. The barometer was still falling in concert with the arrival of the troubling skies, and the instrument's reading caused him to swear. He knew a delay in port for bad weather would play havoc with the ship's schedule. He thought of the *Georgette's* impatient owner, Thomas Connor, who would surely be nipping at his heels, anxious to transport the loads of jarrah waiting at Bunbury to Port Adelaide and collect his payment. Trouble was, Connor had scheduled a lengthy detour into the outbound route from Bunbury. Once loaded, the logs would not be shipped directly to their destination in South Australia, but rather, the ship would steam north again along the Western Australian coast, calling in at Garden Island to load coal before returning to Fremantle, timber and all, to take on passengers and even more cargo. To Godfrey, the route seemed perverse and wasteful of coal; but Connor had calculated that the cost of the detour would be more than recouped by the fares of a sizeable manifest of passengers booked to sail from Fremantle at the end of the month.

If the barometer and Godfrey's assessment of the anvil-trailing cloud-forms should prove prescient, the loading of timber in Bunbury port would not begin tomorrow as scheduled, and those Fremantle passengers would not depart on time. But a delay was of lesser consequence than a wrecked ship, so Godfrey called through the voice pipe down to the engine room, ordering the below decks crew to keep up a head of steam. With the engine running, the *Georgette* could ride ahead on steam if necessary and reduce the strain at her

anchor. Next, for additional surety, Godfrey ordered a second anchor prepared. He did not want a repeat of the mishap that took place a year before when the ship had lost her only anchor in a storm at Champion Bay. At the time of the incident he had not yet joined her, but he recalled the newspaper reports and derisory gossip circulating around the public houses. To the embarrassment of her then Captain and crew, the *Georgette* had steamed round and round Fremantle Harbour with a heavy sea running, unable to be brought to, until the desperate Captain finally offloaded passengers in boats before making for the sheltered waters of Garden Island.

When Godfrey had done all he could to prepare his ship for the coming storm, he ordered the Captain's gig to be launched for disembarkation of the passengers. He knew there was no time to waste. The wind was strengthening and the waters of the channel were getting bumpier. Godfrey looked over at the jetty, flanked with brigs, barques, schooners and lighters, but could see little activity bustling around it. The business of the port appeared to have come to a standstill. He saw that his decision to moor the *Georgette* out in the channel was sound. At twelve feet, her draft was too deep even for the seaward end of the jetty; and even if she could moor there, she'd be dashed and bumped against the structure in heavy winds.

Before the weather set in, it was Godfrey's priority to disembark four people – Mr Stevens and three from steerage. To Godfrey, the offloading of passengers presented an opportunity. He had conjured up his little scheme while still out at sea. It was not out of keeping, he reasoned, for a Captain to leave his ship in the charge of a first officer – just for a little while, provided everything was in order – to carry out some legitimate business. After all, she was shipshape and ready for the storm. *I have seen to it*, Godfrey thought, telling himself that he had skippered her creditably so far; and after all, Thomas Connor was not aboard on this voyage. So, with a genuine item of business as a smokescreen and a private matter needing urgent attention, Godfrey fetched his valise from his cabin and had a quiet word with Abbott, the chief mate. Abbott looked surprised, said little, but nodded tightly and assumed command.

Crewmen lifted the gig from the fore-hold hatch covers and hooked her to the davits on the starboard side. Godfrey got into the gig, taking the

thwart nearest the bow, letting the passengers and their luggage occupy the stern sheets. The crew lowered the gig down the fall and unhooked it aft and forward. Two of his best able seamen, Archibald McLeod and James Hearne, were at the oars; they were sturdy men, as indeed they would want to be, particularly on the return trip to the *Georgette* when they would be battling against the freshening nor'westerly. McLeod and Hearne pushed off from the ship and started rowing for the jetty, their backs heaving, elbows and shoulders churning in circles, McLeod's long, wispy beard streaming backward on the wind, mingling with his matted hair.

As the cloud banks advanced toward the coast, a heavy mantle fell over the sun and the entire vista, sky and sea, dulled to a flat pewter. Coarse needles of rain began to dimple the surface of the ocean. The winds lashed the jetty with such force that it shuddered and lifted, as if trying to uproot itself from the seabed. Any ship remaining moored alongside would surely be battered; and indeed, as the gig neared the jetty the remaining vessels were casting off from it, making for safe anchorages in the channel. The few stragglers bucked at their moorings, the wind blowing through their rigging like a hundred pipers playing through reedy flutes, making a dissonant symphony of wails and whistles.

The gig arrived at the jetty landing – to the visible relief of the passengers – and the crew tied her up. Godfrey, impatient to be on his way, got out first. But courtesy dictated that he should pause to attend the disembarkation of his passengers. Concocting a jaw-stretching grin, he proffered his hand to steady the two ladies as they climbed up the steps, clutching fluttering folds of skirts and petticoats. Godfrey and Mr Stevens exchanged a hearty handshake and comradely grunts, as men often do when they have smoked pipes and shared the gormless small talk of strangers united by grog.

Godfrey ordered his men to return to the ship. With a newly solidified curtain of rain at his back, Godfrey walked the length of the slippery jetty from the landing to the shore, lifting the collar of his coat and hunching into it like a headless man. Only he knew the true reason for leaving the ship at anchor in the hands of a first officer, with a nor'westerly storm soon to strike the coastline. His official business – which in any event could have been

carried out by his first or second officer – was to send a telegram to the agent in Fremantle, alerting him to a likely *demurrage* in Bunbury due to weather. His personal business, on the other hand, was to make a certain transaction in a public house. Godfrey had a taste for whiskey, of greater quantities than he could consume from the ship's stores without being being labelled a drunkard. And with the likely prolongation of the voyage, some supplementary private stocks would make the waiting in port far more bearable.

But first he attended to the telegram. Leaving the jetty at the foot of Henry Street, he walked southward along the port's main thoroughfare, the grandly named Victoria Street. The route was a scant row of houses and shops – hardly a fitting namesake, he reflected, for a distant monarch who had lately been proclaimed Empress of India. The street lay in the lee of Bunbury Hill, shielded from the brunt of the gathering nor-westerly, and for that small comfort Godfrey was grateful. As he passed the Rose Hotel on his left, he drew into his nostrils a seductive draft of yeast and tobacco smoke. The essence teased and tantalised him with the promise of a pleasure to be deferred only a little longer. He quickened his steps, turned right into Stephen Street and reached the Bunbury Post Office and Bonded Store. The clientele was sparse; he completed the errand in a matter of minutes. Retracing his route, he scurried back to the Rose Hotel, his soles squelching through pools of rainwater, the darkening hems of his trousers clinging wetly to the uppers of his boots.

The establishment was plain and mean, but it made an adequate respite from the vile weather. Godfrey carried out his errand in a perfunctory manner, ordering only one glass of whiskey to drink at the bar while the publican wrapped up three bottles for him to take away. Nestling the spirits inside the valise, Godfrey prepared to carry his precious bundle out into the storm, but stopped short under the establishment's verandah, peering out through a curtain of water streaming over the side of its bullnosed roof. He chose his next course of action decisively, muttering aloud a little vow of self-validation. *They will never be able to row the gig in this weather. I had better wait on for a while.*

And so he did wait – three glasses full of waiting as it turned out – poking his nose outside the door of the public house from time to time to observe the state of the weather. Normally an impatient, restless man, Godfrey was savouring this brief respite away from the demands of the ship, away from the confines of home in Fremantle. Back in port he could never frequent a public house; his wife, Johanna, would clutch him close to the bosom of the family. Only under sufferance would she tolerate him imbibing at home, and only then a little wine on Sundays, unless her widowed, temperance-espousing mother did not happen to be calling in.

‘Father’s drinking was such a trial to Mother; she cannot tolerate it again in a son-in-law, especially a seafaring one...you know she has little regard for mariners... so many of them are dipsomaniacs. You are at home so little, John, you must show sobriety and distinguish yourself from those low-life Jack Tars. And when will you ever get command of a ship? You’re over thirty already and still only first officer. Mother is always asking about it.’

Godfrey found this all rather tiresome. Drinking had not prevented his late father-in-law from attaining a measure of prosperity on the back of the convict importations. John Flynn the tailor (surely one of the humblest of trades?) had made a niche for himself supplying uniforms to the Fremantle Prison Establishment. Flynn had left his widow in fulsome comfort, installed in a two-storey solid brick house on the left bank of the Swan River, a far cry from the crumpled little cottage in the consumption-riddled peat bog village they had left behind in the mists of Cork. In Fremantle, where a man’s station was judged on his wealth more so than his birth, the Flynnns counted as people of substance, even if Mrs Flynn did prattle on incessantly in that strident harping voice, (some more kindly called it a lilt) but to Godfrey it was grating as a flock of seagulls squabbling over a scrap of fish guts.

Fortunately, Mrs Flynn’s demeanour toward Godfrey had lately become more kindly. Once he was made Master of the *Georgette*, Godfrey’s name appeared often in the press. The vessel’s comings and goings were closely chronicled in the *Shipping Report* as she plied her way up and down the coastline: ‘*Port of Fremantle, arrived, November 8 – Georgette, S.S., 213 tons, J. Godfrey, from Champion Bay. Passengers – Mr and Mrs Coggill, and Messrs J. Turner and W. Wild.*’ At long last he was a mariner of some repute

– but his status came at a cost. Intent on conjuring a social renaissance for the Flynnns (as the family had faded into social obscurity following the demise of Mr Flynn the tailor) Flynn’s widow and daughter had taken to commandeering Godfrey’s brief stints of shore leave, holding high teas and soirees to show him off to Fremantle notables. The presence of Captain John Godfrey, Master of the *S.S. Georgette*, was sufficient to draw public officials, army officers and merchants to the Flynn household. Introducing her son-in-law to the coterie, the old matron affected a proud and proprietorial manner such as she had never displayed in the past. Even in private she began to address Godfrey with such civility as to warm his heart a little, but the matter of drink continued to be a bugbear between them.

So on this afternoon in Bunbury, his enforced detention in the Rose Hotel was perversely liberating. But too soon for his liking, Godfrey detected a lull in the storm’s intensity. Regretting the curtailment to his drinking spree, he gathered up his bundle and set out into the streets. The return journey to the port placed him full-faced against the rain, forcing him to squint and bow his head against a barrage of cold, wet lances. Overhead a bank of charcoal-hued clouds covered the night sky like tar-paper. Under his feet, a runnel of glistening rainwater winnowed through paving stones and tumbled into the gutters. He navigated the straggly network of streets near-blind, helped only a little by a miserly stand of street-lamps and a weak shaft of illumination from the wooden lighthouse on Bunbury Hill. His belly was well laced with spirit, his perceptions clouded. Twenty paces ahead, the Captain observed a sheet of sodden newspaper gamboling and fluttering on the cobblestones, but as he neared it, the thing mutated into a seagull and drove itself skyward into the storm.

When Godfrey reached the open crescent of the harbour, a blast of wind from the north-west slapped him around the head and half-cleared his mind. The view to seaward revealed nothing but absolute pitch black, save for a deep foreground of thundering whiteness. His boots squelched along the waterlogged beach, catching the spray of breakers long before he reached the shoreline. Sheltering under the eaves of a shed, he rummaged in his pocket, took out his tin of tobacco, his pipe and a box of safety Lucifer matches, plugged his pipe with a previously cut wad of tobacco and lit it with

deliberate slowness, letting the match burn down to its end while he held it up toward the blackness of the bay. He could see faint glimmers of light from where the ship lay at anchor, but could not see even the outline of the ship herself.

Godfrey smoked energetically to maintain a signal from the glow of his pipe. About a half hour later he heard the voices of the men and the creak and splash of the oars approaching the jetty. He descended the landing steps, got in to the boat, this time occupying the preferential stern sheets. The gig made the tumultuous crossing back to the ship, the men rowing stoutly into the wind and swell, placing one bitter yard of water after the other behind them. Feeling somewhat jollier than he did on the outward trip, Godfrey called out words of teasing banter to the men, urging them on faster, but not in an unkindly way. 'There's an extra tot of rum for you lads if you get us there by eight bells.'

Back aboard the ship, once safe and private in his cabin, Godfrey placed two of the bottles in his locker, opened the third, and tossed back several glasses of the spirit. It soothed his nerves against the roars and shrills of the storm and the fretful pitching of the ship as she pulled and bucked around the anchor.

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The blow lasted another two days. The Captain's restless nature did not suit the idleness of this enforced delay at anchor in the channel, and he was soon afflicted with the jumpiness some called 'cabin fever'. He noticed how the men seemed to revel in the lull of this layover, forming impromptu gatherings to 'shake the elbow', as they called their game of wagering with dice. With the ship at anchor, the men had little to do, so Godfrey set them at whatever work he could find for them, while he retreated to his cabin to check the logbooks and attend to a small amount of correspondence, until he had exhausted every diversion that would keep him from opening his locker.

Late on the afternoon of the first day, he succumbed to the temptation of a glass of whiskey before supper, and took out the bottle from the night before, surprised to see it was more than half spent. He poured himself one generous glass, and then a second.

The next morning Godfrey awoke to an uncustomary stillness. He looked out of his cabin porthole and saw little life in the rigging of the ship moored opposite. The *Georgette* held firm and calm at anchor – another good augury. By the time he went up on deck the fleet, having been so long held to ransom by the weather, was mobilising, some vessels having taken berths at the jetty to begin their loading, others heading out of Koombana Bay for ports north or south.

Godfrey called for the first mate Abbott, who was to leave the vessel at Fremantle, having served a mere fortnight on the *Georgette*. Godfrey would not be sorry to see Abbott go – the mate was an officious fellow, inclined to question the judgment of those above him, and he seemed to be in league with Dewar, the tacitly sneering second officer.

‘Abbott, take the gig to find some lightermen and have a good look at their boats – make sure they’re sturdy enough for the weight of the logs. Tell them the pay is five shillings a ton with a bonus of another two shillings each if they finish the job by six bells.’

‘We’ll be lucky to get them for the price, Captain. Word’s goin’ around the jetty the other ships are payin’ seven shillings a ton.’

Godfrey’s hands were tied. ‘The owner has set a limit. I cannot pay any more. Bring me what you can find.’

‘The owner must be as poor as Job’s Turkey if he can only pay such a pittance.’

Abbott showed his back to Godfrey. As he receded along the gangway he left a trail of belligerence behind him: Godfrey found the mate’s bearing as affronting as a pair of forked fingers thrust in front of his face. But ornery though Abbott was, he was also efficient, returning in the gig by midday with the services of three lighters duly secured. Nineteen bales of hay were stowed in the hold, waiting to be offloaded before the loading of timber could begin. Godfrey sighed at the tedium of it all. He took no interest in the stevedoring, and as soon as the gig was back up on the davits, he got in and ordered his men to make a return trip to the jetty. He had another item of genuine business: to send another telegram to the shipping agent in Fremantle, advising the estimated length of the *Georgette*’s delay in Bunbury.

As he stepped off the jetty, a pallid wash of sunlight filtered hesitantly through the clouds, as if ashamed to reveal the full blight of the storm's destruction from the night before. Blowfish, some of them still puffing, were wrecked in a mess of sea wracks, bottles and driftwood jumbled with the detritus of a wrecked ship. Scraps of rigging and sail, the flesh of ruined ships, were strewn over the sand: old cordage, eyelets, battens and deadeyes lay scattered like dismembered bones.

Godfrey had a *frisson* of guilt: *these must be the remains of the Annie M. Young*, he thought. Only two weeks before, the 303 ton brig had lost her anchor in a severe storm that swept across Koombana Bay from the north west. Her master, Captain Tiddy, was *in absentia*, having imprudently left the ship in the charge of the first officer. While Tiddy was stranded in port by the weather, the ship had parted her anchor cable and drifted across the bay. The crew had dropped two more anchors, but those cables had also parted and she was finally driven ashore at North Beach, sustaining damage in the process, and deemed too far gone to refloat.

*There but for the grace of God....*

Godfrey knew he had made a gamble when he left the ship that first night. But unlike Tiddy, he had reboarded the *Georgette* before the weather reached the point of no return. And today's excursion was perfectly reasonable: the weather had cleared, the offloading of cargo was only just getting under way, he had a telegram to send and perhaps one more errand to perform in Victoria Street if he had enough time.

He was surprised at the activity in the port. An influx of entrepreneurs had occupied the jetty precinct, selling foodstuffs and sundry goods – tooth powder, smelling salts and toilet soap, Tamar Indian lozenges, boiled sweets and handkerchiefs, books and newspapers – and offering diversions to those whose journeys had been forcibly delayed by the inclement weather. One landowner had brought three fine horses to the jetty to hire them out for the amusement of sailors wanting to escape the tedium of the long wait in a port that catered poorly to a seafaring man's needs. Racing the length of the windswept beach, the riders whooped loudly and flaunted their bravado to amused onlookers until the horses were as foamy and wet as the sea itself. The owner of the horses boasted that the animals had been bred for the British

Army in India. But watching the rough riders treating the horses like living merry-go-round steeds, Godfrey wondered if the animals' usefulness would be depleted by the time they were delivered to the armed forces in Peshawar, or Rawalpindi, or whatever destination awaited them.

Three native men were hovering at the edge of the crowd. They wore kangaroo hide cloaks with the skin side out, carried no spears, and seemed to have no purpose – other than curiosity – for visiting the port. The natives soon became curiosities themselves, particularly for the bored sailors who enticed them to the foot of the jetty, the hub of the port where vendors flogged their wares and ships' crew waited out the weather, some breaking away from the throng and attaching to streetwalkers, like iron filings to magnets, before returning to smoke and drink and gamble.

Godfrey lingered at the perimeter of the crowd and watched with amusement as the sailors offered the natives tobacco to smoke in clay pipes and rum to drink from the necks of brown bottles. The spectacle of black men in kangaroo cloaks indulging in white men's pleasures incited much merriment amongst the onlookers. The Aborigines were good-natured and did not seem to mind being the butt of the laughter, until one of them, unbalanced by the effects of liquor, fell upon a table of lemonade and ginger beer, bringing the whole thing down in a cascade of wet shards, treacle froth pooling on the wet earth and mingling with blood pouring from his gashed calves. The stall vendor bellowed at the sailors, demanding compensation for his spoiled merchandise, and a spirited altercation erupted. The crowd found the melée every bit as entertaining as the exhibition of drunken Aborigines. Godfrey watched the native men as they slunk away from the scene, walking unsteadily toward a woodland of casuarina forest that flanked the opening to the inlet.

Godfrey retraced his steps from the other night, first to the post office to send his telegram; and seeing as how he was passing the Rose Hotel on the way back, he slipped quietly inside.

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The loading of timber began the next morning. Abbott's wharfies milled around the timber yards near the foot of the jetty until two bullock teams arrived, pulling jinkers. Presently a shuttle operation got underway, starting with the loading logs onto the jinkers. The bullock teams towed the jinkers out into the water, shouldering along the side of the jetty to the waiting sailing lighters. With only their thick necks and angular heads remaining above water, the stout animals held firm against the swell while the jinkers were tied up to the lighters. Above on the jetty, the wharfies used hand-operated cranes to lift the timber off the jinkers and place them into the lighters that were tied up alongside the vessel, sometimes two or three rafted together in a row. Up on the foredeck between the hatch and the foremast, the ship's crew operated the steam donkey winch to haul the logs from the lighters into her main hold.

The storm may have passed, but the sea remained heavy as remnant squalls continued to buffet the channel. With the ship rolling around a great deal, the loading was sometimes aborted for a time, causing the operation to go at a snail's pace, much to Godfrey's frustration. The whole business made him nervous: there was the potentially lethal derrick swinging around dangling massive logs with guy wires hanging off them, hands scrambling around the deck, bantering and arguing with the lightermen alongside; a man driving the steam winch, other hands on guy ropes stowing the logs in the hold, and the engineers watching the winch and the main boiler in the engine room.

Leaving the supervision to Abbott, Godfrey distanced himself from the loading, occasionally taking a cursory look at the goings-on from the safety of the bridge.

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On the second day of loading, the second officer John Dewar, a big-red-headed Scotsman, was operating the steam winch on the foredeck between the hold and the foremast. Dewar was meticulous in the hold, very particular about stowing the cargo properly, protecting pipework and exposed ribs with small bits of wood, choosing big square logs for the bottom and

packing them tightly with smaller pieces so they would not move about in a heavy sea.

But Dewar was not so canny on the winch. Being in charge of such a modern piece of machinery, he turned a bit flaunty in front of the others, in particular the lightermen. He badgered them, sniped at them when they picked the wrong logs or passed them awkwardly into the hook and sling.

‘Not that one, lads, bring me the longer one over there...no, not that one, t’other next to it...ah, put that one down, it’s got a curve on one side. Find me one with straight sides.’

For a little while, before the tedium of the loading set in, before the onset of splinters and pinched fingers and backaches, the men responded to Dewar’s taunts with a waggish insolence.

‘Make yer feckin’ mind up, donkey...Shut yer bone box and get on with it or you’ll get the boot, there’s plenty more lighters in the port...Get off our backs or you’ll get a bunch of fives in your gob.’

As the men set the logs into the sling, Dewar opened the valve to let steam into the cylinder, causing the winch to turn and the hoist to lift and swing the log over the hold. From the alley way next to the hold, the second engineer, Joe Haurigan, watched the trajectory of the logs as they swung over the beam of the ship. It was Haurigan’s task to give signals to the donkey-man and guide the logs carefully into the hold.

Several times he had occasion to check the second mate for letting down the hoist too quickly. It made Dewar prickly to be checked in front of the lightermen. He compensated by raising his voice and finding more petty fault with the men. As the loading proceeded, the good-natured banter started to turn sour. Tempers began to fray; the lightermen were fed up; they spewed lusty grunts and expletives as they placed each log in the hoist, and Dewar’s lambasting made them all the more sullen.

The weight of one monster log caused much protest by the lightermen lifting it into the hoist. The massive cut of timber was positioned over the open hatch, lowered end first in to the hold, then lifted up again so the stevedores could turn it on an angle to guide it down and sideways into the hold. But as it straightened up, its weight gave it such momentum that it swung forward, and hit the hull on the starboard side, forward of the mast,

about a foot above deck level. The massive log struck one of the ribs with a force that caused the rib to buckle and come away from the hull plating.

Haurigan turned toward the place of impact on the starboard side. He made no move to get a closer look but looked up to see if the Captain was looking on from the bridge. There was no-one. He and Dewar exchanged a long silent stare.

‘Carry on,’ shouted Haurigan.

The loading continued.

## Chapter 2

25<sup>th</sup> November 1876. Perth.

ANXIOUS that the coach would depart without him, George Leake bolted down his baked dinner. It was the last meal he would consume on dry land for several days, and for an instant he wondered if he would soon see the meal again. But he had heard that sea-sickness was all in the mind, and resolved he would not succumb to the affliction on this voyage, or any future, for that matter.

He boarded the coach in St George's Terrace. As the coach rumbled down the Stirling Highway toward Fremantle, Leake felt the hastily-consumed meal churning uneasily in his stomach. He thought that such an early onset of queasiness was not a good harbinger for the journey ahead. This was not even a journey of his own instigation, but a journey of duty, to bring his sister Amey back from Adelaide. It would take him away from the most agreeable diversions of Perth in late spring, the idyllic weather, the Christmas parties, rowing on the Swan, cricket on the Hale playing fields, the seasonal hiatus from his law studies.

The sea voyage was one that Leake knew well and dreaded. From the age of thirteen, he had made the return journey between Fremantle and South Australia three times a year, arriving at his port of destination weak and wasted. He would totter across the gangplank like a centenarian, his guts aching from days of retching, clothes reeking of sick and sweat, and rue the absence of a school of similar standing in Perth. The voyage had been a costly price to pay for an education at St Peter's College in Adelaide. Leake was grateful that his parents had sent him to Saints – he had made friends with some top chaps there and come away with top marks that carried him forthwith into his legal studies. But as the beginnings and ends of the terms drew near, the thought of making the wretched voyage clouded his schoolboy mind. The coastal steamers, most latterly the *Georgette*, seemed too insubstantial to ply the continent's treacherous sou'westerly coastline between Fremantle and Port Adelaide, a distance of fourteen hundred nautical

miles, and in particular the treacherous eddies and swells between the Capes – Naturaliste and Leeuwin.

Seven years since his first voyage to Adelaide, his days at St Peter's long finished, Leake was once again embarking on the detestable journey, but this time his suffering would be doubly prolonged, with little respite between the outward and return trips, and his sister to look after on the homeward leg. Still, he did not mind so much the coach ride between Perth and Fremantle; in fact he was quite enjoying it today, observing how the patches of bushland were becoming smaller and smaller with each passing year, and the once-sporadic farms and settlements were becoming more numerous and larger. The rough bush track was now a well-used highway and the congenial custom of nodding to oncoming travelers was dwindling as the traffic multiplied. Several times along the inland side of the route, Leake glimpsed convict gangs at work, building the new railway line that it was claimed would halve the journey time in just a few more years. A dozen or more carts, wagons and coaches were stationed outside the Halfway House – the most Leake had ever seen in his years of travelling this route. Being the only passenger, he asked the driver to press on, as he had a ship's departure to catch at four o'clock, and it was a quarter to three already.

A mile or so out of Fremantle Port the highway bent toward the coast, displaying a great tableau of blue, the sea and sky appearing conjoined, air meeting water seamlessly save for a patch where a small island defined a brief stretch of horizon. Leake found it disquieting to confront such an expanse of empty blue and to contemplate the days ahead, bobbing about this watery world on the diminutive *Georgette*. He had made the passage aboard the vessel several times before, and found her only superficially more commodious than her ill-fated predecessor, the *Xantho*. Leake shuddered to think of that little paddle steamer, another nautical conveyance he had known and patronised well, lying in an ocean grave at Port Gregory these past four years.

The road cut through rolling dunes and turned sharply left. The clatter of horses' hooves dampened to a soft clump as the coach advanced southward through sand toward the port, the ocean now on the right, pushing an offshore breeze through the open window. They crossed the new bridge over the Swan

River, only finished that year, and once again Leake was struck by the speed at which the colony was changing. Such progress would have been unthinkable without convict labour. He wondered how the momentum could carry on, with the transport of convicts brought to a halt six years ago and the ticket of leave men disappearing into the towns or the bush, many of them entrapped by the rum bottle as they had once been by leg irons.

At Arthur Head, they passed the old square-based lighthouse, alongside it the foundations of a new beacon rising up from the limestone rocks. Presently the coach drew into the harbour, but Leake saw no sign of the *Georgette*, neither moored at the Ocean Jetty nor out to sea, at least as far as he could tell from the naked eye. At the foot of the Ocean Jetty was a little encampment of people, mainly women and children, milling around a clutter of luggage.

Seeing the poor people on the jetty – mostly steerage passengers, he imagined – he suspected they had been waiting there for several days, unaware that the ship would be late arriving from Adelaide. He at least had been notified by telegram, and had adjusted his departure from Perth accordingly. Leake experienced a moment of gratitude for his comfortable station in life. Seagulls circled above the waiting crowd calling *aay, aaw*, waiting to swoop on the detritus of humble victuals from the jetty below – brown bread crumbs, shavings of damper, apple cores and grey scraps of salted pork. *Two societies in waiting*, Leake thought. *One optimistic and one opportunistic.*

Anxious to know when the *Georgette* would arrive in port, Leake went into the passenger shed. A shipping agent sat at a desk blowing cone-shaped columns of smoke from his pipe. The plumes wafted up to the low ceiling, flattened out and spread toward the corners of the room. His exposed flesh was tinted a bilious yellow shade, betraying the agent's habitual smoking habit. The fingers of his smoking hand were stained; his moustache was discoloured as if he had been eating mustard and his eyes were ringed like a mask. He took the pipe from his mouth and held it away from his sallow face.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but the ship is still taking on coal at Garden Island. She’s expected to arrive later this evening. We hope to have her ready to sail out at ten o’clock tomorrow morning.’

Leake felt his frustration bite like a physical affliction. It manifested as a quivering heat in the pit of his stomach, an organ that was already tender from his rushed dinner and juddering coach ride. ‘I was informed the ship would be leaving today. I hurried all the way from Perth for no reason, when I could have remained another night at home.’

The agent’s face crumpled miserably, like that of a scolded dog. Leake immediately regretted uttering his complaint in such a peevish manner. ‘So what is the cause of the delay?’ he enquired in a more conciliatory tone.

‘I’ve received a telegram from the Captain, sir, and it appears the ship was late sailing out of Adelaide. Then there were further delays in Bunbury due to weather. I regret your inconvenience, but I am told the Albert Hotel is quite clean and the food is decent. Some other gentlemen passengers have gone there just now. I suggest you secure a room while there are still some available.’

Leake turned his back on the harbour. Grateful he had only small luggage to carry, he traversed the scrubby tract of foreshore separating the port from the town settlement. The land was littered with piles of sandalwood, dismembered barrels and broken bottles. He walked carefully toward the horizon of white limestone buildings, remarking how oddly pristine they looked against the dun-coloured detritus underfoot, like a child’s milk teeth rising out of a scurvy-ravaged mouth.

The sou’westerly breeze gave him a brisk buffeting across the back and shoulder blades. It carried to his nostrils not a clean briny smell, but a taint of burn and rot (or so he imagined) as he had heard stories about the crematorium established at Catherine Point some three miles south. This grim incinerator was seldom wanting for fuel; malignant maladies – typhus, measles, cholera, diphtheria and influenza – were dispersing through the colony like a spray of shot through a pigeon’s breast. To contain the spread of disease, the victims were promptly dispatched at the crematorium. But the incinerator was injudiciously sited, so that its smoky effluent was carried on the prevailing wind to Fremantle. This misjudgment on the part of the works

authorities incited much ridicule in the population, and induced a mood of unrest when the stench of burning flesh, genuine or illusory, wafted over the town. Many believed the scourges were not destroyed in the furnace, but rather were metamorphosed, their sepses resurrected by the flames and released into the atmosphere like thousands of unseen, malevolent phoenixes. But Leake harboured no such superstition; his science masters at St Peter's had assiduously drilled their pupils in the Scientific Method and drummed out any vestiges of superstition, and Leake had emerged from his schooling a reasoned young man.

He reached the foot of Pakenham Street, a fleapit of disheveled workers' cottages. His olfactory sense, recently titillated by the faintly perceived vapour of combusting bodies, was assailed by the stench of the communal open cesspit. Many times the Chief Surgeon had called for this abomination to be replaced with enclosed latrines, asserting the connection between raw open sewage and disease, but the authorities had resisted his entreaties. Instinctively, Leake wanted to take his linen handkerchief from his breast pocket and hold it over his nose, but with no free hand he was obliged to run the gauntlet of the street, coping as best he could by breathing through his mouth.

The timber dwellings were crowded together, most on a lean, and some so acutely tilted that the extremities of their iron roofs seemed to meld together, as if adjacent hovels were trying to become one. To Leake, a man of moderately tall stature, the homes seemed ridiculously low, built for dwarves perhaps. On his right, the door of one cottage stood open; brought up with good manners, Leake was not a peeping Tom, but he glanced guiltily into the doorway and saw why the homes appeared so squat. Beyond the threshold the floor sloped steeply down into the house, like a ramp. The houses had sunk into the morass on which the street had been built. Over time, he thought, they would surely be swallowed up by the sodden, sticky damp. Small wonder that the previous year's typhoid epidemic was believed to have originated in Pakenham Street.

The Albert Hotel stood where Pakenham and High Streets crossed. The inn was not nearly far enough, he thought, from the squalid quarter, but it was the only one suitable for respectable travelers, as its tariffs were too

expensive for likes of sailors and whaling-men and the insalubrious company they kept. He was given a small but passably comfortable room, one facing west with a window that allowed in the sea breeze. Glad to escape the tawdriness of the streets, he lay down on the bed to rest until supper time.

### Chapter 3

*24th November 1876. Bunbury.*

CAPTAIN Godfrey left Bunbury with a severe case of the fidgets. The ship had remained in Bunbury port for far too long, nearly a fortnight; five days waiting for weather, a full week spent loading. Impatience nipped at his heels like a terrier; it caused him tap his foot and twitch his fingers, to pace about the ship and stare ahead hard and often from the bow, as if he could hasten the moment when Fremantle would appear in his sights.

Godfrey had never seen the ship's hold so full. She was carrying 145 loads of hewn jarrah, 25 bales of leather, two packages of kangaroo skins, 264 cattle hides and two casks of whale oil. When the hatches were lifted, the whole mess reeked. By the time Garden Island came into sight, the *Georgette's* coal bunkers were nearly empty. It frustrated Godfrey to be making this stop to feed her hungry bunker – so near to Fremantle – with the mainland port lying only seventeen miles to the north on the southerly bank of the Swan River. He left the tedious business of loading coal in the hands of the first mate, and paid a short visit to his cabin to apply the salve of liquor to his jangled nerves. The principal source of his anxiety was the ship's owner, Thomas Connor, who would certainly be waiting for them at Fremantle.

Connor, a New Zealander who had come to the Swan River Colony to make his fortune, had caught a ship from the northern port of Champion Bay to rendezvous with the *Georgette* in Fremantle. Godfrey imagined Connor pacing up and down the Ocean Jetty, peering out to sea, waiting for a glimpse of his floating enterprise coming in to the harbour. He knew Connor would take him to task when they met. Connor would scrutinise the measure of her cargo and the bill of lading to calculate the profitability of this particular voyage. He would chide the master about the tardiness of her arrival, for time was money, and a tardy arrival meant a tardy departure. *Connor should confine himself to the railway business – he knows nothing about shipping*, Godfrey thought darkly.

Since the loss of the mail contract, the enterprising Connor had solicited the timber companies in the south west of the colony. This current

consignment from Bunbury was the largest she had carried so far. But jarrah timber, however lucrative a cargo, was far heavier than mail; it was time-consuming and hazardous to load, and to carry it the ship used more fuel. Connor remained insensible to this argument, but he also grumbled at the cost of the *Georgette's* growing hunger for coal. Her consumption had increased from fifteen tons a day to over twenty as her payload became more burdensome, and the business of taking on coal had become more drawn-out.

This latest loading stop at the windswept, incongruously named Garden Island severely tested the Captain's patience. Standing on the portside deck, Godfrey watched as stevedores pushed barrow after barrow of coal up the gangplank and deposited their loads into the bunker, working under duress to finish before sundown. The rays of the lowering sun glinted through the rigging, casting a web of shadows over the deck. Aside the ship, the water riffled with the movement of small fish rising for insects, and in an instant the sea's surface was blanketed with the wings of opportunistic gulls. Knowing predators that they were, they had been poised to strike like clockwork at the late afternoon feeding time.

Godfrey calculated that the ship would not get away before dark. He sent one of the hands to fetch the second officer from below, and presently the perspiring, coal-blackened John Dewar was standing alongside him. The second mate was some ten years his senior, of intimidating size, ruddy face, ginger hair laced with salt at the temples.

'How much longer, Dewar?'

'She's about three quarters full, perhaps another half hour, Captain.'

The Captain imagined a lack of conviction in the way Dewar uttered the final word in his statement. Godfrey's maritime experience was sparse against Dewar's fourteen years at sea. After nearly two years aboard the *Georgette*, Dewar had greater knowledge of the vessel than anyone else aboard her. But he was a coarse man, with no certificate of competency, and his current station of second mate was likely to be the pinnacle of his career.

'What is her draft? She seems a bit low in the water.'

'About eight feet aft, two by the stern, sir.'

Godfrey again thought he heard a sneering irony in Dewar's manner of saying, 'sir'.

‘What is the state of the bilge?’

Rivulets of sweat ran down Dewar’s broad, black-dusted face, forming flesh-coloured clearings across his cheeks.

‘About two feet of water, a little more than usual, but only on account of the bilge pump being troublesome again. The second engineer has been trying to work it these last two hours.’

‘Then send Haurigan into the bilge without delay to check the lower part of the pump. And have him report to me when he has properly assessed its condition.’

By the time Dewar disappeared, Godfrey was in such a state of distemper that he retreated back to his cabin to take a nip of whiskey. He savoured the liquor as it passed over his tongue and palate, slid down his gullet, warmed his throat and insides and smoothed the jagged edges of his nerves. Telling himself that a second glass would prolong this agreeable sense of wellbeing throughout the long night ahead, Godfrey reached again for the bottle.

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Of late, Joe Haurigan had become well practised at dismantling the Georgette’s bilge pump. This grimy task had fallen upon the young second engineer every time the temperamental pump, choked by rubbish from the bilge, stopped throwing water. On this last voyage from Adelaide, he had been obliged to repeat the procedure at King George’s Sound and now, again, at Careening Bay, the final port of call before Fremantle.

The bilge pump, which was connected to and worked by the main engine, was located in the for’ard part of the engine room on the port side. Haurigan was about to get to work on it again when William Sinclair came down the ladder and stepped on to the engine room floor. With the two firemen, Wilson and Lennon, helping Haurigan, the clamorous, steamy room was all at once filled to capacity with men and machinery. The action of the engine’s pistons drummed an incessant rapid triplet beat, *chug-a-chug, chug-a-chug*, into the men’s skullbones.

Sinclair bellowed above the engine’s din. ‘Trouble again with the pump?’

‘The usual, sir. The faulty valve. Won’t get no better till the Cap’n agrees to get a new one.’

‘There’s no time to do it in Fremantle. It will have to wait till Adelaide’.

‘Time is money, so they say, sir.’

Not waiting to see the effect of his sarcasm, Haurigan turned abruptly back to his task, showing Sinclair his curled back. The first engineer looked over Haurigan’s shoulder in a distinterested manner, making a token show of supervising his subordinate. Haurigan took a spanner and began to dismantle the pump assembly to clear the blockage of ash, clay and straw. As he worked, he plopped the wet debris into a tin. When the assembly was clear, he replaced the parts in position, primed and restarted the device until it was throwing water freely.

‘Ship needs more than a new valve – she could do with a new pump. A modern one with four pistons. That way they keep goin’ even if a valve or two gets choked.’

‘Keep your opinions to yourself, Mister. If the valve needs clearing a *hundred* times between here and Adelaide, just keep your mouth shut and get on with it. The *Georgette*’s not getting a new pump with four pistons. It’s your job to keep the pump working, and if you don’t like it you can find another ship.’

Turning his back on Haurigan, Sinclair eased through the crowded engine room toward the door. A man of less than average stature, he had the knack of augmenting his small frame through posture, carrying himself proud and upright, chin tilted up, a habit that served him well on the bridge or in the saloon, but not so well in a crowded engine room. Not looking where he was putting his feet, Sinclair caught the tin of bilge slops with the toe of his boot and splattered the contents over the engine room floor. Swill splashed over his highly polished black boots and up the shin of his trouser legs.

Sinclair flicked his legs in disgust and climbed back up the ladder, not looking down or behind, and the men suppressed their laughter till he had gone.

## Chapter 4

25<sup>th</sup> November 1876. Fremantle.

LEAKE's mood brightened when he entered the dining room of the Albert Hotel. Two of the Dempster brothers, who he presumed to be the 'other gentlemen passengers' alluded to by the shipping agent, were already at supper. Leake had met the eminent mariner James MacLean Dempster and his four sons on a number of occasions. But there had been long lapses between encounters, and Leake, keen-minded though he was, had always struggled to match the brothers' names and faces. As he approached their table, he was certain the youngest-looking was William, but he could not tell if the other was Edward or James or Andrew.

Leake thought highly of the Dempsters, a rough-hewn clan who had done much to open up the colony. Since boyhood, he had been enthralled by stories of their exploits; and even now he tacitly envied their adventurous lives. The family presided over vast pastoral enterprises at Northam and the south-eastern extremity of the colony. The Dempster men thought nothing of making the month-long overland trek to attend to the shearing at their lonely Fraser Range Station, at least 100 miles inland from wind-battered Esperance. When the shearing was done, they would load the clip on a massive cart, harness a team of twelve camels, and haul it to the coast where their own cutter would be waiting to ship the wool to Adelaide.

For Leake, the company of the Dempsters made his impending voyage aboard the *Georgette* seem suddenly more of an adventure. He caught the eye of William Dempster, who sprang to his feet and thrust out his hand. William had an ingenuous, tawny-skinned face, a high forehead and prodigious whiskers, worn in the fashion of the day, but none-too-neatly trimmed. In an instant Leake was seated at the brothers' table and regaled with hearty greetings and a bottle of beer. Typical of their clan, the Dempster brothers were intensely gregarious, insisting he join them for dinner. Leake supposed the long periods of isolation they endured had whetted their appetites for fellowship.

‘We’re sailing to Esperance tomorrow to relieve Edward,’ said the second brother who, by the process of elimination, must be James or Andrew.

‘The poor wretch has been on the station by himself for three months. But first we’ll stop at Albany to buy timber and sheep.’

Being the son of a prominent barrister and magistrate had made Leake adept at the skills of social diplomacy. ‘And your other brother – has he remained behind at Northam?’ he asked, in hope that the response would reveal the identity of the other Dempster at the table. He was rewarded with the answer he sought.

‘Yes, Andrew is at Buckland House, looking after our ailing father,’ came the obliging reply from the brother who could only be James. His words came out in a damp slurry. Seated at close quarters around the small table, Leake noticed the fine scarlet lines across James Dempster’s nose and cheeks. Leake had done very little imbibing in his young life, but he recognised a hard drinker when he met one. He guessed that James had been at the bottle for a while.

Leake expressed his well wishes for the recovery of the Dempster patriarch. The brothers seemed less troubled by the *Georgette’s* delay than he; in fact they regaled him with tales of past adventures in Fremantle, a place they clearly found more alluring than he and for reasons that escaped him, especially after his recent trek through the port’s odiferous streets. The brothers ordered a bottle of claret and the three bantered on agreeably over their dinner of fried battered sardines and boiled potatoes.

‘You would be pleased now that the telegraph service has reached Esperance,’ said Leake, who had read of this new development in *The Western Australian Times*.

‘No one is more pleased than Edward,’ answered William. ‘He sent the very first telegram from Esperance last week, not because he had any important news to convey, but for the novelty and fame of it, we suspect.’

Mellowed by the beer and wine, the men laughed rather more robustly than William’s quip may have warranted. The florid-faced James made a guffaw that resonated around the room. But he stifled it abruptly when a young lady appeared in the doorway. The lady was pale and tired-looking, but nonetheless pretty, with a well-kept head of brown curls around her shoulders

and a dress of good quality. She seemed hesitant to enter any further into the dining room. As heads turned to take in the rare vision of an unescorted woman in a hotel, she shrank further back into the doorway leading to the guest rooms. But before she could retreat completely, a waiter came to her rescue. She could be heard ordering a meal to be brought to her room.

William leaned forward and lowered his voice.

‘What husband would let such a pretty little thing go about alone in Fremantle?’

‘I suspect she’s been stranded waiting for the ship, just like the rest of us,’ Leake said.

‘Perhaps she has no husband,’ James said with a knowing wink.

The lady finished dealing with the waiter, turned her back and made an exit through the same doorway toward the guest rooms. James Dempster’s eyes made vertical sweeps of her as she retreated ‘That’s a nice ‘follow me lads’ if ever I saw one.’

William mock-chided his brother. ‘For heaven’s sake, James, she looks a respectable young lady – if you must descend to such low-life thoughts, please divert them elsewhere.’

‘I certainly shall, Willie-boy,’ James said. ‘Let’s go out for a stroll and see what the good people of Fremantle are doing this evening.’

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Leaving the modest gentility of the hotel, they stepped into street and melded into the moil of sailors, ticket-of-leave men and street-walkers. Whale oil lamps hung aloft on poles, casting down pools of greasy light, pock-marked with flurries of flying insects. The lamps exuded a stench of burning flesh, causing Leake to reach for his handkerchief. *How backward Fremantle is*, he thought. *They are not yet using kerosene.*

Whether it was deliberate or not Leake could not tell, but James and William flanked him as if he were a younger brother in need of protection. He was quietly glad of the buffer between himself and the roving groups of so-called ‘Champagne Charlies’ who lurched and heckled through the streets; even though they seemed good-natured enough now, he had heard stories of brutal, grog-driven attacks by gangs of these louts. The three men, the

Dempsters and Leake, made their way around the tight circuit of High, Cliff and Henry streets, passing establishments of varying vintage and repute: the austere new limestone Commissariat, a few of the early wattle and daub cottages, Mrs Higham's store and the telegraph office, all of these buildings dim and uninhabited. At this hour, the lifeblood of the port capered through its streets and issued from the open doors of its public houses.

They returned full circle into High Street where a rumble of male voices signaled the proximity of the Emerald Isle Hotel. Like a sailor mesmerised by siren-song, James quickened his step at the sound of the beer-lubricated jabber. Without discussion or debate, he led the way through the public house with the other two on his coat-tails. The Dempsters and Leake moved as one to the bar, bought schooners of dark brown beer and carried their swill to a tall table. It was a curious piece of furniture, Leake thought – designed for leaning, not sitting, but offering the small comfort of a foot rail for propping one weary boot at a time. The men stood hunched over the table, their shirt elbows acting as wicks for pools of spilt beer.

The brothers showed their familiarity with Fremantle's *demi-monde*, demonstrating to Leake that they had spent many more evenings in the port than he. At first he was surprised at the number of men who nodded at the Dempsters, or approached them to exchange a few beery words, but then he began to understand that these men were drovers or shearers, farriers or traders, labourers or farm-hands – men who had shared in some small morsel of the family's commerce, and who showed the brothers respect – albeit in a rough and drunken fashion. Leake found it rather jolly to be amongst such an affable throng. The hail-fellow-well-met greetings seemed genuine, he thought, if warmed to some degree by the effects of grog.

When the swell of well-wishers had cleared, William touched Leake on the shoulder and nodded in the direction of a fellow seated alone in a dim corner of the room. Grey-haired and heavy-set, the man looked like someone who wished not to be disturbed.

'See that miserable-looking fellow over there? It is Joseph Doonan. He resigned in disgrace over the Fenian affair. People say he tried to do away with himself.'

The man looked over in their direction, causing William to lean forward and lower his voice. ‘One minute he was taking breakfast, the next he picked up a bread knife from the table, stood up and drew the knife across his throat. Nearly cut himself through to the windpipe. See, he’s wearing a kerchief to cover the scar.’

Leake was well acquainted with the notorious escape of six Fenian prisoners several months before. Two Fenian agents, Breslin and Desmond, had masterminded the break-out from Fremantle Prison. Doonan, the superintendent, was a hapless dupe; he let Breslin con his way into the prison on a ruse. Inside the limestone walls, Breslin managed to pass along a note with the escape plan, helping six men abscond to a waiting whaleboat. The boat caught up with its mother vessel, the American whaling ship *Catalpa*, and she made a dash for the open ocean. The *Georgette* had been in port at the time and the navy commandeered her to give chase. She managed to catch up with the *Catalpa* and fired a cannon across the bow, but it was too late – the *Catalpa* had reached the asylum of international waters. The escape of the Fenians made the Swan River Colony an international laughingstock.

Leake felt sorry for the poor wretch with the bandaged neck. ‘It was not entirely Doonan’s fault, I’m sure. The conmen who executed the escape were very cunning.’

James Dempster was less charitable. ‘For god’s sake, the fellows’ names were ‘Desmond’ and ‘Breslin’! Doonan should’ve guessed they were Fenian confederates. But instead the blockhead invited Breslin to tour the prison, no questions asked. He may as well have wrapped the key in silk and pinned it to the mongrel’s waistcoat.’

Again, Leake was less judgemental. ‘The Navy and the Police were as much to blame. What a travesty it was, to commandeer a coastal steamer to catch a whaling ship.’

‘The travesty has given our ordinary little *Georgette* a certain notoriety,’ William said. ‘And speaking of the ship, she’s leaving early in the morning so it’s time we finished our beer.’

They stepped back out into High Street at a quarter to ten and headed in the direction of the Albert Hotel. From the eastern end of the street came

the sound of a bell ringing. Men scattered and disappeared into alleyways as the clanging became louder, signaling the approach of its ringer.

The Dempsters, familiar with the nightly curfew imposed on ticket-of-leave men, strode confidently toward the prison officer as he called out, 'bond or free?'

'Free,' answered William Dempster.

'Thank you gentlemen, and a very good night to you,' said the curfew-keeper, who on closer look at the well-heeled threesome would have had little reason to doubt William's response.

James Dempster wordlessly fell behind the other two. When Leake last looked behind him, he thought he saw James's tall, lanky figure leaning into the recess of a dark doorway, a rounded female figure nestled under his raised arm. William, who did not look back, said nothing.

## Chapter 5

*27<sup>th</sup> November 1876. Wallcliffe Homestead, near Margaret River.*

TWO gunshots rang out into the early evening. The second crack overlapped the echo of the first, then faded off with a whine, floated on the air before it died in the rustle of the forest. Expecting a third shot, Ellen Bussell clenched her jaw. But no other shot came.

She tried not to think about the unthinkable. Two hours before, her husband and their stockman had ridden into the bushland, into the same space just now split open by rifle fire. This tract of straight-trunked, white-barked karri forest lay immediately south of Wallcliffe, dividing the homestead from the clearings of stony pastures where they grazed their dairy cattle.

The men were already late returning with the herd. Ellen had been pacing on the verandah, performing her customary daily vigil, half worried, half angry, and ready to scold Alf for going back on his promise to bring in the dairy herd before sunset. And now, hearing shots fired, she knew that wild pigs had something to do with it.

Ellen Bussell was one of the settlers' children to be born in the Swan River Colony. She'd grown up in the windswept coastal settlement of Augusta, learning to fear few of the wild things there. But she would admit to being afraid of two creatures: snakes and feral pigs. Of snakes, she was less wary, as she had been taught to know which ones were venomous and which were not. She knew which months of the year to watch out for them – in late spring and summer when they came out from their dens and basked on rocks in the paddocks, or flicked across tracks in the dunes, leaving sinuous, cross-patterned grooves in the sand. Ellen knew to avoid walking through the long grasses in the breeding months, September and October – a lesson she had learned at the age of seven, when a band of natives had brought a little girl into the Flinders Settlement, lying stiff in her uncle's arms, her chest pumping like a small bird's, forcing rapid wheezes from between her blue lips. Another man carried the decapitated, still-wriggling body of a striped snake.

The natives delivered the child to the homestead of Ellen's parents. Robert Heppingstone laid the native girl on the rush-covered kitchen floor.

Ann, his wife, wrapped a strip of linen around the twin puncture wound on the girl's engorged foot. The child's body was rigid, nearly as still as a corpse's, except for her chest that continued to heave but with ever-diminishing force, and her eyes that rolled up and down until her pupils finally disappeared into the upper lids, leaving the open sockets white and blank like winkle shells. With her final rasping breaths, she expired spittle and foam, making Ellen run outside the hut in fright.

Soon after, the natives came out and carried the girl's body past her, walking slowly away from the settlement. Ellen never found out where the girl was buried, but she knew about the graves of the native people: they were shallow, lonely little excavations in the bush, covered with leaves and logs, marked by small hillocks of earth at each end of the grave. The Aborigines had no burial ground like the neatly laid out white people's graveyard that was rapidly filling up in the Flinders Settlement – a ground filling up with babies and mothers who died in childbirth, souls who succumbed to consumption, pneumonia or drowning – all the mishaps of a community scratching out a living in an inhospitable corner of the continent where the Indian and Southern Oceans clashed together at Cape Leeuwin.

The snake incident had frightened Ellen for life, but still, she remained more afraid of wild pigs. Those beasts had no dormant season and no predictable home range; they seemed to thrive in forests and wetlands, highlands and valleys, in all manner of forests, from the karris near the coast, to the jarrah forests of the Blackwood Ridge and the tuarts of the Vasse.

It had been eleven years since the Alfred Bussells had moved from Ellensbrook to Wallcliffe. In that time, reports of encounters with wild pigs had become more common. It stood to reason, Ellen reasoned, as the population of settlers and timber people grew and penetrated further into the wilderness, while the pigs bred one new generation after another. The pigs had no predators other than men. Of late, she'd heard of horrific attacks on dogs, livestock and sometimes people, nearly always occurring late in the day or after dark.

Ellen had been in an anxious nervous state since Filumena came along in April. No tonic or elixir could lift her out of it. Dreading the thought of being separated from her family, she kept the older children on a short

curfew, kept the younger ones close by her. She would fret in the late afternoons until Alf rode in to the yard. 'Bring the herd in sooner, Alf, before the pigs are about.'

But Alf at first could not see a reason for changing his routine. 'They are only pigs, after all, and very shy creatures around humans. And in any event, my dear, it is getting late in the year – the sun is not setting till half past six. Wild pigs have seldom attacked in daylight.'

But Ellen's mind was teeming with images of Alf being thrown off his panicked horse and savaged by a big razorback hog. 'Take Sam with you, just for a while. The pigs are breeding now; piglets are around, I am sure of it. I heard squealing last night, not far away from the house.'

'It is not necessary dear, but we will see.'

Ellen knew his answer was a concession, masked to save face. With nothing more said, a new routine was started. Sam Isaacs, carrying a rifle, rode out with Alf each afternoon. Ellen felt easier in her mind, knowing that Alf was not out in the bush alone. But still she kept up her daily custom of sitting on the verandah, watching and waiting for the return of the herd. She would try to keep her mind on her needlework, but her thoughts and senses were fixed on signs of the cattle approaching the homestead: the clink of bells, the murmuring, the clop of hooves on compacted earth, the barks of the two herd dogs, the earthy smell of bovine flesh carried forward on the wind. Eventually the leaders would poke their square heads out of the bush and plod into the clearing. With full udders, they needed little prompting from the servants, to make their way into the pen.

As November drew to a close and spring began to give way to summer, the milking was nearly always finished, with the help of Sam's wife Lucy and an ex-confidant known as 'Old Coe'. After it was done, Alf would drink a bottle of beer and smoke a pipe on the verandah and watch the sun lowering behind the tree-clad cliffs. For a few moments the treetops would appear to be on fire, glowing radiant from the sun's rays before the sun dropped behind the cliffs and down to the sea.

On the day the rifle shots rang out, Alf and Sam had gone out later than their recent custom. *Alf seems to be getting careless again*, Ellen had thought as they departed, *always finding something else to do before they set*

*off down the track*. The sound of the shooting at dusk brought the servants out from their huts and into the yard; the children rushed out from the house and they all peered as one into the darkening forest.

‘Where is papa?’ The whine of four-year-old Fred played a number of times against the muted sounds of early evening, the chitter of crickets, the faint whisper of the sea at the base of the cliffs. The sounds of Wallcliffe with no cattle in the yard.

Grace hushed her brother. ‘A horse is coming.’

It took a moment for the others to hear it as well; the sound of hoofbeats advancing along the track toward them, accompanied by the percussive jangling of a harness and slap of stirrup against leather. The horse, riderless and skittish, burst out of the forest track and into the yard. Grace caught the black gelding, Smiler, her father’s favourite horse, by the bridle.

‘Mama, I must go out and look for them.’

At sixteen, Grace was the most skilful rider of all the Bussell children, but Ellen could not let her go.

‘It is too dark, too dangerous. Sam is with your father. We will wait for them here.’

The vigil turned out to be thankfully brief. It was not long before the first of the cows lumbered into the yard, their blunt shapes forming a dark mass of moving flesh. The herd was almost absorbed by the night shadows, except for their white patches that appeared to float disembodied through the air. Lucy and Old Coe did their best to herd the cows in the blackness and began the milking, working to the dim flicker of lanterns.

Following close behind the last of the herd came the taller shape of a horse carrying a rider. In the deep gloom, the wide blaze on the horse’s face announced it to be the old roan. Likewise, from atop the horse, the rider’s pale face and white beard were beacons in the dark, signalling that Alf Bussell had returned home. Sam Isaacs followed a few yards behind on foot, a single dog loping along next to him.

Alf got down from the horse in a slow and stiff sort of way, moving uncharacteristically for him, as if he had just become the sixty-year-old that he actually was. When he spoke his voice quivered almost imperceptibly, but

enough for Ellen to know that he was shaken. ‘We are both quite all right, but poor Laddie is gone – he was killed by a sow.’

Alf told them the story with a touch of sheepishness. About a mile from the homestead Laddie had poked his way into a thicket and surprised a wild sow with piglets. The sow had marauded over the dog and gone for Smiler, charging broadside at the horse’s flank. Smiler had bolted, throwing Alf to the ground. Before the pig could get to Alf, a single shot from the rifle was enough to drop the sow. With a second shot, Sam finished it off.

‘So it was all over very quickly, and we are none the worse for wear, other than the loss of a good dog. But you were right as usual, my dear Ellen – I suspect the story would have had a grim ending if it had not been for Sam.’

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Once again, Sam Isaacs had been a godsend to the family. Ellen often thought of the boy as a gift, a consolation for the loss of her baby sons. He had become a part of their household so naturally it was as if he belonged there. For Ellen, he was more like a son than a servant. Alf often pulled her up for spoiling Sam, giving him too many liberties, allowing him to sit at table with the girls, giving him a good eiderdown to sleep under and as much milk as he could drink.

But Sam’s arrival at Ellensbrook – their former homestead, the home she would come to think of as ‘a place where boys die’ – gave her a comfort that Alf would never come to comprehend. Sam came along soon after the loss of Christopher – the fourth of their children to be born at the homestead. When Christopher was delivered, Ellen let the native women take the afterbirth for a ceremonial burial, a ritual she had never witnessed, but had heard of, having been born in the colony and raised with Aborigines around her, and played with the piccannies for want of any other friends save for Mary Anne Smith. So when the women servants came and asked for the membrane, Mary Anne, who had delivered her, was against the practice, saying how strange and primitive it was, but Ellen and Alf could see no harm in it and let them take it.

‘They believe the afterbirth will create a bond between the child and the earth that will sustain it,’ said Alf, who was well practised in the tongue of the Aborigines, and knew of their customs. But only two months later, the earth took Christopher back. Ellen could not remain still for grief. Helpless to contain or calm her, Alf watched her as she walked and walked around the perimeter of the homestead and over the dunes till the awful greatness of the ocean walloped her eyes and roared at her to go back to the womb-like basin of Ellensbrook. She turned around and pitched wildly down the track before coming to rest against the fence.

Alf caught her as she slumped, but she pushed him away with a cry that cut the air like the shriek of a wounded bird. The native women formed a protective circle around her, remaining in this position for some time with tears rolling down their faces, then walking off in silence with their heads down.

Later, when Ellen had regained some composure, Alf, who had watched the women’s response from a discrete distance, expressed astonishment.

‘It was a very remarkable thing to see. Why did they feel for an infant’s death in a white man’s home?’

Within herself, Ellen understood what the women felt, and why they surrounded her and wept as if grieving for one of their own. But with her plain way of speaking she was at a loss to express such intangible thoughts to her husband.

After the death of Christopher, Ellen’s protective instincts hardened. Seldom letting the girls out of her sight, she would take them with her on regular walks to the waterfall, making their way through a tall peppermint forest, treading a well-defined path, cleared of vegetation by the repetition of their own footsteps, following the line of the brook through a moist verdant gully toward the hissing of the falls. The understorey of the forest was a luxuriant tapestry of zamia palms, maidenhair ferns, donkey orchids and blackboy trees.

Edith and Fanny could manage the mile-long walk taking turns carrying Mary, but little Charlotte had to be carried, at least until Ellen’s belly swelled again and she could carry her the distance no longer. Concealed

behind the falls was the reason for the daily journey: a limestone cave that offered a cool larder for Ellen's sweet white butter. Ellen was proud of her butter, though it ached her arms to churn it, for it brought a reliable income to the family the year around, unlike the seasonal uncertainties of crop harvests and livestock sales.

The butter-making was an endless cycle. When Alf was at Ellensbrook, milking the cows was his chore; when he was not, it was hers. Wedged on a stool beneath the cows, with a belly that was more often than not bulging, Ellen's protruding navel rose up to meet the charged teats of the animals. Once she had extracted the milk, she poured it into a big, wide pan for heating over a fire, until the cream rose to the surface to be skimmed and poured into the churn. Ellen had a habit of clenching her teeth against the pain of churning, and her jaw ached as much as her arms when it was all over. In the early days of the dairy, many batches of butter, flecked with the writhing bodies of ants, had to be discarded. Alf had made her a four-legged frame to hold the pan at knee height but even so, in the summer it was necessary to drizzle a perimeter of camphor oil on the ground around each leg to deter the insects.

One day, when Ellen was near the end of her term, barely coping with the burden of the child in her arms and the one within, she made the heavy journey to the falls, sensing that this would be the last for a time. She rested on a boulder near the cave's entrance while the three girls placed the keg of butter in the cave. The Aborigines called the glade Meekadaribee, meaning 'the bathing place of the moon'. They believed that spirits inhabited the cave, but these were friendly spirits, a pair of sweethearts whose laughter echoed in the falling water. Ellen did not mind the idea of the spirits – certainly, if they existed, they had never caused any harm to her butter. She liked to come here and often lingered to savour the tranquility of the place before returning to her toils at Ellensbrook.

With the butter safeguarded from spoiling, she was glad to pause a little longer in the heat of the late January day, and allowed the girls to paddle in the brook. Edith helped the two younger ones remove their shoes and stockings and tie the hems of their dresses in a front knot to keep them dry.

The girls swished about in the rippling water, squealing when a school of minnows skimmed past their ankles.

As she watched the girls from her vantage point above the falls, Ellen's eyes were momentarily diverted to a quivering bush on the other side of the brook. An instant later, the bush grew still. Ellen thought nothing of it, presuming the cause of the bush's movement to be a skink or other small forest animal. Fanny drew her attention back to the water-play with an urgent shout, thrusting a fist-sized black crayfish into the air and begging to take it home to cook for dinner.

Edith interrupted with an urgent call.

'Mama! Look – there's a boy over there.'

Edith was pointing across the brook where a slight dark figure was standing on the bank, as still as a statue. The girls stopped their play and went mute. Ellen guessed the person to be a native boy of perhaps ten. Even from the other side of the brook, she could see water pooling in the boy's eyes. His distress pained her. She called out to him in the native language, asked him if he was lost.

The boy did not answer, but leapt down the embankment and crossed a random causeway of stones to reach the near side of the brook. He planted his bare feet in the strip of sand and rubble beach and stared up at Ellen. Inspecting him closer, she noticed a distinct slant to his eyes and his chiseled, angular cheeks, thinking he did not look like a full-blooded Aborigine. The girls remained ankle-deep in the water, alternately ogling the strange boy and glancing at their mother to see what she would do.

In a gravelly near-whisper, it was the boy who broke the silence.

'Have you seen my pigs?'

Ellen was startled to hear him speak in English and knew at once that he must be in service to a settler household.

'No.' Ellen answered with a firm shake of her head, as she was accustomed to doing with Aboriginal servants, to be sure they understood.

'Where are you from?'

'Captain Molloy's. I've been minding his pigs, but they've run away.'

Ellen was astonished at the quality of his spoken English. 'You are a long way from Augusta. Will you go back to Captain Molloy?'

‘If I go back he will punish me. Please may I go with you?’

*What will Alf say?* Ellen seized an excuse to bring the boy back to Ellensbrook.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Yes ma-am.’

‘Then come with us and we’ll give you something to eat.’

The boy climbed up the embankment and followed them to the homestead. Brown and stringy, he made an odd addition to the feminine Bussell procession. He was dressed like a white colonial boy, but a poor one, with a torn shirt and breeches that would have been a good fit for Alf. The crutch hung just above his knees, and the bottoms were rolled up, exposing his skinny shanks. It was a comical little gang they made, this bush-urchin who’d lost his pigs, and her pensive water-sprites, who kept an uncharacteristic silence all the way back to the homestead. *They have seen so few boys in their young lives, other than poor Christopher who had hardly lived to be a boy*, Ellen thought.

When Alf came back from digging potatoes, the boy was sitting cross-legged by the front door, busy with a heel of bread and dripping. Alf asked the boy what brought him here, and the story of the lost pigs was repeated, the fear of Captain Molloy amplified in the telling. Alf tilted his head toward the boy and gave Ellen a look that said, ‘*another mouth to feed?*’

‘But we need more help, Alf. The girls and I must do everything when you are not here.’

‘We need men, not boys. By his own account he cannot even keep charge of a few pigs. What use would he be on a cattle run?’

Alf’s tone was less contrary than his words, so Ellen left his question unanswered and let the matter linger in the air between them. When milking time came around, Alf went to saddle up one of the horses. Ignoring the boy, who held his horse for him while he mounted, Alf rode off down the cattle track without saying a word. The boy watched him recede into the bush, with a yearning look, Ellen thought.

All the while that Alf was away rounding up the herd, the boy waited quietly at the head of the track. Ellen sat on the verandah with the girls around her, mending a dress of Edith’s to hand down to Fanny. She saw the boy’s

posture stiffen as he peered intently in the direction in which Alf had disappeared, along a trail that was well-dimpled with the hoof prints of horses and cattle. An instant later Ellen sensed what the boy had sensed: a barely perceptible vibration from the ground, a faint pungent-sweet smell of cattle floating down the valley, the familiar signals of the herd's imminent arrival at the milking-yards.

The boy waited for the herd to break into the clearing. Silhouetted against a golden cloud of dust motes, Alf could be seen riding toward the middle of the herd. The boy stood aside while the majority of the herd passed, then ran around behind and prodded the stragglers into the milking-pen. Alf looked guardedly at this interloper, but to Ellen's surprise he gave him some cows to milk, and the boy went about his task in a confident enough fashion. Ellen guessed that the milking took a good half hour less than usual, and when it was all finished Alf led the boy back to the homestead and asked him if he would like to stay on to work at Ellensbrook.

From that instant the boy, who said his name was Samuel Isaacs, became a part of Ellensbrook homestead, and in the year 1865 he went with them to Wallcliffe. Sam parted with few details of his history, but it seemed that his young life had transcended two worlds, that of his mother's people and that of the settlers and landowners. In his early years he led a wandering existence, sheltering from the ocean gales of winter high on the ridges above the Blackwood River, where they survived by eating roots and hunting kangaroo and possums, and then descending to the wetlands in spring to feed off frogs and tortoises, in summer moving to the coastal shores and estuaries to trap fish. Sam told the Bussells he had never known his father, but he believed him to be an American whaler. Of his mother he had few memories, only that her death marked the end of his tribal life and the beginning of a new existence with white settlers.

Three days after Sam Isaacs arrived at Ellensbrook, Alf went away droving cattle to the Vasse. As a precaution before his departure, he had calculated the date of Ellen's confinement.

'I shall be back well in time for the arrival of our new little blessing,' he told her as he left.

But the baby had already dropped low in Ellen's belly, and she sensed that it might come early, unlike the other children who had been predictable, always obedient to Alf's predictions. She waited until she was sure the pains were real before sending Sam to fetch Mary Anne Smith from the dairy at Boodjidup. Sam had been given no permission to ride their horses, but Ellen felt within herself an urgency, and could not wait for him to go on foot. She directed him down the track that led in a south-easterly direction to the dairy two miles away, and he returned within the hour, followed by Mary-Anne on horseback.

That night, assisted by her childhood friend and midwife, Ellen gave birth to Grace Vernon. Alf returned two days later to find that the homestead's population had increased yet again. Mellowed by the birth of another healthy child, even though it was another girl, he found no grudge with Sam taking the horse, and gave him permission to ride it for his duties on the farm.

Alf thought it courteous to write to tell Captain John Molloy about the runaway boy, while hoping his disclosure would not lead to the boy's return to his former employer. Three weeks later Molloy's response arrived, giving validation of Sam Isaac's scant account of his life thus far.

*To Alfred Vernon Bussell, Ellensbrook*

*3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1860*

*Dear Alfred*

*I am delighted to acknowledge your letter bearing news of the birth of your precious Grace. May I convey my sincere congratulations to you and Mrs Bussell. You have chosen a most serendipitous name for your daughter, and may she, like her namesake, bring many blessings and joy to your household.*

*It is very kind of you to bring the matter of Sam Isaacs to my attention. I was aware of his disappearance, having expected him to arrive at Fairlawn with some twenty pigs by the second week of January, and by the latter end of the month I was beginning to fear that some misfortune had befallen him. As you*

*are no doubt aware, since the start of the warmer weather there have been frequent disturbances among the Aborigines, most particularly outbreaks of violent feuding among the tribes up on the escarpment. This unrest has instilled much anxiety among the servants on properties here at the Vasse, and several of them have gone missing in recent weeks.*

*It is with relief that I learn the boy Sam Isaacs is alive and apparently well, although the fate of the pigs is, and will likely remain, a mystery. I am at pains to believe that the pigs have been lost under his caretaking, as he is a reliable and competent pig herder, and indeed he shows great promise as a stockman despite his youth and stature. It is more probable that the pigs were stolen from him, and the boy has been overcome by shame and too frightened to return to my employ.*

*Livestock stealing has regrettably become such a commonplace occurrence in the area. I am certain that you share my concerns about the tide of lawlessness advancing through the colony, largely perpetuated, I am obliged to say, by men who have secured their ticket of leave and, fuelled by habitual intemperance, are seeking to make a living through illegitimate means. I have complained to the government about the laxity of standards applied when determining a convict's preparedness for release, but my warnings have gone unheeded. In the discharge of my duties as magistrate I am increasingly called upon to deal with the consequences of this degenerate society, and I can assure you that the stocks I have had built at Busselton are seldom empty.*

*Your offer to return the boy to me is honourable, but since he is not encumbered to me in any way, and seems to have settled in well at Ellensbrook and proving himself to be a useful hand, I propose that he remain with you, considering there is such a dearth of capable male servants in the area.*

*I shall be pleased to disclose what little I know of the boy's history. He is a half-caste, his father being an American Negro whaler, apparently with the name of Saul Isaacs, and his mother a local Aboriginal woman. The offspring was given the tribal name of 'Yebble' and is thought to have roamed with his tribal group for the first three or four years of his life. When his mother died he was brought to the Dawson family at Westbrook, where he was succoured and raised by Anne Dawson and the native servants, until he was old enough to come to work for me. No doubt you will have remarked on the boy's refined English speech, and this is a credit to the Dawsons, who included him in schooling and worship and afforded him many of the benefits of a pious and cultured household. He has learned to catch a horse and has acquired livestock handling skills far beyond what would be expected of a boy of his years.*

*I commend Sam Isaacs to you, and trust that this sparse information will give you some comfort in the event you decide to provide a permanent home for him Ellensbrook. Please convey to Sam that should he ever wish to return to Fairlawn, he will be most welcome, and the loss of the pigs is forgiven.*

*My home is always open to you and your family, and I hope you will call in when you are next at the Vasse. Until then I remain,*

*Yours faithfully,*

*John Molloy*

*Fairlawn, Busselton*

Although the Bussells were glad to receive the Captain's endorsement of Sam Isaacs, they had no need of it by the time the letter came, as they had ample proof of the boy's horsemanship, his skill with stock-handling and above all his prompt actions at the start of Ellen's confinement. Sam was given more duties around the homestead – milking, droving, handling the

bullock teams and tending to the vegetable crops. Even with his small boy's feet, he managed to fill Alf's grown-man's shoes; although the mystery of lost pigs was never answered. But soon after he came to live at Ellensbrook the squeals of feral pigs were often heard in the forest at night; footprints and scraps of hide were found amongst the blackberry bushes that grew wild around the homestead.

## Chapter 6

*28th November 1876. Fremantle.*

WITH each day spent waiting on the jetty at Fremantle, the tightly-wrapped wad of notes in Annie Simpson's dress pocket grew thinner. She had not planned for such a long delay in the port, and with the ship yet to arrive she and wondered if her money would run out, leaving her to ask for charity, or starve.

She had paid fifteen pounds for a steerage class ticket, and this amount included her meals for the duration of the voyage. Once in Adelaide her husband would take care of her, or so she hoped, though in the weeks before he sailed for South Australia he had no work at all, and their table had been very meager indeed.

Bundling six-month-old Henry and a shabby portmanteau onto a bullock cart, Annie had left the lodging-house in Fremantle the day before the *Georgette's* scheduled departure, to save paying another week's rent in advance. She thought it best to save her money and spend the waiting-time on the jetty, as many steerage passengers did. After all, it was nearly summer and the weather should be warm enough.

So she joined the sorry lot of passengers on the jetty, with little protection from the sun and ocean winds, only the timber wharf for a bed and the portmanteau for a pillow. Henry was the only infant in the group on the jetty, but far from drawing sympathy, his strident cries were a source of irritation to the other rough sleepers. Annie felt it best to keep her distance from them. When the baby needed to suckle, she took him away from the jetty, crossing the sandy foreshore to perch on a rocky outcrop. There, she and Henry were free to be mother and babe, with all of the natural functions that went along with that.

The ship did not sail on the 25<sup>th</sup> – it did not even arrive in port. After three days on the jetty, Annie was bone-tired. She did her best to tidy her hair and keep her dress as clean and orderly as her situation allowed, but marks and stains, largely caused by Henry, were appearing on her clothing. The infant himself looked increasingly grubby as the days wore on and she hoped

the ship would afford some means to repair the shabbiness of them both, before she disembarked at Port Adelaide into the care of her waiting husband.

In spite of her dishevelled state, when she walked at large in the port, Annie was aware that she attracted the attention of men. The days of exposure to sun and wind had heightened her colour, but she still had the fine complexion typical of a young Englishwoman, and delicate features. Self-conscious about the leers and whistles that came her way, she ventured away from the jetty and into the streets only to buy food, eating humbly and sparsely, relying on coarse brown bread as her staple, supplemented with apples from a fruit stall in High Street. Next door to the fruit stall was Miss Jewitt's shop, a popular establishment with the ladies of Fremantle, its window displaying fine china cups and figurines, shell buttons and silver filigree jewellery boxes and darling little baby dresses, things that Annie could only admire, but not have, or at least for now.

After buying her modest rations for the day, she made her way down High Street with Henry sleeping heavily in her arms, avoiding looking to the left or the right or most particularly, directly into the eyes of the men she passed, especially those loitering outside the public-houses.

'A very good day to ya, my sweet English Rose, ye look a little weary, would ye stop and take a sip of wine with me?'

'Where are your off too, darlin', all on your own with that little bairn? Shame on your husband for for lettin' you go about without a man's protection. Can I walk along with you?'

*Protection.* Annie was worldly enough to know the man's concerns were not genuine. She knew it was not protection he was offering her, but something more knowing and selfish. The unworthy cad's remarks disturbed the deep well of resentment she was harbouring, a well that had filled up a little more with each passing day since her marriage to Nigel Simpson the previous year. Barely sixteen at the time, Annie had been given little to say about the matter. She considered her circumstance to be as bleak as slavery itself, perhaps worse, because the author of her banishment from England was her own mother.

'Your step-father and I cannot support you any longer. It is time you found a husband to take care of you. Mr Simpson is strong and capable – he is

a little older than you, but that is good – he has experience in the world. He will *protect* you.’

Annie had stepped on to the gangplank at Liverpool, in the grip of a large, coarse man who, after only a few days of their entering the matrimonial state, had left her shivery and tender. His rough beard had abraded Annie’s face and neck, his greedy hands had pressed and kneaded her body until it was mottled blue and yellow. But the worst pain she suffered was the dull ache in her throat, her chest, the pain of her grief at leaving England.

The voyage lasted four months. Annie and her husband travelled steerage class, where they were allocated a sleeping compartment between decks, barely wider than a casket and only as long, divided by a partition that Mr Simpson clambered over each night. He would land heavily on top of her, making urgent rhythmic gasping noises that Annie hoped would be taken for snoring by the other passengers lying so near. In the mornings she could not look them in the eye.

Annie, like most of the passengers, suffered from seasickness, more so in the early days. She made the most of the short intervals when they were permitted on deck, congregating with the other women and children in a location designated for the steerage passengers, her husband joining a huddle of men nearby playing dice games in calm weather, cards when the ship’s roll was more vigorous. Mostly the men conversed in an amiable banter, but sometimes, when flasks of whiskey were seen stealthily flashing between pocket and mouth, the voices changed, growing loud and snarly. Some flare-ups ended in a fist-fight, usually short-lived, since the crew would hear the commotion and break up the *melée*.

They rounded the Cape of Good Hope in a gale, and Annie’s seasickness returned. She remained wretchedly sick – as did most of the passengers – as the ship headed east across a northerly stretch of the Southern Ocean, gunned along by the Roaring Forties. The weather and heavy seas made it intolerable to go on deck until the final few weeks of the voyage as they neared the west coast of Australia in January. The ship headed north-east, crossing a warm south-flowing current as they made toward the as yet unseen land. The seas were calmer now, but still Annie’s sickness lingered

on, this time in a different guise, gripping her each morning and leaving her able to tolerate only ship's biscuits.

Annie knew little about these matters, but when her monthly curse failed to arrive she told her husband she thought she may be with child. His response was churlish; they did not need the burden of a child so soon. When they arrived in Fremantle he took a tiny room in a lodging house and found patchy work on the wharves. Simpson, who seemed oblivious to his wife's rounding belly, found her a situation in the laundry at the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum and Invalid Depot. One wet autumn morning, Annie reported for her first shift of duty, arriving at the establishment's iron gate in a gown and cape saturated by rainwater after a two-mile walk from the lodging house. The rainfall in Australia was such as she'd never experienced in England; this rain came down not in drops but in wide sluices that cascaded down her back and spilled over the brim of her hat like a tiered fountain.

Dull and grey, the asylum building loomed faintly, like a ghost, out of the monotonous watery-grey landscape. To Annie, the asylum looked as daunting as one of those official buildings in Liverpool – the Collegiate perhaps – all pointed arches and tall, narrow windows, good for spying out from within perhaps, but useless for letting in the light. In Fremantle, this town of simple whitewashed buildings, it was an old-fashioned oddity. Within its grimness resided a miserable population of humanity, a rabble of able-bodied insane who mingled freely with those who were lame and sick but of sound mind, and in the bedlam of it all the infirmities of the inmates coalesced. So the tubercular or tumour-riddled would learn to wail in concert with the lunatics or rock silently in piss-soaked corners; and the insane would begin to cough or break their limbs in frenzied altercations with real or imagined assailants.

Annie spent ten hours a day scrubbing and wringing and beating sheets and gowns discoloured beyond any redemption. She was glad that her work kept her separate from the inmates, although on one occasion a gargantuan female inmate broke into the laundry and tipped Annie headfirst into tub of grey washwater, holding her under until two orderlies subdued the woman. Annie felt the panic of her child within, flailing and beating against her belly as she fought against the purposeful grip of the woman's hand on

the back of her head, wondering if she had come all the way across the sea in a ship only to be drowned in a foot and a half of dirty water in a dank hospital laundry. Then afterward, as she retched and barked on the laundry floor, Annie wondered if that child would die in her womb from the shock of its mother having been deprived of air, or whether it would be born blind or blue or simple-minded; but soon after, its movements seemed to regulate again, vigorous but calm, and the child stayed there intact while she carried on with her work at the asylum, all the way through until the time of her confinement, finally delivering a healthy baby boy in their lodging house with the help of a kindly midwife named Granny Adams.

After Henry's birth, they had to make do with only Mr Simpson's wages. But Annie saw less and less housekeeping money, the more he gallivanted around Fremantle at night, often returning to the lodging-house in the early hours of the morning, lurching and stinking of cheap brandy. His snores would ripple through the little room, atomising the vapours from his sour stomach and creating an unbearable atmosphere within the close confines, even prompting the occupants next door to bang on the wall. Annie would bundle up the fretful Henry and walk him up and down on the footpath in front of the lodging-house until the dawn broke over Fremantle and it was time to rouse her husband to go to work.

Then one morning, barely an hour after he had left to go to work, Nigel Simpson returned to the lodgings.

'What're you lookin' at? They've given me the sack. '

'What will we do now? Will you look for other work?'

'Not in Fremantle. Not in this god-forsaken hole of a place. I'll head on to Adelaide. We should've gone there from the start. The port is growin' fast – they're cryin' out for men. You can come out later, when that one is big enough.'

Six months later, Annie had received only two letters from Simpson, the first containing a hair-raising account of the bad weather that accompanied his tumultuous voyage to Adelaide on the *Georgette*; and the second containing a little money and a curt note demanding that she take the next steamer from Fremantle.

Now, as Annie hurried on past the low-life men in High Street to reach the comparative sanctuary of the jetty, she wondered if her husband had also spoken to ladies in such a forward manner when he roamed the streets of Fremantle at night. Or whether he was doing so now perhaps, in the port of Adelaide.

## Chapter 7

*27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> November 1876. Fremantle.*

THE iron steamer crossed Gage Roads in the early hours of the 27<sup>th</sup>, guided by the beacon at Arthur Head. Lying spread-eagled in his cabin, Captain Godfrey convulsed between consciousness and sleep. From his slack mouth came an assortment of snorts and wheezes worthy of a barnyard menagerie. The Captain's agitation was due not so much to the rough passage, but to his earlier indiscretion with the whiskey bottle. As he arrived at a fully wakeful state, remorse greeted him like a baleful wife.

Godfrey's contrition was quickly eclipsed by bodily distress. He was helpless in the grip of the cheap whiskey's retaliation, groaning at the after-burn of spirit in his throat and the churn of bile in his stomach. With a well-practised reflex, he pulled a chamber pot from beneath his bed and puked into it, each lusty heave triggering a pang in his head. His stomach contracted like a bellows and he feared his skull would implode.

When his exertions could yield nothing more from his belly, Godfrey gingerly sat upright and placed his feet on the cabin floor. He rang the bell for the cabin boy, but the sound of the little clanger made him giddy and he lolled back on the bed. Soon there was a timid knock at the door and Godfrey feebly called out for the boy to enter.

The door opened slowly, bringing a wash of fresh air into the fetid cabin. The Captain's malaise eased perceptibly, but James Nunan, the fifteen-year-old cabin boy, was not so lucky. As he peeked around the edge of the door, clearly apprehensive about what he might encounter within, his nose wrinkled involuntarily. Godfrey noticed this with irritation.

'Take this,' he ordered, pointing to the reeking chamber pot, 'and bring me a basin of warm water and a cup of strong tea,' ordered Godfrey,

Thirty minutes later, somewhat restored, the Captain went up to the bridge. John Dewar was at the helm when the ship steamed into Fremantle harbour, sails hauled in and a belch of dirty black smoke blowing to leeward. In the gloomy light of dawn, Godfrey could see the bulbous shape of Thomas Connor standing on the wharf.

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Longing to end her tedious vigil at the jetty, Annie willed the ship to arrive. She'd peered out to sea, scanning the harbour as she'd done so often over the past five days, trying to conjure a vision of the *Georgette* on the horizon. Then as she crossed the grassed reserve and reached eyeshot of the jetty, the sight she longed for materialised: the familiar two-masted mail steamer, its black hull, white topsides and black funnel, coming into the harbour. She watched with relief as the ship made her final approach to the ocean jetty, sails hauled in and a belch of dirty black smoke blowing to leeward.

The ship's arrival in port triggered a flurry of activity as crew and stevedores mustered on the wharf, arriving passengers hovered to collect their luggage, shipping agents, tinkers and vendors mingled and traded. Later that evening several saloon class passengers – Annie guessed them to be so, on account of their fine clothes and luggage – began arriving at the jetty. They looked fresh and rested, clear-eyed and well-fed, unlike herself and the other gaunt wretches who had spent days clinging to the wharf like limpets, their hair and garments crusted with salt and coal soot.

One of the new arrivals was a well-dressed lady, perhaps in her early thirties, and like Annie, unaccompanied by a husband, with a baby about the same age as Henry and a girl of about eight. The lady joined a group of saloon passengers who formed their own society on the jetty. They had brought their luggage in fine wooden trunks and arranged them in a little circle, using the boxes as seats, rather like drawing-room chairs. Sitting on the wharf with her skirt spread around her and Henry tucked in a hollow between her knees, Annie could feel the chill rising up from the water below, through the wharf boards and into her hip bones.

The new arrivals passed the time in polite conversation while they waited for the signal to board. Although she did not wish to eavesdrop, Annie could hear the lady with the two children addressed as Mrs Dixon. The only other lady in the cabin class party was younger, very pretty woman and also apparently unaccompanied by a husband, but with two small children, not yet

walking age. The gentlemen, who eventually numbered seven, included two who bore such a likeness that she guessed them to be a pair of brothers.

The first mate moved about amongst the waiting passengers, starting with the saloon class party and then the steerage, announcing that they would be allowed to board within the hour, although the ship was still some hours away from getting clearance to sail. With Henry becoming fretful and still some time left before boarding, Annie walked off the jetty and carried him away to nurse him at her customary lump of rock. She turned her back to the port and faced out to sea, bending close over the child cradled in her arms and making a cocoon of privacy as best she could.

Bound tightly in a blanket, Henry took his first forceful sucks and then jerked his head back, as if propelled by the force of the jetting milk. He forked his legs to his chest, opened his mouth wide and sucked in several lungful of air till he was full like a bellows. With a strident cry and a thrust of legs, the child expelled the air. Halfway down his body, the blanket bloomed with a wet patch that quickly seeped through to the sleeve of his mother's dress. For Annie, his crying set off a newly familiar stinging sensation. She unbuttoned her dress and clamped the child's mouth on her left breast, using the back of her wrist to staunch the flow of milk from her right one. But she was not quick enough, and a drizzle of dampness seeped on to her front.

The sensation of wet warmth lasted only a minute, as a brisk wind blew off the water, drying and chilling her at the same time. Annie pulled her shawl tighter, but it was only a summer one, and not at all sufficient for this unseasonably cool end of November. Henry had drained her left teat. Annie went to discretely put him on to the other, but when the infant was midway between, she heard footsteps behind her. Two men came around the rock and looked sideways at her, violating her attempt at concealment. Annie hurried to pull her shawl across her front, but they were too quick, and caught an eyeful. The men gawped and grinned.

‘Good day, ma’am, be careful, you may catch a chest cold.’

They were wearing the uniforms of prison officers. Annie had seen similar on the streets of Fremantle. In the lee of the wind they exuded the stench of cheap spirits.

‘Do you need assistance?’

Annie turned around at the sound of a woman’s voice. It was Mrs Dixon, walking rapidly in their direction, lurching with each step as her boots mired in the sand, her dress sweeping a gritty wake behind her. Taking off her shawl, Mrs Dixon stood between Annie and the men. She stretched the shawl between her outstretched arms, forming a privacy screen. The men laughed and moved along.

‘You should come back to the jetty at once. Fremantle port is no place for a lady on her own.’

It had been a long time since anyone had taken an interest in Annie’s welfare, and she felt oddly close to tears.

‘Where is your husband?’ Mrs Dixon asked bluntly, looking at the cheap ring on Annie’s left hand.

‘He has gone ahead to Adelaide to find work. After the baby arrived I wasn’t fit for the voyage. We are joining him now.’

‘And has he found work?’

‘I am not sure, but he has sent for us, and we will make the best of our situation, whatever that may be.’

Mrs Dixon raised one eyebrow and Annie felt the heat of embarrassment prick her face and neck. A trickle of sweat ran from her armpit down the side of her ribs, mingling with the other effluents that seeped from her every encounter with Henry.

‘When have you last eaten?’ Mrs Dixon’s words were kind, but her manner of speaking was terse.

‘I had a little breakfast this morning but I am not very hungry now.’ Annie was lying.

‘You must eat for your child, if not for yourself.’ Mrs Dixon said this in a less chilly tone. ‘Come and sit with us until the ship sails – we have biscuits and cheese and a little raisin cake.’

They returned to the jetty together, Mrs Dixon walking briskly without the encumbrance of a child to carry and Annie hurrying to keep up with the squawling Henry in her arms. Arriving at the circle of trunks, Annie received cold stares from the other saloon passengers. Mrs Dixon went to her own trunk, on which lay an assortment of small comforts, including a basket of

provisions. She delved into the basket and made up a collation for Annie, wrapped in a sheet of salvaged brown paper. Annie took the gift with some sense of mortification, receiving it as she did in full view of the well-heeled passengers, some looking on with pity, she thought, but others with disdain. But her hunger, and a growing feeling that her milk was becoming scant, helped her overcome her shame.

*The ship leaves soon, she thought. This will be the first and last time I will need to accept charity from Mrs Dixon.*

Annie ate the food discretely, a little way from the other steerage passengers. The weight of food in her stomach had a soothing effect on her nerves. She lapsed into a state of mild soporific bliss, thinking of her new life in Adelaide, fancying she would make friends with Mrs Dixon on the voyage, and they would write to each other forever afterward, and they would visit each other and laugh together at their adventure on the wharf in Fremantle, and remember it not as an inconvenience, but a happy circumstance – the start of a friendship that would last to the end of their days.

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The instant the gangplank was lowered, Thomas Connor crossed it heavily and, true to form, immediately reproached the master for the laggardly voyage to Fremantle. Having earlier shown little concern for the wayward bilge pump, Godfrey now proffered this technical problem as an excuse for the ship's slow speed. He enlisted the two engineers to speak to Connor about it, and eventually they wore down the parsimonious owner, securing his assent to replace the faulty valve in Adelaide.

Connor's patience was sorely tested when the Lloyd's surveyor was delayed. Another day and a night passed before she was inspected and cleared to sail. The surveyor, William Onslow, accompanied by a master shipwright named Storey, spent an hour or more on the inspection. Godfrey perversely hoped that the problem with the pump would be discovered, as further proof to Connor that the delay was caused by technical troubles and not incompetence on his part. But as it eventuated, neither Onslow nor Storey checked the lower part of the pumps, as there was too much cargo in the way. They paid greater attention to the ship's boats, finding the lifeboat in good

condition, but ordering some caulking along the keel of the pinnace and a leak to be repaired on the gig. In the meantime, while the *Georgette* awaited clearance, more passengers arrived in port and booked berths on her, bringing the number on board to seventy-two including crew. The additional passenger fares, combined with the lucrative cargo (of which the timber alone was worth eight hundred pounds) gave Connor some compensation for the delay.

The waiting time in port allowed Godfrey to take stock of his new first mate. William Dundee, a baby-faced ginger-top, joined the ship at Fremantle. He seemed too young to have been eight years at sea; but then he did hold a certificate of competency. Despite the piece of paper, Godfrey had some reservations about the new mate. Dundee had never before served as first officer, never higher than second. Godfrey wondered if the new appointment would put Dewar's nose out of joint; but Dewar could not be promoted, not without a certificate. *Well enough – they will soon enough get the measure of each other*, he thought.

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Executing his first duty after joining the *Georgette*, William Dundee escorted several ladies and their children over the gangplank and into the hands of the stewardess Anne Brennan. He crossed back to the jetty to fetch their larger luggage to place in the hold, selected a small trunk and disappeared below with it. Moments later he came back up, still lugging the trunk. Dundee went over to speak to John Dewar, who was sitting nearby on the deck splicing rope. 'There is no place for the luggage. The hatch is full near to the beams with timber.'

Dewar had his back against the bulwark, legs stretched out in front of him, working a fid into the rope with great concentration. He did not look up at Dundee. 'Store it between the hatch coamings then.'

Dundee set about shifting the luggage from the jetty to the foredeck, wedging the pieces into the space between the raised plates surrounding the hatch openings. When the space was filled he stood there for a moment, looking at the assemblage of valises, portmanteaus and trunks, before going over again to the second mate.

'Where can I find some rope to hold them?'

‘Ye should know where things are kept by now, first officer.’

Dundee hovered for a moment, looking down at the indifferent form of the man who officially reported to him. ‘I’ve hardly been an hour on the ship.’

‘The foc’s’l hatch.’

Dundee went down below into the forecastle and returned with a length of rope. As John Dewar watched him discretely, the first officer lashed the luggage together and wound the ends of the ropes around the coamings of the hatches.

‘I suppose that’ll do as long as it’s smooth as a millpond out there,’ Dewar said. ‘But I can’t see that bein’ the case.’

Putting down his splicing work, Dewar got up, and without a word to Dundee, untied the rope from around the coamings, unwound it from the stash of luggage and made a big performance of re-tying the lot together. As Dundee looked on he ventured to make a defence of his handiwork, but Dewar ignored him till he finished. ‘That’ll hold ‘er all right.’ Dewar stared at Dundee in a calculating sort of way.

Dundee met Dewar’s stare, opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment the Captain summoned him up to bridge. As Dundee walked away he shot his answer over his shoulder. ‘There are more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream.’

**Part II****29<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876**

## Chapter 8

*29<sup>th</sup> November. Coastal waters between Fremantle and Cape Naturaliste.*

FINALLY, at six o'clock in the morning, the *Georgette* cast off from the ocean jetty. A number of passengers had boarded her the night before, but Leake, who preferred to spend as little time on the ship as possible, chose to remain onshore for another night. He had kept his room at the Albert Hotel – in all costing him four nights' tariff – but with the Dempsters nowhere to be seen, his final evening in the port was tedious, as he lacked the initiative to make his own adventure in the dark disorder of Fremantle's streets.

The voyage started out pleasantly enough. A light land breeze was blowing as the ship steamed southward through Cockburn Sound, passing Garden Island to starboard. Most of the passengers were on the decks for this early part of the route, enjoying the calm conditions of the ocean and the balmy weather. At times, schools of snapper broke through the sea's surface in massive whirlpools, all fleshy and pink, eliciting squeals of excitement from the children watching from the decks. The *Georgette* rounded Cape Peron, heading south into Shoalwater Bay, skirting around the windward side of Penguin Island, a landmark Leake knew from previous voyages, though he had never glimpsed the colony of fairy penguins that gave the island its name. They entered Shoalwater Bay and sailed past The Sisters, a pod of reef tops capped with sharp serrations like rows of flukes on prehistoric sea-monsters, their sides rough and textured like scales.

The easterly wind had weakened and for a brief time the air was nearly still. The lull prevailed as they steamed across Warnbro Sound, a wide bay cupped at its southern end by Long Point. Leake knew Long Point well; the *Georgette* had narrowly escaped a wrecking near there three years ago, infamously at the end of her first voyage in the Swan River Colony. She had foundered on the reef, lost her rudder and escaped a total wrecking thanks to a providential increase in the ocean swell. She was floated off the reef, and with her fires still going, she managed to reach Garden Island.

Leake recalled the speculation in the newspapers and the Parliament about the poor condition of the steamer at the time of her mishap. She lacked

power, the critics said, and should never have been selected for the government mail contract. They had voiced lingering concerns about the adequacy of the repairs to her damaged stanchions and her sprung plates. She was allowed to carry on her business as usual, but the taint of the mishap never left the *Georgette*. Leake, being a nervous sailor, had never trusted the seaworthiness of the vessel – not on his previous voyages, and certainly not on this present one.

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The moment she'd stepped across the *Georgette's* gangplank and on to the ship, Annie Simpson had experienced an odd sensation. Was it a tingle or a small shudder? The feeling was as inexplicable as it was disturbing – like a claw grasping the back of her neck, cold damp breaths whistling into her ear. Suddenly feeling unsteady, she paused to rest for a moment in the alley way. 'I hope your mama gets her sea legs soon,' she'd remarked to the infant son in her arms.

As the *Georgette* had steamed out of the harbour, Annie had turned to look back at the port with a sense of aversion combined with relief. Seeing Fremantle from a slightly distant perspective – its scrappy array of low whitewashed buildings, the tawdriness and grime, the shady characters loitering on the wharf – reaffirmed her conviction that she was leaving a bad, mean place. She wondered if that strange flutter she'd felt on boarding the ship was a final display of Fremantle's rancour.

*Deliver us from evil*, she had whispered to the *Georgette*, squeezing the ship's rail with her free hand. For Annie, this vessel was more than a conveyance to South Australia; it was a refuge from the streets of Fremantle, a blessed shelter from the harsh exposure of the wharf. As a steerage passenger, she did not have high expectations of the ship's amenity. And indeed the steerage quarters were cramped and rank with odours from coal oil and bilge water that mingled and circulated below the decks. But none of these things mattered; she and Henry, having lived rough for nearly a week on the wharf and streets of Fremantle, were finally on the *Georgette* under the protection of a captain and crew. The ship seemed seaworthy, though tiny in comparison with the one that had brought her to Australia. She was a paying

passenger with only an infant son to share her berth, no demanding husband to please this time, and only a few days, not several months, to endure the intimate intrusion of strangers and the seasickness. She dreaded the sickness more than any other thing – for how could she care for Henry if she should begin to retch violently – or even worse, if the child should become ill as well? But then she told herself: *It is only for three days, it is perfectly possible to cope, whatever should occur. Only three days.*

While waiting on the wharf, Annie had become friendly with two of the younger ladies. Carrie Hall and Catherine Welch were cheerful and unpretentious girls, about the same age as herself, and also migrants from England. Unlike Annie, the two girls were spinsters, their lives still unmarked, like new sheets of vellum. The three were soon addressing one another by their given names. Catherine, the slighter one, had eyes so dark that she never had to squint against the glare of sunlight. Her hair was black, and not confined to her head; she had fine matching sideburns that strayed over the edge of her bonnet ribbon. Catherine looked so unlike an English girl, Annie thought – she could have been an exotic Spanish *senorita*, or at least until she opened her mouth and spoke with an air-cutting west country burr that soared above the thumping of the *Georgette's* engine. Catherine had a settled air about her; the air of a bespoken woman, an air that Annie had seen before. Annie was often eerily accurate in recognising when other ladies were smugly and comfortably matched, even when there was no ring on a finger nor a betrothed or husband in sight. And surely enough, Catherine revealed, in a matter-of-fact, perhaps even in a slightly prideful way, that she was engaged to marry an Adelaide draper, an Englishman who had courted her by correspondence, a man she had never met. Annie at first thought it strange for a lady to marry someone sight unseen, but then had she not done a similar thing herself, eighteen months ago in Liverpool?

Carrie was a large-framed girl, ginger-haired, with a jutting chin and pale eyes glinting out of plump rolls of lid. Pastilles of barley sugar performed noisy acrobatics in her mouth. Between the clatter of the sweet against her teeth came the brash speech of a Londoner, a voice so rich that her fleshy throat wobbled as she spoke, and an irreverent laugh was always on the brink of bursting out of her overly tight frilled-neck bodice. Carrie was about

to take up a post as a governess in Adelaide – an excellent calling for her new friend, thought Annie. When Carrie was nearby, Annie frequently found her arms empty of Henry, so often did the future governess take the child and walk him up and down the deck, pointing out to him the activities of the ship – the sails filling, men and seagulls high up in the rigging, lighters gliding by as the *Georgette* steamed out of the harbour. Henry mimicked Carrie's pointing finger and stared round-eyed at the sights and sounds, and Annie thought the child looked as chirpy as she'd seen him in some time.

As the *Georgette* made her way through Cockburn Sound, the weather was fine and mild and most passengers gathered on the decks, the saloon passengers taking their designated place on the after deck, the steerage passengers on the foredeck. Promenading in the company of her two new friends, Annie passed Mrs Dixon and Mrs Davis along the alley way, each party going toward their respective decks. Annie had not seen Mrs Dixon since the wharf, and greeted the lady with a friendly 'good morning', but received only a cursory nod in return.

Carrie and Catherine looked at Annie curiously. The impact of the snub was like a torch to Annie's face. She reddened; sweat seeped from her pores. They reached the foredeck and stood by the rail, looking out toward the open ocean in an awkward silence.

'Let me hold him – I cannot have enough of this beautiful boy,' Carrie said, a little too nicely, as she reached for Henry.

And then the majesty of nature erased the thought of Annie's social embarrassment. She heard a rumble, rather like the noise of a train coming in to Liverpool Station. The disturbance burbled up from under the sea, bringing with it an eruption of bubbles and eddies. Next a glossy black mound burst through the centre of the whirlpool, lifted itself into a supple, muscular arc and plunged its forward mass back beneath the water, sending its fluked tail upward in a final flourish. The young ladies screamed, at first in fear, but then in excitement when it was apparent that the whale's intentions were benign. The animal broke the surface a second time, followed by a diminutive copy of itself, a calf that leapt out of the water in the mother's wake, emulating the same arc of flight in miniature. By now many of the steerage passengers were

on the foredeck, leaning over the rail, exclaiming in delight, straining to catch a glimpse of the whale calf and its mother.

The whales kept pace with the *Georgette* as the ship steamed through the water. They maintained a position next to her foresail, allowing the steerage passengers the best view of the spectacle. Hearing the shouts coming from the foredeck, a handful of saloon passengers came forward to get a better look. Just at that moment Annie's bonnet blew off her head, fortunately catching on the railing, clinging to it long enough for one of the men to catch it before it could fly overboard. The man was young, probably the youngest in cabin class. Annie had seen him boarding at the wharf – he was well-dressed with a mild, pleasant face. He approached her, holding the bonnet outstretched, and she took it with some embarrassment as it was a cheap, shabby old thing. She expected the young man to back away immediately and join the other cabin passengers, but he did not. Instead, he remained next to her at the rail, watching the frolicking whales over the side.

'They are quite a sight to behold, are they not?'

'Oh rather!'

Annie cringed at her gauche answer but her shyness would not let her say more than that.

'Have you seen whales before?'

Annie *had* come close to seeing whales before. A pod was seen from the ship that brought her from England; but it was gone by the time the steerage passengers were allowed up on deck.

'No, never before. But I find them quite magnificent.'

'They are often seen in these waters at this time of year,' he said, 'migrating south to cooler waters for the summer.'

'You seem to know a lot about them.'

'Not much more than I have just said, but I have seen the whales many times on this route. Although I would rather see them swimming free like this, than harpooned in King George Sound, waiting to be butchered at the whaling station.'

Finding the young man personable, Annie began to find her tongue.

'Do you think this mother and calf are swimming into danger?'

‘Oh yes, but not nearly as much as before, not since kerosene. The price of whale oil has dropped, and these days there are far fewer whaling boats. But still, it is a risky migration.’

‘So you take the steamer often? Are you going all the way to Adelaide?’

‘Yes, I went to school at St Peter’s. I have made my own migration many times.’

This was said with a playful smile. ‘And now I must make it again, to bring my sister home. I would rather not travel this route any more, but duty calls.’

He gave an exaggerated roll of the eyes. Annie laughed, and so did he. To her left, Carrie and Catherine began to giggle. Over the young man’s shoulder Annie could see Mrs Dixon and Mrs Davis, watching them with stony faces.

He held out his hand. ‘I am George Leake, from Perth.’

Annie was loathe to disclose very much at all about her circumstances. She reciprocated in the most perfunctory way she could, and diverted the conversation to her friends. ‘Annie Simpson. And this is Miss Hall and Miss Welch.’

They reached across Annie to shake hands with the young man.

‘Are you also going all the way to Adelaide, Miss? Simpson?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah. What takes you there?’

‘I am joining my husband.’

Was it a look of disappointment on his face? Annie was not a conceited girl, but she wondered if he fancied her. They watched the sea in silence for a few more minutes, but the whales were no longer visible by the ship’s side.

‘Well I do wish you a very good journey, Mrs Simpson. Ladies.’

After he had gone, Annie continued to study the ocean, not quite convinced the whales had left. And she was correct. About a hundred yards to starboard, an arc of water shot into the air like white fireworks. A projectile of sleek black flesh rolled through it, and then another, smaller eruption followed in its wake. And with that final salute, the whales were gone.

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The idyllic conditions that prevailed for early part of the voyage came to an end all too soon. As midday approached, Leake felt the predictable rush of the sou'westerly, the daily phenomenon known as the 'Fremantle Doctor', as it began to fill the sails and grab at men's hats and ladies' bonnets. In the scorching days of summer, the people of Perth and Fremantle welcomed the Doctor's cooling draughts, but out to sea it created turbulent conditions for sailors. Until the wind began to tease and tug at him, Leake indulged in a little reverie about his brief conversation with the pretty English girl. He could not quite put his finger on it, but she seemed to have an unusual fortitude that he had never seen before amongst the circle of young ladies with whom he socialised in Perth. Mrs Simpson was quite a paradox, really; she had the looks of a porcelain doll, but then she seemed confoundingly unaffected. None of Leake's cossetted sisters could travel aboard a steamer by themselves, let alone with an infant in tow.

As the ship's roll became more pronounced, an unwelcome sensation rose from the pit of Leake's stomach and extinguished the glow of his afterthoughts about Annie Simpson. Seized with an attack of *mal de mer*, Leake went to lie down, rueing having to share a cabin, and hating the odious prospect of inflicting the insult of his stomach contents on a cabin-mate, who happened in this instance to be Thomas Connor.

Leake, being by far the younger of the two travellers, had offered to take the upper bunk. Hauling himself up and over the bunk rail, he went to draw back the blanket but found it wet with seawater. Beneath the blanket, the linen was also damp, impossibly damp to lie upon. He was about to call for the cabin boy to change the bedding, but saw that drops of water were perpetually falling on the bunk, oozing through crevices in the panelling. What to do? A change of bedding? Futile. A change of cabin? There are none spare. In a more robust state he would have complained to the steward, but at this moment he felt too nauseated to speak. Irritably, he decided to make do with the floor. Using his coat as a mattress and his portmanteau as a pillow, Leake lay on his damp makeshift bed for hours, white-faced and wretched, lapsing in and out of sleep between episodes of vomiting into a chamber-pot.

He passed the rest of the day and evening in that collapsed state, unable to exchange the most basic of civilities with Mr Connor. The ship's owner kept calling in and out of the cabin on brief errands, his bulk oozing into the narrow space as he bumped against the bunk framing and wash stand, groping about for his tobacco or topcoat, leafing through his valise, shuffling papers. Leake feigned sleep, afraid that Connor would try to speak to him. He wondered if the papers concerned a certain legal matter that Connor would wish to discuss in the privacy of their cabin. Leake gave him no sign of wakefulness and Connor at last eased his large shape into the cosy, dry cave of the lower bunk and extinguished the oil lamp.

As evening passed into night, Leake's stomach, having calmed for the past few hours, began to sicken again. He turned himself face down, pressing his belly into the cabin floor. The position had a calming effect and kept his insides intact until the early hours of the next morning, when the ship was brought to in the channel of Bunbury harbour. In the act of turning from a prone to supine position, he triggered another episode of dry retching. When it was over, he groggily made his way up to the deck and propped himself up against the starboard side of the round house, upwind from the *Georgette's* spewing funnel. He opened his mouth and gulped draft after draft of cleansing air, until he felt well enough to ask Nunan, the cabin boy, to fetch him a cup of strong tea and some bread. Leake credited his recovery to the fresh easterly winds blowing off the interior of the land – the same winds that usually made him stay indoors, as they tended to unleash springs of water from his eyes and nose. But now on the deck of the *Georgette*, he found it preferable to suffer leaking eyes and nose than endure a heaving stomach.

Two passengers disembarked in the Captain's gig and the ship got under way again, bound for the Vasse and then on to Albany. Leake felt so restored that he dared not go down below decks. Standing on the foredeck as they rounded Casuarina Point and headed out into the open ocean, he gripped the rail tightly as the ship rolled into the growing swell and approached the full exposure of Geographe Bay. Leake's eyes followed the rise and fall of the bow. The cabin boy came and asked him if he would like more tea, but the thought of taking anything brought Leake back into the grip of nausea. He pressed his lips firmly shut and shook his head.

‘Sir, you may find it helpful to keep your eyes fixed on the horizon,’ the cabin boy said.

Leake followed Nunan’s advice and peered out over the sea, his eyes finding a place where the moonlit shimmering of the ocean gave way to a faint dark horizon. With the land on her portside, the ship followed a south-westerly course across Geographe Bay, steaming toward the Vasse. The full moon hung low over the interior. As night yielded to dawn, the moon sank slowly behind the Darling Range, like the gradual extinguishing of a lantern, casting a deep opacity over the night sky and bringing the stars into piercing relief. Leake occupied himself by picking out the constellations he had learned about in school – Orion, Scorpius, the Southern Cross – until a carmine-red rim appeared eastward over the land and washed across the heavens, scrubbing out the stars with the imperative of a new daybreak.

They arrived at the Vasse at seven o’clock and remained only a half hour or so before setting off for Albany. Leake, feeling restored and grateful to the cabin boy, managed a little breakfast of bread and bacon, consumed on the deck where he remained for most of the day. Encouraged by the smooth conditions of the sea and the fine balmy air, more passengers came up on deck. Some of the other gentlemen from saloon class formed a coterie around Leake on the after deck. The group was made up of up of the Dempsters and Connor and three others – Mr Poole, Mr Lambe and Mr Geddes – who he had encountered but briefly before his malaise struck him down. Sheltering from the sun in the shady side of the round house, they exchanged information about their reasons for being aboard the *Georgette* on this particular voyage. All save the Dempsters were bound for Adelaide. Geddes had made numerous passages aboard her (a fact he liked to point out frequently) and seemed to take a great interest in the workings of the ship.

There only two ladies in saloon class; presently they too appeared on deck and stood a little apart from the men. Leake recognised the pretty young woman they’d seen in the Albert Hotel, the one who had so caught James Dempster’s fancy. Although still pale and fragile in appearance, she had gained some colour in the fresh ocean breeze. Her warmed complexion was most admirably set off, Leake thought, by the crisp whiteness of her sailor collar blouse. Her companion was a lady some ten years her senior, and very

elaborately dressed for a promenade on a ship's deck; her maroon taffeta dress, with its bouffant pagoda sleeves and ample bustle, occupied a broad swathe of deck between the rail and the roundhouse, almost impeding others from passing.

The men glanced discretely at the two ladies, with the exception of James Dempster, who nudged Leake and winked none-too-subtly in the direction of the younger pretty one. Thomas Connor noticed. Being the ship's owner, he had a tendency to assume a proprietorial air; and it was Connor who initiated proper introductions, before James Dempster's ogling would become an embarrassment to them all. The elder lady reciprocated, introducing the younger woman as Mrs Davis, herself as Mrs Dixon.

'Mrs Herbert Dixon of Fremantle?' Mr Connor smirked. The lady answered in the affirmative. 'I have met Mr Dixon on Council business – a very progressive Councillor he is, very progressive. And how are you finding the voyage?'

'Quite satisfactory now that we are finally under way.'

Leake found Mrs Dixon's tone a fraction cold. Her thin lips were set in a disapproving glower. Leake wondered if her gloomy demeanour was precipitated solely by the ship's delay, or whether she held some disdain for Connor.

'The delay was regrettable but unavoidable due to bad weather at Bunbury. Unseasonably bad weather for this time of year.'

Mrs Dixon's slash of a mouth looked stitched together, like a crooked seam. *The lady is not to be mollified*, Leake thought. Evidently, Connor made the same conclusion and directed his conversation to the younger woman. 'And Mrs Davis, are you managing with your two children? It must be quite a burden to be travelling alone.'

'They were much disturbed by last night's rough passage, but the children are now sleeping soundly in the cabin, and I can only hope that the coming night will be calmer,' was her reply.

James Dempster had meanwhile edged closer to the ladies, his eyes fixed on Mrs Davis. 'Your husband must be anxious about you, travelling as you are, such a long way, with no one to look after you,' he said, with a studied look of concern on his face.

‘Mrs Davis will be quite safe,’ Mrs Dixon said dismissively. ‘I have made this voyage before and I shall keep her close company until her family collects her at Adelaide port.’

In a pointed demonstration of custodianship, Mrs Dixon marched her protégé into the saloon, leaving James Dempster with a sheepish grin and the saloon class men to their own company. The abrupt departure of the ladies made Leake feel party to a collective snub. Moving first to fill the awkward air with pithy men’s talk, Mr Geddes initiated a controversial discussion.

‘Mr Connor, how is the work on the Geraldton to Northampton railway line progressing?’

Connor’s answer was a litany of woe. The contract was a poisoned chalice. Nearly twenty miles of track had been laid, almost half the total distance, but it would take another two years at the least to complete. The choice of route for the railway was a travesty, all steep gradients and sharp curves. The mines were growing impatient with the government; they had been calling for the railway for more than twenty years, and now blamed Connor & McKay, the contractors, for the lack of progress.

Leake knew that a damning report on the construction of the Geraldton to Northampton railway had recently been tabled in the Legislative Council. An engineer had been engaged to report on the works, and he concurred that the route chosen for the railway was ill-advised.

‘The construction delays are not of your own making, Mr Connor,’ Leake said diplomatically. Connor continued his lament.

‘The line runs right through the middle of Geraldton’s main street. The road is far too narrow for a railway line. And to make matters worse, the lead price has fallen, and it is doubtful the railway will ever justify its cost.’

Leake wondered why Mr Connor had come all the way from across the Tasman for a thankless construction contract in the Swan River colony, but the blunt Mr Geddes left no gap in the conversation.

‘And now that the mail contract has expired, are you finding sufficient trade to keep the *Georgette* gainfully employed?’

‘Timber,’ was Connor’s answer. ‘Timber. Ship’s full of it now. Current load is for railways in South Australia. We’ve got forward consignments for mines in South Africa, jetties in New Zealand. There’s even

talk of making cobblestones out of the stuff for towns in England. No amount of mail can earn so much. And as for the mails – a beastly business, too finicky. Good riddance to it. This ship's future is in timber.'

His listeners, members of the *Georgette's* human cargo, stood silent in a collective ruminant state.

'Yes, without a doubt, the future's in timber.....and passengers of course.'

To Leake, Connor's little monologue sounded like bluster. His knowledge of the man's legal past told him it *was* bluster. He was glad when the *Georgette's* part-owner excused himself. The conversation pause lasted till Connor was out of earshot; and then James Dempster filled the void with mischief.

'Gentlemen, it seems we are nothing more than a remunerative commodity to Mr Connor. It is odd though that he was prepared to take our money in fares, but barred a gentleman from his ship some months ago – do you remember the case, Mr Leake?'

Articled as he was to his father's law firm, Leake was well acquainted with the case of *Anderson vs Connor*. It was heard in February in the Supreme Court before the Chief Justice and a jury. The senior Mr Leake, Q.C. had represented the defendant, Thomas Connor, who was accused of refusing a Mr J.G. Anderson, a commercial traveller, passage to Champion Bay aboard the *Georgette*. Mr Anderson was seeking damages of five hundred pounds.

For the defence, Leake's father argued that Connor had acted out of ignorance, but once he was informed of his obligations, Connor had immediately withdrawn his ban of Mr Anderson and offered twenty pounds' compensation. In the end, the jury found that Connor had acted out of malice, not ignorance, and Chief Justice Burt imposed a fine on him of one hundred and fifty pounds.

'I do indeed remember the case, James, but I cannot make further comment for reasons you will appreciate.'

William Dempster completed the story that Leake could not tell. 'The whole colony knows that the matter was tit-for-tat. Connor and Anderson had a long-running feud over the *Midas* wreck.'

James picked up the story. ‘Wasn’t she carrying Connor’s timber for New Zealand when she ran aground at Bunbury? Then, without Connor’s knowledge, Anderson bought the salvaged timber for a song. Connor sued to get the full value of his timber back, but he was awarded only a fraction of what the loads were worth.’

‘And then in a fit of pique, he refused passage to Anderson,’ William interjected. ‘Look where it’s got him – out of pocket again, tail between his legs. The man seems to spend more time in court than he does running his commercial ventures. No wonder his railway line is in a parlous state.’

Leake was feeling uncomfortable. Did his sense of unease come from the dredging up of legal matters, or his apprehension about rounding Cape Naturaliste? The increasing bumpiness of the ocean was sending signals through the deck and up into his legs. His knees were working hard to keep him on the level, and he felt his stomach once again growing bilious. He excused himself and went to lie down in his cabin.

## Chapter 9

*29 November 1876. Wallcliffe Homestead.*

THE mulberry tree at Wallcliffe was all a-fruit again, and none too soon, with only a few jars of jam remaining in the larder. Resting on a rocking chair at the end of the verandah, Ellen Bussell studied the tree and her daughters Grace and Violet under it, and credited the rich soils of the Margaret for this year's great bounty of berries.

The girls were clearing the tree of its lush black-red fruit. Ellen knew that not all of the berries would end up in the jam pot, but she did not care. She smiled at 16-year-old Grace's purple lips and teeth that bore testimony to many berries intercepted between tree and basket. *You are still such a child*, Ellen thought. *It is hard to imagine I was already married at your age.*

Ellen was still weak from the birth of Filumena, and not exerting herself very much at all these days – certainly not to take part in such playful work as berry-picking. Mena had taken a toll on Ellen, more so than any of the others had done. But then, perhaps old age was creeping up on Ellen a little sooner than expected? After twelve children it would hardly be surprising. Still, she could not do without any one of them. The loss of the boys, the babies taken from her at Ellensbrook, had made the others all the more precious. The Ellensbrook curse – God be thanked – had not followed them to the new homestead. Jack and Fred were born here at Wallcliffe and were growing up sturdy and bumptious. She had no plan to discourage their high spirits. *Be as noisy as you like*, she told them wordlessly – shout and laugh and cry and run around like little hooligans, just be in my ears and eyes and arms every day and forever.

Just then the boys came up the slope from the river and shot over to the mulberry tree, single-minded in their intent to bother the girls and abscond with a fistful of berries each from the partly-filled baskets. Grace and Violet protested, but Ellen was too languid to intervene or to pull her mind back

from a distant memory of the tree, the day it arrived at Wallcliffe, not long after Alf was sworn in to the Parliament. Governor Weld himself had himself brought the mulberry tree to the Bussell homestead. It had been propagated from an old one in the Government House garden. Mr Weld had made such pomp and ceremony when he presented it to Alfred. He had droned on about some exotic place – was it Ceylon or China? – where mulberry trees grew wild, and their leaves were fed to worms to make silk. *I think we have more important animals to feed than worms, and more useful things to make than silk*, Ellen had thought.

Alf had planted the tree straight away, near the west wall of the house, while the Governor and visitors from Perth looked on. Then they all went inside for tea and scones and debated whether the colony should impose a duty on commodities, or whether members of the Legislative Council should be paid, and other things that Ellen cared little about. Alf had told her that the tree planting was merely an excuse for the Governor to visit Wallcliffe, to show his cronies the substance of the Bussell landholdings and the refinement of the family. It seemed some still needed to be convinced that Alf would be a worthy Parliamentary successor to his brother John. The men looked soft and pallid compared to the sun-weathered folk of the Margaret. Ellen had never seen boots and buckles so shiny. She remarked silently to the visitors: *It is a good thing your coach is right in front of the house, or your fancy fastenings would rust with the salt air and your boots would scuff and perish*. She was not inhospitable, but she longed for them to go and leave her family to go about their comfortable ways.

Though she had never been to Perth, and certainly not to Government House, Ellen thought of the city as a hard and forbidding place, all stone and brick, glass and iron, and people everywhere. ‘You are never alone in Perth,’ Alf had told her. ‘There is always someone in eyeshot, watching, being watched, minding the business of others. You are obliged to look down as you walk, because the stone-paved streets were fouled by horses, bullocks, dogs and in some sordid places, I am distressed to say – people.’

Ellen tried to imagine how it would feel to walk endlessly over hard stone and paving. It was not a situation to be found in Margaret River or Augusta, or even Busselton, where the main crossroads were little more than

dirt tracks. She remembered the great Flat Rock at Augusta that she and Mary Adams had explored nearly forty years ago. They had laughed at the endless hardness of the rock, how smooth and strange it felt underfoot, and they had cried at the cuts and bruises it inflicted when they fell. Ellen imagined the streets of Perth were like that rock, and she felt sorry for anyone who had not had the chance to trudge over the loamy black earth of the forests, the spongy matting of the coastal moors or the yielding sands of the beach that fringed Flinders Bay. Ellen could not envision a life without walking barefoot in soft sand, feeling a warm tickle as the grains washed over the foot and pressed through the toes, like the kneading of warm, yeasty dough through fingers.

Her wandering mind returned to the mulberry tree, where only the high hanging berries still remained. Grace harvested the rest from atop a ladder while Violet lugged her basket past Ellen and into the house. She came out again carrying the baby. ‘Mena is waking Mama, I think she’s hungry.’

‘Give her to me and then fetch Lucy, dear. Last time I saw her she was over in the potato patch.’

*Filumena Weld Bussell.* Holding the fractious child, Ellen wondered if she would ever come to like the name given her youngest. Like the mulberry tree, the name had come from Government House – or rather, from the former Governor himself, Sir Frederick Aloysius Weld, whose wife was called Filumena. Ellen had opposed her husband’s choice, preferring the much prettier name of Cynthia. But Alfred, who had also insisted on naming their next youngest child Frederick, was adamant that the birth of a daughter was a sign that they should bestow a similar honour on the colony’s previous vice regal couple.

‘We shall have a pigeon pair named after the Welds, as a mark of respect to Sir Frederick, and I shall write to him in Tasmania to tell him of our latest little blessing,’ Alf had declared.

Violet returned with Sam Isaacs’ wife Lucy. Ellen handed Mena, who was by now squalling loudly, to Lucy. The servant was still with milk from her second child Lucy Mona, born the year before. Ellen had never given any of her brood (of which Mena was the thirteenth) to a wet nurse, but her last confinement had been more debilitating than any other. It was Lucy herself who took the child from her one day, noticing Ellen had fallen asleep in the

rocking chair with Mena at her breast. From that instant Lucy's milk, which flowed abundantly, became Mena's main source of sustenance.

Ellen watched as Lucy sat cross-legged at the far end of the verandah and began to nurse the child. Immediately the place was restored to welcome silence, other than the sounds of the gentle sou' westerly rippling through the peppermint trees and the faint rush of waves breaking near the river mouth. She could not understand how the servant women could hold such a squatting position for so long, while tending to the potatoes, pounding linen against rocks on the river's edge, or nursing a child. Several times, for the sake of cleanliness if not comfort, she had invited Lucy to nurse Mena on the wooden bench near the kitchen door. But like the other servants, Lucy seemed wary of white men's furniture, preferring above all the ease of the bare ground, but tolerating when necessary the knotted floorboards of the verandah.

*Do all people of colour have such a bond with the earth?* Ellen had wondered, for she knew that the cocoa-skinned Lucy Isaacs was no Aborigine, but rather an American negress who had sailed to the colony from America as a ship's cook. When Lucy had come to cook for them at Wallcliffe, she and Sam were drawn together so speedily that Alf believed the couple had been united by a spirit-bond harking back to their shared connection with the dark continent of Africa.

'It is serendipitous that Lucy has come to us, for if she had not arrived at Wallcliffe, what chance that Sam would find one of his own kind to marry? See how well-matched they are; Sam shows with Lucy none of the reticence he exhibits with the Aboriginal women – the two are like kindred spirits.'

Ellen believed in no such spirit connection, but saw good reason for Sam's attraction to Lucy. The American's dark, cat-like, luminous eyes reminded her of a painting of an Egyptian queen she'd once seen in a picture-book. And then there was Lucy's luscious voice – the sound came out of her mouth as if she'd just swallowed a cup of Alf's eucalyptus honey. Lucy spoke in proper English too, like Sam, but with an odd inflection that was foreign to the speech of the colony. Lucy had a tendency to say things like, 'my word' and 'land's sakes' and 'lickety split'. Once she got used to it, Ellen found Lucy's way of talking quite charming, far easier to like than the plummy

speech of the parliamentarians and doctors, lawyers and other bigwigs who found their way to Wallcliffe from time to time.

When the mulberry tree had been picked clean of fruit, Grace took Violet into the house to hull the harvest, leaving Ellen to anticipate the sugary-burnt smell of boiling jam that would soon be wafting out from the long kitchen to the verandah. Ellen looked out again at the now unladen mulberry tree. Though it had come from some strange faraway country, the tree had thrived at Wallcliffe. As the years passed, it had yielded an ever more abundant berry crop, enough to fill dozens of jars with lustrous black jam. Finally Ellen decided it had earned its place in the garden.

## Chapter 10

30<sup>th</sup> November 1876. Coastal waters between the Vasse and Cape Leeuwin

WILLIAM Geddes was a fly in Godfrey's eye. The Captain found the cabin passenger to be an interfering know-all who lurked and poked about the ship, went into places where passengers had no business and meddled with the crew. The Adelaide-bound passenger seized on every encounter with the Captain to deliver his litany about the ship's condition.

'I have sailed on the *Georgette* many times and never have I seen her so deeply loaded...On every voyage I have gone into the engine room and stoke hole...I have never before seen any water awash in the bilge...The rudder seems to be slightly loose...She is taking a little water over the sides...I was on her when she stranded on the Murray Reef. Are you certain her repairs are holding up?...She is not very lively, Captain.'

Godfrey would have cut the man if Geddes had been in steerage. But Geddes was evidently a man of substance and a regular traveller aboard the *Georgette*. The master bit his tongue and promised to look into those concerns brought to his attention. He grudgingly admitted to himself that the *Georgette* was handling more heavily than usual, but put this down to the weight of her cargo.

Coming into Bunbury port at three thirty in the morning, they anchored in the channel, took off the hatches to retrieve luggage and disembarked passengers in the Captain's gig. They set off again toward the Vasse, entering the broad stretch of Geographe Bay at eight o'clock. The Busselton jetty, having been lengthened the year before, now reached three hundred yards out to sea; but its low water mark at the seaward end still gave clearance of only twelve feet – too shallow to berth the heavily laden *Georgette*. She dropped anchor and waited out in the bay for the water police to board her for their routine inspection and outward report.

At nine o'clock she left the Vasse and headed across the bay on a course west by north into a light nor'westerly wind, close hauled on a starboard tack under fore and aft sail on the approach to Cape Naturaliste, a great finger of land that formed a natural breakwater shielding Geographe Bay

from the full force of the Indian Ocean. She reached the tip of Cape at one o'clock in the afternoon, the land her port side and stern, and came about at two-thirty, two miles out from the land, heading south south-east into foul sou' sou' westerly wind. She held this course until five o'clock under sail and steam, but could hold it no longer due to the foul wind, and came about again on a starboard tack, steering south south-east toward the land.

Godfrey gave the order, 'steady as she goes' before going down below for an early dinner and a restorative tot of spirit to brace him for the coming night. Ahead of them loomed a second cape to go around, and this one to be negotiated in the dark. Cape Leeuwin's clashing of currents had earned it the name of 'Australia's Cape of Good Hope', and Godfrey was always dry-mouthed during the approach and the rounding. When it was over, regardless of the time of day, he would have his own quiet celebration in his cabin – a little steadier after once again negotiating this nerve-wracking stretch of sea.

On this night, when he came back up to the bridge after dinner, the ship was still holding her course going into a fresh breeze and light seas. She was not labouring much, making five knots under steam and the fore raft sail. When they were seven miles off the land Sinclair came up to Godfrey and reported a problem with the bilge pump.

'The engine room pump is very troublesome, Captain.'

Despite the apparent gravity of what he reported, Sinclair spoke in his customary matter-of-fact monotone, like an accountant reading from a balance sheet. 'If I were you, sir, I would get that after pump rigged, in case the pump below stops working. It would be well to get the deck pumps in working order.'

'Is the ship making more water?'

'A little more than normal sir – about two and a half feet of water in the bilge, but that is to be expected, seeing as she is a little deeper in the water than usual on account of the load she's carrying.'

'Is there any cause for alarm?'

'No, but as a precaution we should rig the hand pump on the poop deck and the other on the main deck in the alley way.'

‘In that case proceed to rig them. And perhaps we should shut down the engine to strip down and clean the bilge pump. We can listen for leaks while she’s under sail.’

‘I don’t think that will be necessary sir – there is no cause to stop the engines.’

Godfrey wanted to be as cool as Sinclair, but William Geddes’ words were ringing in his ears. As the first engineer went off to check the hand pumps, the ship once again started to blow off course, and at seven thirty it was necessary to change tack again. They went about on a port tack, steering south west into a fresh head wind and moderate sea. Her sails became useless, and Godfrey ordered them to be taken in. He remained distracted, vaguely uneasy, leery about Sinclair. At seven forty-five, when the ship had settled in to her new course, he ordered John Dewar to check the two deck pumps, and took the unusual step of going with the mate.

‘They were working when I last tried them eight days ago, Captain.’

Dewar gave a few pumps of the handle to the the alley deck pump, under the bridge on the port side, and it drew rusty water – a good sign. Next he tried the poop deck pump above the lazarette – it worked, but drew no water. Bill Dundee came up and lent them a hand to draw and clean the strum boxes. Still the pump would not work. Dewar offered a theory.

‘It could be, Captain, that there is not enough water in the lazarette to draw from.’

‘Check it again at ten o’clock, and again at seven bells.’

.....

*Seven o’clock pm*

After supper, the gentlemen passengers came out of the saloon, leaned against the rail in a companionable file. Leake, who had rallied a little with nightfall, had joined them at table to be sociable, but ate only biscuits and a dish of bread and butter pudding. With difficulty in the blustering breeze, the men – except for Leake who had not taken up the habit of smoking – lit their pipes and looked out at the evening’s vista, the moonlit ocean streaking past. The smell of sulphur from matches mingled with the aroma of honeyed

tobacco smoke, coal oil, salt and gentlemen's cologne. But the weather conditions proved too boisterous even for the seasoned Dempsters, and soon the deck was empty, the men retiring to the saloon to finish their pipes.

'Where's Mr Geddes?' James Lambe asked, talking to no one in particular.

'I expect he's doing the rounds of the ship – masquerading as the Captain,' James Dempster said, causing the lot of them to chuckle.

'If I were the Captain I'd toss him overboard.'

'If the crew doesn't get round to it first.'

'He's a busybody, sure enough, and he's doing his bit to make us all skittish. Keeps talking about the ship's seaworthiness from her accident on the Murray Reef – when was it – about three years ago? Not long after she arrived in the colony.'

Lambe had evidently heard Geddes speak of it. 'It seems Geddes was aboard her at the time. He says it was a miracle she wasn't lost. Must have been a harrowing business. No wonder he's always darting around the ship looking for defects. She was out of commission for some time after that incident, was she not?'

'Indeed,' answered William Dempster. 'She was bilged in the accident. Needed major repairing – patches to her forehold, a new rudder and stern post. It came out that she was not swung, nor her compass tested by the port authorities before she was sent out to work.'

Leake did not like to hear this story brought up again, not while he was out at sea aboard this problematic ship as she made rapid progress toward the second of the dreaded capes: the Leeuwin... *Lioness*. The cape was named after the Dutch ship that charted it two hundred and fifty years before, but this was also an apt name for such a fierce stretch of water. Cape Leeuwin lay low and flat on the horizon and was difficult to see until a ship was nearly upon it. Its brutality arrived by stealth as it caught vessels in a convulsion of two opposing currents while they navigated an obstacle course of small islands, the St Alouarns, and submerged reefs.

At supper, Leake had found his bread and butter pudding, a warm mash of butter, sugar and cinnamon, comforting, but in the smoky fog of the saloon it began to return with a rancid aftertaste. He left the saloon with a

hasty ‘good night’, not from forgetting his manners but being unable to act upon them.

.....

*Seven-thirty pm*

Annie put on her old dress, the one she had worn on the ship from England, her ‘sick dress’, as she thought of it after she had retched over it so many times during the four-month voyage. While working in the laundry in Fremantle, she had tried a number of times to scrub out the stains, but dark marbling had persisted down its faded blue worsted bodice.

The familiar feeling of seasickness had possessed her just a few hours out of Fremantle. During daylight hours, she kept her stomach contents intact by staying on deck, a privilege she had enjoyed only infrequently on the previous voyage to Australia. Henry did not seem bothered by the rolling motion of the ship – indeed, he appeared lulled by it, settling into her arms as she leaned back against the ship’s rail for stability.

That evening, Annie, retiring to the confines of her sleeping berth, she found no rest or relief. Henry showed no sign of sickness, but he became fretful in the close air of the steerage quarters. A rosy flush crept up his neck and under his chin; his skin felt warm and moist. Annie decided to put him in a little linen dress, much lighter than the woolen one he’d been wearing on deck, and removed his stockings.

Her berth was located in quarters set aside for the ladies travelling without husbands, and their children: there were eleven of them in all – the elderly Mrs Stammers who was traveling with her daughter Mrs Hauxwell and two grandchildren; Mrs Harris with her small son, the two Hayworth sisters and a boy of about nine, Herbert Osborne, whose uncle was berthed with the single men.

Few of them had escaped the sickness. On the second night aboard the *Georgette*, the sounds of retching were more prevalent than the first, not only from the adjacent berths of women and children but also from the married quarters; they resonated with the barks and groans of men, punctuated with the vibrato of snoring from those fortunate enough to sleep. The rumbling of

the ship's engine made a continuous counterpoint to the sounds of people in fitful sleep or wretched malaise.

What with the sufferings of others and her own distress, Annie slept little. Henry was wakeful and fractious; in other circumstances she would have taken him out and walked him on the deck. But this night, with such bedlam being made by all, she decided that Henry's racket was no worse than any other, and pretended not to hear the intermittent 'hushes' and signs emanating from nearby berths.

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*Eight-thirty pm*

The ever-inquisitive William Geddes chose a visit to the stinking, noisy engine room over the after-supper spirits and banter in the saloon. Uninvited and unannounced, he climbed down the ladder, brazen as could be, and found not only one engineer but two, both leaning over the bilge pump. Geddes assumed a proprietorial air, as if he were himself the master of the ship.

'There seems to be a lot water in the bilge. The sound of water swashing around is louder than usual. What is the reason for that?'

Sinclair gave an abrupt answer. 'The ship always makes that noise when she's rolling about.' He turned his back on Geddes, who hovered a moment, then climbed back up the ladder without another word.

Sinclair dismissed the passenger. 'The man is a Nosy Parker. He thinks he's in charge. There's one of them on every voyage.' Having vented his spleen, the first engineer seemed to deflate. His voice lowered, his body curled forward in a discrete kind of way. 'This bilge pump has been a curse since we left Champion Bay three weeks ago.'

'As you know, sir, I've tried to fix it myself many times, but the valve is faulty...'

'I know all about the faulty valve, Haurigan, and there is nothing to be done about that till we get to Adelaide. Meanwhile we'll have to rely on the hand pumps. Go and see if the poop deck pump is working properly now.'

Haurigan left the engine room. Sinclair kept fiddling with the bilge pump. As he worked away he fancied the sound of water below was growing

louder. When the second engineer returned, his report gave Sinclair no comfort.

‘I’m not sure if the rose of the pump is clear, sir. The stone ballast is in the way – I’ve not been able to examine it properly.’

‘Keep a close eye on it. I’m going off watch now. Call me if the situation gets any worse.’

.....

*Ten o’clock pm*

Acting on the Captain’s orders, John Dewar checked the hand pumps for a second time that evening. The poop deck pump again drew no water. He tried it again at eleven thirty with the same result, but mentioned nothing to the engineering department.

By now, it was blowing hard and a heavy sea running. At midnight, Dundee came on watch to relieve Dewar. The ship was standing off the land on a port tack in a fresh moderate sea, not labouring. Dewar handed over his watch in an imperious manner.

‘The poop deck pump isn’t fetching water. On Captain’s orders you’re to try it again at two o’clock.’

‘Have you told the engineers about it?’

‘Haven’t seem ‘em. Neither of ‘em’s been along to talk to me.’

‘Is the for’ard pump working?’

‘Don’t know. Captain didn’t direct me to try it. I reckon there’s not enough water in the forehold to fetch. Though, without a sounding pipe, it’s hard to be sure.’

.....

*Midnight*

Joe Haurigan sent a fireman up from the engine room to the officers’ quarters to wake up the first engineer. Moving on legs that were stiff and slow from sleep, Sinclair went down into the engine room. It gave him a shock as he stepped onto a floor awash with seawater, six to eight inches deep. He confronted a weary, fidgety Haurigan.

‘What’s the trouble?’

‘The water is increasing, sir. I’d say by five or six inches since seven o’clock.’

‘Has the bilge pump been troublesome?’

‘It’s stopped several times. The usual trouble – it’s been necessary to clear the valve several times to get it working.’

‘Where is all this water coming from?’

‘I’m not certain, sir. I’ve been too busy clearing the pump to find out the cause of the leak.’

The chief engineer’s mind was waking up slowly. ‘I think the leak must be in the fore part of the ship. Is the sluice valve between the engine room and the forehold open?’

‘It usually is kept open sir, though it is difficult to check, being as it is under a floor plate in the stoke hole.’

‘Never mind about that now. We’ll open the other sluice valve in the bulkhead between the engine room and lazarette. That will let the water run aft. The pump on the poop deck can be used to pump the water out in the meantime.’

Sinclair got down on his knees and crouched against the aft bulkhead. As the water swilled up around his trousers he felt around below, seeking the submerged valve. When he found it he twisted his wrist around this way and that, until he sensed a flow of water away from the engine room.

‘That should keep the water from gaining, as long as the poop deck pump is able to pump the water out of the lazarette.’

Sinclair appeared to forget his usual distaste of dirty work. He rolled up his sleeves and attempted several times to get the bilge pump working. At first, the chief engineer worked in his usual quiet and stoic manner, methodically taking apart and examining the valve assembly, scraping and polishing it, attempting to remove any minute unseen flecks of debris that may be impeding the work. Several times he reassembled the workings and tried the pump again, but it remained maddeningly inert. With each attempt, his composure eroded a little further. He began to spew grunts and sighs of frustration, punctuated by high-pitched cries of ‘bloody bastard’ and ‘damnation’ every time the device failed to come to life. But Sinclair’s efforts

to fix the pump came to nought, and by two o'clock the water level in the engine room was rising at an alarming rate.

'The water's still gaining,' he conceded to the others in a cracked and quavery voice. 'The poop deck pump must be blocked again. Go up and see to it.'

.....

*1<sup>st</sup> December 1876. Two o'clock am*

Bill Dundee was at the helm when Joe Haurigan called him away from the bridge.

'You're needed down below to clear the hole in the bulk head and the lazarette.'

Leaving able seaman McLeod at the wheel, Dundee followed Haurigan into the down into the lazarette. What he saw there gave him cause for alarm.

'Does the Captain know about the water? There must be eighteen inches or more down there.'

'I don't know if he's been told. He's still off watch. As a matter of urgency we must get the pump working again. You're to clear the stone ballast so the bottom of the pump can be reached.'

'I can't do it straight away. I'm under orders to call the captain at two o'clock.'

Dundee turned on his heels and made for the Captain's cabin, leaving Haurigan hovering over the lazarette in a fractious state. He knocked on the cabin door, and hearing a muffled 'come!' he opened it, letting in enough light from a ship's lamp to see the shape of the master's body burrowed under a blanket. The air in the cabin smelled of stale liquor and tobacco smoke.

'Captain, you asked me to call you at two o'clock. It is now two-twenty – I am sorry to be tardy – but there are troubles in the lazarette. It's filling with water. I fear the ship is going down by the stern.'

Godfrey jumped up at once, followed Dundee to the lazarette, and spoke briefly to Haurigan. 'Where is the water coming from?'

‘With the bilge pump not working, we opened the sluice valve to let water from the engine room run aft, hoping the hand pump could cope. But something’s blocking the hole to the pump – some ballast needs removing, sir.’

Godfrey sent Dundee to bring two more men, and Haurigan returned to the engine room. Dundee, trailed by the men, went down into the lazarette and began to clear ballast to get at the foot of the pump. When they finally located the end of the pump, the pipe was blocked with black clay, the detritus that had come through from the engine room. The ooze had escaped into the water, rendering it black and tarry.

The first mate went to the engine room to get a saw to cut the clogged pipe of the pump above the water level, but in the short time he was gone the water had increased. Wading in the rising cold black water under the flickering light of an oil lamp, he could not cut the pipe, nor could either of the men. At four o’clock in the morning, when the water gained to waist deep, he ordered them to abandon the lazarette.

.....

*Three o’clock am*

Seawater was starting to seep over the stoke hole plates. As the water oozed and swirled through the joins in the plates, it made a stinking black infusion of coal dust, oil and bilge, rising to fill the confined space of the stoke hole like a slop sink in a scullery.

And the water kept rising. Two of the firemen, Lennon and Wilson, were called back into the stoke hole to bail. But vigorous and strong though they were, the men could make no gain on the water. Joe Haurigan came down into the stoke hole. Seeing the men wading up to their knees, he ordered Wilson to shut the sea cock beneath the plates. ‘We must stop the water from flowing for’ard or she’ll go down bow-first.’

Haurigan had the hoarse voice of a man on the precipice of panic. He did not wait to see Wilson perform the deed, but went back to join Sinclair in the engine room. The fireman got down on his knees, plunged his arm into the greasy water and felt around for the edge of a plate nearest the sea cock. He

lifted the two-foot wide plate and gave it to Lennon to hold while he lowered himself further into the swill. Wilson eased his entire arm and shoulder, then his neck and ear under the water, rotating his head around to the left to keep his nose and mouth clear. With a series of grunts and snorts, and several dunks of his head under the grime-marbled surface, Wilson declared the sea cock shut.

Haurigan returned to the stoke hole after a few moments. ‘Have you shut the cock?’

‘Yes sir, I have.’

‘Are you sure?’

Haurigan waited for no reply but crouched down into the water to check the sea cock for himself. His arm would not reach far enough into the cavity left by the lifted plate, and he could do no more than accept Wilson’s word that the task had been done. The big fireman replaced the plate and lifted himself back to a standing position until his head nearly grazed the roof of the stoke hole. His clothing was glistening dark and dripping. And still the water kept rising.

By four o’clock in the morning, the swill was up to waist height, and Lennon and Wilson were kept bailing till the water rose to Lennon’s neck. Being the shorter, Lennon climbed the ladder, rung by rung, and they kept on bailing till the water lapped over Wilson’s chin and he was forced to follow Lennon up the ladder. In the deserted stokehole the water rose higher and higher, until it was over the level of the fire door, and an advance incursion of fine rivulets rolled hissing into the bed of sawtooth flames.

.....

*Ten minutes past four o’clock am*

Peering up from the bridge, Godfrey perceived a glimmer of light in the sky. After a night of deepening dread, he was grateful for the early dawn, grateful that the ship had stayed afloat long enough to see another daybreak. At the very least she would not go down in the dark.

Hearne was at the helm, steering south-east toward Cape Leeuwin about twenty-five miles off the land. McLeod had just come back onto the bridge after his watch. It gave Godfrey some comfort to have his two stalwarts nearby. Then in quick succession Thomas Connor and William Sinclair came up to the bridge.

‘Why is there bailing going on from the lazarette?’ Connor asked. ‘Is something the matter?’

The asinine question made Godfrey snap. ‘There is something very much the matter, but we don’t know what it is, or where it is. There is a leak, and it is getting worse rapidly.’

Sinclair’s news bore out the severity of the situation, and he spoke it with a quiver in his voice. ‘Captain, the water is over the lower platform in the engine room. There is no more good we can do.’

‘Go and find Dewar and get him to call all hands on deck to bail.’

.....

*Quarter past four o’clock am*

With the men left bailing in the lazarette and engine room, John Dewar went to check the deck pumps. First he tried the for’ard alley pump, but it drew rusty water, just as it had the previous evening. The water coming up was nothing more than ordinary bilge water, signifying there was no leak in the forehold. Dewar removed its handle, leaving the pump sucking water, and carried the handle aft to the poop deck pump. As he fit the handle onto the second pump, William Sinclair appeared at his side. ‘Cap’n says you’re to call all men on deck to bail. Look sharp, the situation’s looking grim.’

Attending to the pump, Dewar was bent over double. All he could see of Sinclair was a pair of once-pristine boots and the legs of his pressed worsted trousers, now defiled with grease. Dewar stood to his full height and looked down at the smaller man, whose size seemed to have diminished even further with the travails of the night and his sartorial deterioration.

‘If the bilge pump were workin’ there’d be no need for bailin’,’ Dewar muttered.

.....

*Four-thirty am*

William Dundee stepped onto the bridge and gave a piece of portentous news that would have the effect of turning the ship around. ‘Captain, the water in the engine room is increasing fast.’

Godfrey ordered the foresail and trysail set and told McLeod to make for the land, now some fifteen miles distant. His next order, fired at the first mate, foreshadowed the unthinkable. ‘As a precaution have the boats swung on their davits and provisioned.’

The *Georgette* went about, heading north-east toward Cape Hamelin and the sheltered bay to the north of it that served for the loading of timber onto ships. Rising above Hamelin Bay was a conspicuous landmark, a white irregular sandpatch that could be seen for miles out at sea. It was a useful navigational aid to mariners, and Godfrey strained his eyes for the first glimpse of it as the darkness lifted. McLeod broke his concentration.

‘Sir, there’s a ship comin’ up aft of us – she’s just rounded the Cape.’

Godfrey looked over the *Georgette*’s stern and could just make out a shape on the horizon, a faint silhouette standing slightly west of Cape Leeuwin. It was a ship for certain, hull down, but in this gloom it was impossible to distinguish her masts or identify what sort of ship she was. Whatever the vessel, she offered the chance of a rescue.

He turned the telegraph handle to *SLOW ASTERN*. The *Georgette* halted her slow advance through the water and drifted on the swell, letting the other ship, about seven miles away, close some distance. Godfrey ordered the men to fly distress signals, and watched the ship through the telescope as it grew larger on the horizon, her detail becoming clearer in the brightening dawn, till finally she could see her hull up at an angle that displayed her three masts.

Godfrey recognised her as the barque *Ashburton*. She was a substantial vessel of over five hundred tons, a timber trader; she plied between Port Adelaide and the Vasse. He knew her master, Captain Richard Hays, a good fellow and steady hand; and for a brief time Godfrey visualised an orderly rescue by the *Ashburton*: all souls aboard the *Georgette* transferred in boats to the barque, taken to a safe anchorage in Hamelin Bay, well in

advance of the steamer's sinking: as good an outcome as any master could expect under the circumstances.

But the *Ashburton* sailed on past them, heading out to sea.

.....

*Five-thirty am*

It was barely broad daylight when an early sou'westerly began to blow up from behind. Feeling it from his station on the bridge, Godfrey cursed the wind for coming unusually early in the day on this day, of all days. The wind caught the ship's port side and started to blow her off the land, away from the refuge of Hamelin Bay and further north up the coast.

As the prospect of landing the ship in a timely fashion began to fade, the engine spluttered to a stop. Godfrey did not need a report from the engine room to tell him what had occurred. He received the call on the voice pipe.

'Captain, the water's gone over the stoke hole plates. The fires have gone out.'

Godfrey took over the helm, sending McLeod to the deck where he would be needed more. With the engine silenced, it was as though the *Georgette's* heartbeat had stopped. The air around Godfrey sounded suddenly hollow and expectant, amplifying the groans and sighs of the vessel that haunted him like a ghost ship.

Godfrey scanned the emptiness of blue between the ship and the shore and thought of it as a watery battlefield on which the fate of the *Georgette* and those aboard her would be decided over the coming hours.

.....

*Five o'clock am*

Leake slept on his bunk, unable to countenance a second night on the cabin floor. He was thoroughly disgusted at the deterioration of the ship since his last voyage. He slept in his shirt and trousers to buffer himself against the damp bedding; but as the night wore away, his clothing drew the salty moisture to his skin like a full-length cold compress. He managed some short intervals of sleep; the final episode broken by the shock of sudden silence,

followed by a drowsy reflection: *The engine has stopped – surely it is too soon for Albany?* An instant later a knock on the cabin door jolted him out of his confusion. It was the cabin boy.

‘Excuse me sir, would you please go immediately up to the deck.’

‘What is going on?’

‘The ship is in difficulty. Please hurry, sir.’

Leake pulled on his boots and overcoat in great haste. When he walked on to the quarter deck he found the situation to be very dire indeed, with water washing over the deck and the women and children in a frightful state. People watched with ashen-faced disbelief as they saw the crew placing water, food and spirits into the three boats that were hanging out on their davits.

The crew appeared disorderly to Leake. He heard the first officer shouting that the boat was missing a painter, and saw other men scurrying around to find a spare length of line. It worried Leake to think that such a fundamental thing as a rope could be missing; and he wondered what other shoddy workmanship lurked aboard the *Georgette*, and indeed whether the lifeboats were seaworthy. It did not give him peace of mind to see the second mate returning with a coil of fraying rope, giving the lame remark that ‘this will have to do.’

Leake stood there, looking on at the chaos and feeling ineffectual until an able seaman directed him toward the lazarette to join the bailing line. Leake was glad to be assigned a place at the top of the line, stationed on the deck and not down below in the dark, flooding hold. It gave him a measure of solace to help in some small way to keep the ship afloat, although he could have done without the doom-sayer William Geddes, who stood in the line next to him, making bleak comments as he passed the bucket along the line.

‘I’ve had a bad feeling about this voyage from the start...I knew the ship was in a ruinous state...Came aboard against my better judgement, but what other choice did I have? The mail cart takes too long...The Captain’s a drunkard...The ship’s going down, there’s no avoiding it...’

Leake was not the only man rattled by these gloomy pronouncements. James Lambe, working on the other side of Geddes, tried to put a more hopeful light on the situation.

‘Calm yourself, Mr Geddes – can’t you see the ship’s turned around? She’s heading for the shore. We’ll reach dry land before she sinks.’

‘If that is the case, why are they launching the boats?’

Leake saw that it was true. The lifeboat was being readied for launch while the women and children were being marshalled onto the gangway in an orderly queue.

‘If my wife were aboard I wouldn’t let her into any of the boats,’ said Geddes. ‘I saw them being inspected at Fremantle. Full of bodgy patches, all three of them. If I’m asked to get into a boat, I’ll refuse, and I’d recommend you do the same. Stay with the ship – your chances will be better.’

.....

*Five-thirty am*

Annie lay on her left side with her knees buckled toward her chest. The curve of her body made a warm hollow space, and that space was filled with Henry. The child also lay on his left side, tightly curled. The barrier of his mother’s arm kept him from falling out of the narrow bunk. Fragments of dreams were brushing fretfully across the canvas of Annie’s mind.

*The young gentleman, Mr Leake, crosses the deck, walks slowly toward the group of women from steerage class. A parting forms in their cluster, allowing him to reach Annie, and he is smiling warmly, and says, ‘won’t you join me in the saloon?’ and he gives her his arm, and they are walking back across the deck, and then she thinks of Henry, how can she have forgotten him, where is he? And then she looks over the side of the ship and Henry is falling away, and she sees him hit the water, and he calls up to her, ‘Mama!’. The shock of falling into the sea has given him speech, and one second later he is no longer there, but in his place is the baby whale – or has Henry transformed into the baby whale? And suddenly the mother whale is next to him and the baby whale swims freely, gaily on the surface because he is safe with his mother. In spite of being a whale, his mother shouts, loudly and urgently.*

‘Wake up! Everyone out. Everyone up on deck at once.’

Annie recognised the strident voice of the stewardess, Miss Brennan, coming from the passageway between the compartments. The call went up

and down the passageway, punctuated by the rapping of the Miss Brennan's knuckles on walls and door frames. 'Come out at once. Leave your things behind.'

Sweeping the bawling Henry into her arms, Annie knocked against bunks and doorways to find her way in the dark from the cabin to the passageway. Several others were ahead of her already, groping their way along the passage to find the ladder to the deck above. The procession squeezed past a small figure pressed against the passage wall; Annie recognised it as the young boy, Herbert Osborne, who was travelling with his uncle. As the uncle was nowhere to be seen she urged the lad to follow her, but had no chance to turn around to see if he was behind her. Much later, it occurred to Annie that she never did see Herbert Osborne up on the deck. In fact, she never saw him again at all.

The women and children were herded around to the after deck, passing by the lazarette where men were bailing water. At the end of the line was the young Mr Leake, receiving buckets as they were lifted up from below and then tipping the water over the deck. He did not notice Annie at that moment, so frantic was the operation. She noted the blankness of his face – he appeared focused, but not frightened, as he bailed silently alongside the more mature gentlemen who by contrast grunted and fussed about their toil.

In the half light of dawn, the after deck appeared to Annie like an alternative version of hell – not a fiery hell, but a cold, watery one. The saloon passengers had already come out of their cabins and were sloshing, confused and panicked, across the chaotic deck. The cold was bitter; Annie's bare feet quickly went numb in the water, her whole body was soaked when a wall of seawater sprayed over the deck; and now the cruel sou'westerly wind made the next assault, slicing through her wet clothing and chilling her to the bone. Henry, covered only by his thin little dress, had not escaped the soaking. She had never before heard him make such distressful noises. His chin was quivering from the cold; his lips were turning blue.

A steward stood near, the one who served the saloon class passengers, and Annie asked him to fetch a blanket for her baby.

'I cannot go below to find one,' he told her. 'Everyone is to remain on deck.'

Annie noticed the cabin boy helping the old lady, Mrs Hauxwell, who had slipped in the wet and was kneeling on the deck, unable to get up for the weight of the sodden skirts around her. When Nunan had lifted Mrs Hauxwell to her feet and braced her against the side of the cabin, Annie tried her luck. *Surely a baby is as important as an old woman*, she reasoned. Unlike the steward, the boy did not protest. He ran off and returned moments later with a blanket, fashioning out of it a swaddling of sorts, a tightly rolled casing with a hollow core. Annie placed Henry into the cocoon; he fitted his carrier tightly, like a caterpillar grub.

.....

*Six o'clock to eight o'clock am*

Godfrey was up on the bridge alone, directing the activity below, calling down orders. The ship was making about one or two knots under sail in a light sea, the breeze still following her but not quite dead astern. Her stilled propeller behaved like an anchor; it created drag in the water, making it hard work for the sails and slowing down the ship's progress. She sailed past the intended landing place of Hamelin Bay and proceeded further north to find another bay. The crippled ship's point of landing would now be determined by wind and providence, not by design – if, indeed, she stayed afloat long enough to reach the shore at all.

The lifeboat was swinging on the starboard davits. Godfrey made the precautionary decision to have it launched and towed, so that a speedy evacuation of women and children could be made if it should be necessary. He ordered Hearne and McLeod into the boat; the men took up the oars, preparing to go down the fall. The launch was bound to be difficult, with the breeze on the starboard quarter. Godfrey put the helm hard up, trying to make a lee to starboard, but the ship did not have enough steerage way, and he could not pay off. Godfrey could do nothing more to protect the boat and left her launching to Hearn and McLeod.

He shouted an order to the men: 'Unhook the falls!' As the boat went down the side, they placed two oars vertically like skids to protect her from hitting the ship's hull. The *Georgette* rolled about in such a lively way that some bumping could not be helped as the lifeboat dropped down her side. The

instant the lifeboat touched water she took on a large amount of water, prompting Hearn to put down his oar and start bailing.

By the time the lifeboat was passed astern, Godfrey could see she already had already some ten inches of water in her. The flooding continued as waves washed over her bow from the ship's wake. Hearne, baling vigorously, could not gain on the water, but managed to keep it from rising further while Godfrey brought the ship's head around.

Sailing on, towing the lifeboat, the *Georgette* settled further into the water, till she had only about two feet of freeboard at the stern, and Godfrey could wait no more. He ordered the lifeboat to be hauled up to the portside gangway, just forward of the mainmast rigging. The lifeboat's painter was tied to the after most davit, the same davit from which the pinnace hung. McLeod tied the other end of the painter around a thwart in the lifeboat, giving it a round turn and two half hitches.

Godfrey ordered the second mate to usher the women and children onto the gangway. He could hear Dewar trying to reassure the anxious passengers.

'Don't fear, ladies – the Captain's bringing the ship in to the land. We'll be towin' the boat behind the ship for a while – just as a precaution – and before you know it you'll be safely back on dry land.'

Dewar folded down two hinged panels in the gangway bulwark. Even with it lowered, some of the ladies had difficulty getting over it in their long dresses, exposing ankles and even calves, but showing no concern for modesty under such fraught circumstances. Mothers were loaded and seated first, and then their children were passed over the bulwark to James Hearne, who placed them into the arms of their mothers. When the loading was done, Godfrey counted twenty-two souls in all, including the two crewmen. He ordered the boat to be slacked astern again.

With the weight of them all in it, the boat took on even more water. The women joined in with whatever receptacles they could find in the bottom of the boat. They continued on in that way for a time, and gained a little on the water, and Godfrey began to think he had the situation well in hand, considering the dire condition of the ship. *The women are safe for the time being*, he reasoned. With the men bailing and the foredeck pump working

again, they stood a fair chance of keeping the ship afloat till they reached the coast.

But just as he was feeling mildly heartened about the whole wretched business, he heard the rattle and clang of wayward tackle, followed by a series of blows against the ship's starboard side. The noises signalled a new setback: the gig had broken loose. Looking down from the bridge, Godfrey saw that the ringbolt holding the gig at her bow had pulled out of its stem post. The hook of the fall had disengaged, letting the gig drop bow-first into the water. Connected to the ship by a single ringbolt at her stern, the gig knocked repeatedly against the side of the ship, like a giant baton striking a drum.

Before Godfrey could give any orders to rescue the dangling gig, William Dempster slid down the other fall and into the boat, clinging on precariously as she hung from the one davit on a near-vertical slant, her bow slicing this way and that on the surface of the ocean. Dempster stood with his feet lodged against the stem of the bow, holding on to the stern thwart. He called for her to be lowered away, and it was Godfrey himself who reached over the starboard side and cut the tackle with a rigging knife.

As the gig dropped astern, the force of her fall nearly launched Dempster into thin air. The impact when she hit the sea inundated her with water up to the thwarts. Someone tossed a bucket to Dempster and he began to bail vigorously while the gig was pulled aft. For a time, the gig and lifeboat were towed side by side behind the ship. The crisis with the gig over, Godfrey again dared to think they could make it to land in this manner, if they could just keep the ship afloat long enough – or at the least get close enough to land that if she were to sink, they would stand a chance of making it to shore in boats.

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While the women and children milled about the quarterdeck, Annie held back in the shadow of the roundhouse. She tried to avoid the notice of the crew as they ushered the women and children toward the portside gangway and dropped them over the side into the boat. The saloon passengers were put in first, followed by the steerage. The lifeboat was once again slacked astern and towed behind the ship, now settling even deeper into the

water, bobbing heavily in the ship's wake. Its little bow would poke up over the peaks of the waves, then crest and tumble down to reveal the rest of the craft, filled by a crush of moving flesh. Collectively, the occupants uttered a crescendo of screams as they rode the boat up one side of each swell and down the other. They were so closely packed into the boat that they looked like one organism with many heads and limbs. Annie could see not a glimpse of spare thwart, and the boat was three quarters full of seawater, welling up over people's laps, as though they were sitting in a bath. Many of them were bailing, most having nothing to use against the rising water but the natural bowls of their cupped hands.

Annie found she was not alone in her defiance. Her friend Carrie Hall had also escaped the lifeboat by returning to the steerage quarters, and now she discretely joined Annie and Henry against the roundhouse wall. They remained there undetected for a short time, until a crewman passed by them on his way for'ard, and called out to the Captain that there were still two ladies on board. Their discovery instigated a new flurry of commotion on the deck, prompting the Captain to come down from the bridge and bark orders to haul the lifeboat back to the ship, as he castigated the crew for overlooking the last two women and child.

As the two women were led to the gangway, the Captain called for the first mate. Bill Dundee materialised from the lazarette, his ruddy face glistening wet, shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, puffing from the exertion of lifting buckets of water unceasingly these past few hours.

'I want you to go in the lifeboat with the women and children.'

Annie noticed that the Captain's orders had a disquieting effect on the mate.

'Yes sir,' Dundee quavered, while he turned to look behind the ship and the heaving lifeboat, now just yards from the stern. Without another word, he turned on his heels and headed for'ard, till the fuming Captain apprehended him.

'Where are you going, mister?'

'To fetch my coat and tobacco.'

'Make it quick. The boat will be hauled up in a moment.'

The sight of the lifeboat alongside, teeming with wet, miserable bodies, made Annie sick with dread. The crew wasted no time; in an instant the round form of Carrie Hall was being swung out over the stern and dropped into the lifeboat. The young woman was wedged down between two children, and the smaller of them was lifted onto her lap to save room. An instant later, a man's arm encased Annie, baby and all, and pressed her toward the rail. It was Bill Dundee, wearing his coat.

‘Quick, o’er ye go.’

‘I will not. There is no room in the boat, and it is three parts full of water now. I choose to stay on the ship, if you please.’

‘Captain’s orders. All women and children are to go in the boat.’

When Annie refused again, the oarsman in the boat shouted up to her.

‘Hurry, Madam, you must get in now’.

Annie had never before defied a man – not her brother, nor her stepfather, nor her husband. A maddening black heat, like a hot lump of coal, burned inside her head and rammed against the backs of her eyes.

‘No. I’m staying with the ship.’

A pair of hands reached around her, wrenched Henry from her arms and dangled him over the side. The pressure in her head was vented, coming out in her howls as the child was dropped into the arms of one of the women. Next the same hands – they were those of Bill Dundee – hooked beneath her arms and swung her over the rail. The oarsman reached up to receive Annie and lowered her until her feet found their way through flesh and clothing to the ribbed bottom of the boat. The water swirled above her knees; she took Henry from the seated woman and with no room to sit down she could do nothing but try her best to stay on her feet in the lurching boat.

Bill Dundee jumped in after her and stood near the bow. Annie heard the Captain shout an order – she thought he uttered the word ‘painter’ – and the first mate took the end of the rope from another sailor. The ship was pushing through the water slowly, the lifeboat see-sawing in the rise and fall of the Georgette’s wake. Under another order from the Captain, the oarsman pushed the lifeboat away from the ship’s side. The boat began to slip away from the portside toward the stern, until the rope in Dundee’s hands became taut and the distance between the ship and the boat remained constant. For a

brief moment, looking up at the big hull of the ship, sails filled purposefully with wind, Annie thought there was hope the lifeboat could be towed safely to shore, so long as the mother ship remained afloat. But instead, the mother ship became their adversary. On the force of the swell, rather than slipping further astern, the lifeboat shot forward. Annie heard the Captain shout, ‘slack away’, and ‘slack the painter’, and then, ‘slack the boat astern’, and an instant later the ship’s side came rushing toward her, filling her eyes with a wall of steel sheets and rivets. Before she could be dashed against the ship like a fly to a swatter, the lifeboat’s bottom disappeared beneath her feet. Then she was airborne, she and Henry, launched into the air at the very moment that a loud crack sounded, as if they were being fired from a cannon.

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Godfrey watched as bodies were ejected from the boat in all directions. He was sickened to think what would befall the occupants on the low side of the boat, who were spilled out and disappeared under the ship’s counter. He knew they were more likely to be crushed than drowned. Those on the high side of the boat made a scramble for the ship, some managing to climb up. Others were tossed in the ocean; a few were able to swim back to the ship, their pale arms like the tentacles of sea creatures, grasping and clinging to any part of it they could. With the rolling of the ship, the boat was freed from her under counter; her bow rose steeply out of the water till she upturned end to end, slapped down onto the surface of the ocean and covered several bobbing heads like the lid of a kettle.

Hearne and Dundee were among the fortunate ones who made it back to the ship – Hearne first, and then Dundee. The latter had been caught under the counter, but somehow worked his way out, and was half drowned when he clambered over the side and collapsed on to the deck. Godfrey looked down at Dundee sprawled at his feet with seawater dribbling from the side of his mouth. The Captain’s teeth clenched; a hot impulse charged down his leg and into his foot. His boot shot forward, aimed at Dundee’s kidneys, but he checked it before it met its target.

‘I told you to slack the boat astern. You disobeyed my orders. You’ve caused a disaster.’

Godfrey was distracted from his rage when a life ring flew over the stern, landing short of a little girl struggling in the water – the Dixon child, he thought. She was spluttering from her nose, her eyes squeezed shut against the waves washing over her face, mouthing a silent call for help. The crew dragged the ring back to the ship and tossed it again. The second time it travelled the extra distance needed to reach the girl, but by then it was too late; the ring landed on empty water, the place where the child had been moments ago, but was no longer.

.....

Godfrey ordered the yards of the ship hauled round to take wind out of her sails, and the square fore-topsail lowered. This brought the ship to a stop, but not until she was thirty feet or so ahead of the people floundering in the water. Then all at once the disaster with the gig became a blessing in disguise. William Dempster, who was still being towed astern, warped the gig sideways toward the drowning souls. Amongst the people in the water was Archibald McLeod, clinging to his oar. Dempster drew alongside them and several grasped at the side of the gig at once, tipping it over until the gunwale skimmed the ocean's surface.

With the gig in danger of capsizing, Godfrey ordered Dewar into the water. The second mate jumped overboard – not a great leap, with only two feet of clearance between the poop deck and the sea – and was immediately followed by James Nunan, the cabin boy, who went over without orders. Nunan and Dewar both landed wide of the gig, but the overturned lifeboat was drifting near the ship's stern, and they managed to climb on top of it.

Just then a third body was airborne – it was James Dempster, coatless and holding an oar. He leapt from the stern, falling in near enough to the gig to swim to it. He clung to the high side of the gig and grasp the outreached hands of his brother. The women holding on to the opposite side provided a counter-weight, enabling William to haul his brother in without capsizing the craft. With the two Dempsters in the gig, they began to pull people out of the water, the children first and then the women.

The last woman to be rescued was the young mother from steerage, Mrs Simpson, the one who had made such a fuss about going in the boat. She

was in the water some distance from the others, between the gig and the ship. Curiously, she was not flailing around, but was floating quietly on her back, perfectly still, with her baby lying on top of her. Godfrey wondered if she had fainted, or been knocked unconscious in the mishap. He called out to the Dempsters, pointed toward the woman overboard, and they rowed over to her in the now heavily loaded gig, managing with some difficulty to lift her and her baby in.

Godfrey ordered Dundee to haul the gig back to the ship. When the gig was alongside, the first mate waited for no further order, but turned his back abruptly and launched himself into the boat, as if glad to put some distance between himself and the Captain. The crew in the gig managed to steer the little craft toward the hull of the lifeboat, plucking from it the second mate and cabin boy. Carrying four crew, four women, four children and the brothers William and James Dempster, the gig drifted away from the steamship's side.

By then Godfrey had squared the yards. The sails filled and the ship began to make headway. In the gig, McLeod and Dundee took the oars and rowed against a choppy cross sea, but they could not keep up. The ship faded from sight.

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The Captain had never before felt so isolated on a ship's bridge. For the time being, the sails were set for the present north-easterly course. With the first and second officers despatched into the gig and all other men hard at bailing in the decks and the lazarette, there was no call for crew to come to the bridge. And with the engines dead and the engine room flooded, there was no reason to send messages below decks via the ship's telegraph or to call orders through the voice pipe.

So up on the bridge of the stricken ship, it was just Godfrey, alone with his remorse, his fears for his own life, and his whiskey bottles that he had salvaged from his locker before his cabin was inundated. He was sensible enough not to over-inbibe – after all, he would need his all faculties to navigate the ship safely to shore – but the odd swallow of the potent spirit

helped to smooth over his jitters. His solitude was briefly interrupted when a judgemental Thomas Connor came on to the bridge.

‘What a mess we’re in now. Several passengers drowned, the ship in dire straits and no first or second officer aboard. Why on earth did you send them both into the gig? Are you courting disaster?’

‘Dundee was green, useless. We are better off without him.’

‘That may be – though he hardly had a chance to prove himself. But as for Dewar – he may be rough but he’s a good mariner and he knows the ship better than anyone.’

‘We’ve already lost lives off the ship. The people in the gig will have a better chance with Dewar.’

‘I hope you are right – if not, another fourteen lives are to be accounted for. And believe me, mister, you will be called to account, at least for those lost already. Those people would still be alive now if you had kept them on the ship.’

‘There is no certainty of that. The ship may still go down.’

‘We are in your hands, mister. And I can smell whiskey. I would thank you to leave it alone.’

Connor went back to his bailing, leaving Godfrey at the helm to perform the skippering feat of his life, to bring this damaged, sinking ship in to land. Godfrey thought of the eight souls left drowned or dying in the *Georgette*’s wake, lost too far out to sea for their bodies to be found or for any of the wretches to have a proper burial. And then, he thought of the little girl, how he’d seen her suffering seconds before she was surrendered to the ocean. And then, he looked down from the bridge and over the side, contemplated the tumult of the waters below, and wondered if being lost to the sea might be a preferable fate.

## Chapter 11

*1<sup>st</sup> December, about eight am. North of Cape Leeuwin, about 15 miles off the coast*

LYING with Henry in the bottom of the gig, Annie took several moments to reconstruct what had happened to her. She could remember standing in the lifeboat as it careered toward the side of the ship. Just before the lifeboat struck the vessel, the bottom of it disappeared beneath her feet, sending them airborne, she and Henry, and an instant later a loud crack split the air. The crack was followed by a roar – the roar of the ocean in her ears as she went under, and then as she surfaced, the screams of women and children around her, the sounds of mouths and throats and lungs filling with seawater, the sounds of lives ending.

Somehow, throughout her flight and immersion, she managed to keep hold of Henry. He remained clamped to the left side of her body, rigid in his rolled blanket, like one of those Indian babies Annie had seen in books. Her heels lifted till her toes broke through the ocean's surface, her hips followed, her back stiffened until her body formed a floating raft.

Then the world went silent.

Floating away on her back, she glimpsed the lifeboat, now broken into two overturned pieces, drifting away slowly on the swell, and the crippled hull of the *Georgette* receding far more quickly than the dismembered lifeboat. Not seeing, nor hearing, anyone else around her, Annie believed she was all alone. Her hairpins were all gone, her hair was being washed around her head like seaweed. Her prone body continued to rise and fall on the waves. She went under the water twice, and then she was asleep.

The next thing she felt was the clasp of an unseen hand, tugging at her hair. She opened her eyes, thinking it was Henry, as he often pulled at her hair when he suckled or was held close. But then she saw that his arms and hands were still confined in the now-soaked swaddling blanket. He was alert and oddly peaceful, watchful. For how long had he been observing her sleeping while they floated together as one?

Ahead, a shadowy shape materialised against the sky, haloed by the afternoon sun, blurred by the seawater film over her eyes. She blinked and her vision cleared; it was the little gig from the ship, and it looked peculiar, crammed as it was with men, women and children. Annie rocked her body forward, thrust her legs vertically beneath her and reached with her right hand to catch hold of the side of the boat.

A man leaned over and took Henry from her. It was the same man who had caught her baby when he was tossed into the lifeboat. How long ago had that taken place? Minutes, or hours? She had no idea. But this time she relinquished Henry with relief.

‘Hang on a bit longer,’ the man said kindly. ‘We’re taking in a woman on the other side of the boat. You’ll be next.’

Annie was the last to be brought in. With Henry and herself, they made fourteen in all, crowded together in a tiny gig, already filled beyond its capacity, and there was nowhere at all for Annie to sit. She was grateful to find herself a passenger in the gig and not still to be floating in the ocean, but thought it ironic to be once again the surplus person in a rescue boat.

From the time they picked Annie up, she was made to lie crosswise in the bottom, between the seats where the men were working the boat. Through trial and error, she found the position that was least intrusive for the men, and least uncomfortable for herself and the baby. She lay on her left elbow with Henry under the shelter of her body.

After raising her head one time and receiving a knock from the oars, she quickly learned to lie low. From her aspect of looking up from the bottom of the boat, Annie had no idea of where they were going, but she could see her fellow passengers both aft and astern, or at least their legs and lower torsos, and sometimes their heads etched against the sky. The men’s trousers and ladies’ skirts were sodden, but then again, despite the constant bailing Annie and Henry were lying in several inches of water. The full lengths of their bodies were saturated in seawater, and soon their flesh became puckered and spongy. She could hear only sporadic terse conversation amongst them, and sometimes the sound of gagging, accompanied by the bending of a torso over the gunwale.

Stretched out flat in the boat, Annie felt foolish to try conversing with the others, except for the first mate, Bill Dundee who sat on the thwart in front of her, sitting next to the able seaman who had pulled her into the gig – his name, she learned, was Archie McLeod. He cheered her up; he managed to keep a jolly face, even when the ocean waves brought torrents of water into the boat. He was able to joke about the shipwreck, this being his third in the past few months. ‘I only want ta get back home to South Leith in Scotland, but somethin’s trying’ ta keep me here, I reckon. They say things come in threes, so maybe this is my last shipwreck for a while.’

And then, after a wave hit them near side-on, folding the boat over in its awesome curl, almost tipping its contents into the sea, he was quick to make light of the moment. ‘It’s a good thing I’m not wearin’ a kilt or I’d have to ask ye not to look up, Mrs Simpson.’

Archie McLeod induced some weak laughter in some of the boat’s occupants, but not Mrs Dixon, who had also been rescued by the men in the gig. Annie looked up at the lady who had been her kind but aloof benefactress on the wharf, who now sat red-eyed and silent on a thwart, clutching her baby. Like Annie, Harriet Dixon had saved her infant, but her daughter Ada had been lost when the lifeboat capsized. It fell to Bill Dundee to give Mrs Dixon the terrible news that the girl was not among those taken back into the ship.

‘I’m so sorry madam, we didn’t pick up your little lass.’

Annie could not look at Dundee at that moment. She remembered little of the lifeboat accident, but she knew he was the senior officer in charge of the boat, and recalled the Captain shouting at Dundee angrily just before they collided with the ship and were tossed into the water. She felt sorry for the first mate, sitting across from Mrs Dixon at such close quarters, seeing the bereaved mother so distraught. Annie thought how heavy the first mate’s burden must be – even if the accident were not his fault – such a burden of guilt and sorrow for the people lost, especially for the children.

As it happened, Annie’s exile to the bottom of the boat served her well, as she did not have to confront the grieving, the complaining or the shared, unspoken fear. The back of her head rolled against the hard strut of the boat. Water lapped into her ears. She was in a position to observe the

world from a worm's eye, or perhaps a fish's eye, she thought, while her mind drifted, floated, in rhythm with the boat.

Overhead, Annie's view was nothing more than a wide arc of bright blue sky, curving downwards to meet the gunwales of the boat, this tiny, bowl-like receptacle, overfilled and overflowing, a mere brown speck being tumbled between the meeting point of ocean and heavens. In the early part of the voyage the sun was high in the sky, not at its apex, but a little lower and to the right. At first it took a single clockwise swivel of Annie's eyeballs to frame the sun; then, as the afternoon wore on, the orb dropped further and swung out more to the left, until it finally disappeared below the gunwale, casting half of the boat into shadow.

But the sun's memory lingered on a little longer, burnt into the right side of the boat, casting its hull with a warm, luminous yellow, as if an egg had been broken into it and the yolk had run down the interior side, while the white had splashed over to join the clear froth of the ocean. Annie reached out to touch the glowing side of the boat's hull, above the waterline, and stroked the reflected heat, pressing the inside of her wrist to it and feeling her warmed blood flowing back up her arm and into her body.

And then the glow faded, the ribs of the boat cooled, the arch above them transitioned from blue to steel. Annie felt the wind freshening, stealing over the side of the boat and whistling between the toes of her bare feet propped against the gunwale. The sea became more agitated, sending ever larger waves over the side, and the two gentlemen passengers, the Dempster brothers, were kept constantly bailing. She was surprised at how cool and collected the brothers were, considering they were not sailors but sheep station owners, so far as she could tell from their conversation. Despite the Dempsters' exertions they kept up a steady conversation about this and that, ever so calmly, as if they were enjoying a Sunday sail on the Swan River.

Annie felt fortunate to have the first and second officers on board; they seemed to know the coast well. But as the evening deepened, the men's rowing made less and less headway against the ocean currents. Dewar made an observation to no one in particular. 'If only we had a blanket we could make a sail of it and it would help us make faster progress.'

Annie knew her baby had the only blanket in the boat, though there were other young children who were doing without. She leaned further over Henry to conceal his blanket, but then had second thoughts: the blanket will do Henry no good if we never make it to the shore.

‘If you can give me something to keep the baby warm you can have the blanket.’

Dewar pulled off his shirt and gave it to Annie. The men fashioned the blanket in to a lugsail, using the oars as a mast and a batten from the boat as a yard. From there the boat picked up speed, though Annie heard Dundee say they would need to follow an indirect course toward the coast, running with the south-easterly wind dead behind them to avoid being swamped.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the coast. Huddled with Henry in the shell of the boat, Annie could hear the growing crescendo of pounding surf, a sound that ebbed and flowed; sometimes a whisper, sometimes a crash. Unlike the rest of the passengers, who sat upright and had a clear view of what lay ahead, Annie could not see what was to come, nor know what to expect when they landed.

Suddenly, the forest of legs and laps that had surrounded her for twelve hours or more began to agitate and disappear from view as one body after another stood upright and leapt overboard, until finally there was room for her to stand up unsteadily and survey the scene ahead. A white crescent-shaped beach gleamed in the bright moonlight against a dark background of peppermint trees. Shadowy shapes scampered over the beach, the silhouettes of the passengers who had already alighted. As the boat was about to touch the shore, Bill Dundee shouted to her to jump.

‘I cannot move,’ she told him.

It was true. After hours of soaking in cold seawater in the bottom of the boat, absorbing the water into her tissues – it felt as though her very veins were infused with seawater – her body was chilled and stiff. She held Henry tightly as ever to her chest and had no hand free to break her fall in the event she should tumble over upon hitting the sand. As the gig skidded on to the beach, Annie Simpson and Bill Dundee were the only two left aboard. Dundee lifted Annie and Henry, all in one, over the side and landed them,

standing and solid on the sand. They looked behind them and saw the boat being carried away in a great rush of surf.

## Chapter 12

*1<sup>st</sup> December, late morning. The coast north of Cape Freycinet.*

LEAKE had been bailing from the lazarette with little respite since early morning. He stood on the top rung of the ladder, just high enough to see across the deck, and hauled up buckets lifted by the men below. Leake was not used to such manual exertions, but he was glad to be at the high end of the bailing line, not perched on the ladder or standing up to the armpits in water like the unfortunates below. The only man with a better position was Thomas Connor, who stood next to him and emptied the buckets over the deck.

The buckets changed hands in a continuous loop, full ones lifting, empty ones passed down again, in a mindless routine that acquired a momentum of its own, performed as effortlessly as the involuntary act of breathing. And as the ship's hull disappeared lower and lower into the water, Leake knew that the endless cycle of bailing had become as vital to his survival as respiration itself.

The bailing line had grown grim and silent. Unlike Leake, they could not see the visible settling of the ship into the water, but Leake was sure they could feel it. At the current rate of sinking, the water in the ship would soon rise to become one with the ocean, and they would all be washed away.

Leake had acquired some rudimentary swimming skills in the Swan River in his boyhood summers. He calculated his chances of reaching the shore. Along this stretch the limestone cliffs rose sheer out of the water. Froth-capped breakers hurled against the serrated surfaces of the cliffs, self-destroying into glistening, convoluted waterfalls that snaked through the crannies of the rock faces to the boiling surf below. Leake knew those falls of seawater would run red if a person were carried in on such a ferment.

The foundering ship maintained a north-easterly course toward the land, running sluggishly with south-easterly wind behind her. She skirted a rocky point dominated by a big oblong boulder that was divided cleanly in two pieces, as if split by a giant axe. Beyond that was the crescent of a small bay; it appeared to be a safe landing place, and the men looked with longing

toward it, but the ship had not the steerage way to turn and could only keep going on her tangential course toward the shoreline further north.

The *Georgette* sailed past a platform of flat rock with a curious rounded rock perched on it, rather like a Yorkshire pudding on a plate. Beyond this rock was the indent of another shallow bay, but still the *Georgette* could not turn into it, could only follow her course until the shoreline straightened and her trajectory was such that she was heading straight for it.

Leake knew there to be settlements inland from the cliff fortresses: clearings, cattle and sheep runs and brave little farms sheltering behind dunes, defying sandy soils to extract vegetable and potato crops beyond what they needed for subsistence, making butter and cheese in primitive little bush dairies. He envied the unseen who were securely installed behind the rocks and dunes, who were safe on *terra firma*. As the ship angled nearer to the land, he could almost smell the musty earth from newly-dug potatoes, the sweet-pungent aroma of sheep dung, the sharp savour of fish smoking over eucalyptus wood.

‘Can we not put in somewhere around here?’ Leake called out to Connor.

The owner, as if already pondering the same question, waded heavily over to the ladder and hauled his sodden-clothed body up to the bridge, his trousers weighing low and exposing a livid crack flanked by two fleshy white half-rounds, like the inside surface of an apple cut in two. A minute later he returned, descending the ladder front-first and holding his dragging trousers to his crutch.

‘The Captain says the sou’easterly is freshening – he can’t turn the ship into the land. He’s making for another bay about eight miles further north along the coast.’

Leake wondered how many more inches of water would equate to eight miles of sailing, and he was certain that the same thought was occupying the minds of the others. He cast his eyes southward, to the lobe of land jutting out to sea, capped by towering cliffs, a promontory they must skirt before reaching this sheltered landing place.

He was about to resume his bailing when a movement, high on the cliff top, caught his eye. It was a horse and rider, standing near the cliff's edge, the horse's mane and tail blowing straight and flag-like toward the land. From this distance, Leake could not tell if the rider was a man or woman. He called to the others and for an instant all hands stared at the apparition. Several of the passengers called and waved to the figure, useless though it was to do so. The rider did not acknowledge the waving, but turned the horse around and disappeared from view.

‘Perhaps they will fetch help’, said James Lambe.

‘What sort of help?’ answered Connor. ‘Unless they can find two sturdy lifeboats and strong men to row them out, there is no help to come from the folk on the shore. No one can help us now but ourselves.’

## Chapter 13

*Early afternoon, 1<sup>st</sup> December. Wallcliffe Homestead.*

LATELY, sleep was having an irresistible power over Ellen; most afternoons it felled her with a heavy-laden dullness, sending her to the chaise lounge in the parlour. There she would arrange the folds of her dress across the scrolling leaf pattern of its cut velvet upholstery, her shrinking body making little impression in the padded cushions. She would drift off while watching the square of bright yellow light flaring in from the open window, filled with a shimmering cloud of dust motes disturbed at times by the swirling black bodies of flies.

She would remain there until the late afternoon when her eyelids, having registered the change of light in the room, would lift heavily. By that hour, the illumination from the window would be narrowed to a shaft and warmed to the colour of burnt orange or blush rose, depending on the colour palette of the sunset sky above the cliffs at the mouth of the Margaret River.

Then, in would come Lucy or Ngilgi to light the lamps, and the warm glow of the flames would cast the parlour in its evening burnish, bringing out the lustre of brass doorknobs, the glint of gold-rimmed plates on the armoire, the gleam of the pendulum on the regulator clock on the wall.

Throughout Ellen's hard-working life the notion of sleeping in daylight hours had been unthinkable, even on sleep-deprived days following broken nights with two babies born so close together they were both still needing her milk. Now she felt guilty, spending her afternoons as she was in such an unproductive manner, but the need for sleep was too compelling, and Alf and the children did not seem to resent her absence from the chores.

As she dozed in the plain light of day, the sounds that drifted through the ebb and flow of her consciousness were very different from those at night. These were the sounds of a household busy at work: the clump of bread dough on a floured cloth, the grating of the oven door opening and the metallic clink as the bread tins met the hot oven floor. And the sounds of voices, the voices of her children, as melodic and silvery as the music she had heard played by an elegant lady from Perth in a recital at the Busselton hall.

What was the name of that sacred song she liked so well? Ah yes, she remembered – it was *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*. It had such a lilt, it was not a dreary sombre song like most church music – you wanted to sway your head in time to it. And what was the other one? The lady had sung along to it – a song with a foreign name – something, something ... Pear? la Gloria. Very pretty it was too, with little surprises in the way it stopped and started, little hesitations and trilling notes. But it was still not as pretty as the laughter of her children in the house, even when their chatter was at its silliest, even when they were petulant or cross with one another.

On this day, not long after Ellen had drifted off to sleep, a discordant sound from the kitchen broke the music of the children's voices. She woke with a shudder. It was the voice of Sam Isaacs. This was odd in itself, as he seldom went into the kitchen. His voice sounded loud and agitated; that was odd too, as his voice was normally as muted and soft as the sound of a gumnut falling on a bed of leaves on a damp forest floor.

It was an effort, so soon into her sleep, to lift herself from the chaise lounge. She walked unsteadily into the kitchen where they were all clamouring around Sam: Charlotte, Edie, Mary, Grace, Fred and John, and then Alf, who had heard the fuss and dashed in to the house. In Ellen's confusion it took a minute to comprehend what was going on. From what Sam was telling them, it seemed that a ship was sinking, close to sinking off the coast. Sam had been down at the Boranup dairy, was returning to Wallcliffe along the coastal run, had seen the ship and galloped his horse to the homestead to raise the alarm.

'The ship is nearly under the water. No smoke is coming out, but the sails are up. It looks to be in bad trouble.'

Grace was always the most excitable of the Bussell children. In the kitchen, listening to Sam's account of the emergency, Ellen saw a look on Grace's face that often preceded the acting out of the girl's rash impulses; the same look from the night of the wild pig attack, when she wanted to go after her father in the dark. The same look when she wore when she was fourteen and the unknown, ticklish three-year-old gelding, the barely broken Smiler, was brought to the homestead, and she begged to be allowed to ride him. Alf had refused, but she took the horse out on the sly when her father was away

from the property. Later, when Alf returned ahead of the expected time, he caught Grace galloping the horse along the cattle track. Grace's punishment had been negligible; some extra turns at butter-churning, a task she hated. But when Alf had caught her so blatant and sheepish on the horse, he'd seen her command of the spirited animal and let her ride it after that, so long as she was with Sam, in case she should be thrown off in the bush.

'She rides with the skill of a stockman,' Alf had said, and Ellen knew what was going on in his mind: *we are destined to have a scarcity of boys*, he would be thinking, *so we may as well let the 'boy' come out in the most adventurous of our daughters*.

Listening to Sam talking of the stricken ship, Ellen began to feel light-headed and had to sit down at the kitchen table. Grace's voice came to her as if through a tunnel.

'Let me go and help them Papa. Let me go with Sam.'

It was the strangest thing. Ellen heard her own voice, not coming from her throat but from somewhere above, in the rafters perhaps.

'Bring them back to Wallcliffe. I can take them all in.'

.....

Where the bones of the ridge permitted, Same and Grace rode close to the cliff tops, heading southward, the sea to their right. Sam, having the more placid of the two horses, rode ahead to flush out any kangaroos that might bound out of the bush and cause the nervous Smiler to rear up. In some places the limestone headlands had been sheared off by the belting gales, leaving shards of rock scattered across the track. They skirted around the debris and found a way inland through over the coastal heath that grew stubborn and thick in the lee of the wind.

On a more leisurely ride, Grace would have noticed the patchwork of colour over the heath in late spring – the yellow of buttercups and wattles, red cockies' tongues and blue fan-flowers bordering the flat rocky outcrops, purple wisteria and white clematis climbing up the jagged vertical ridges. But today, she looked only for hazards underfoot and scanned the seams between rock and vegetation for chinks of clearing wide enough to climb the horses up. They zig-zagged along in that way, up and down the contour of the ridge

for twelve miles, scanning the ocean for glimpses of the ship whenever they reached the crest.

Several times, the vessel appeared in their line of sight. They recognised it as the mail steamer they'd seen up and down the coast many times before. But its funnel was uncharacteristically smokeless and the ship was heavy in the water, making slow headway on sails alone. When they last glimpsed the *Georgette*, she was turning awkwardly toward the shore about three miles ahead.

The rock falls on the ridge had become impassable, forcing them down into to a series of low-lying gullies. They crossed a scant stream known as Calgardup Brook and took an open track rising up the dunes, hoping to meet the ship as she came in to land.

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*Calgardup Bay. Three o'clock pm, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876.*

At last, Leake could see the bay the *Georgette* would come in to. He judged it to have a narrow channel, surrounded by protrusions of rock through which the ship would have to navigate carefully – a tall order, he thought, as the ship was nearly sunk already, with no engines working – and beyond the channel, a stretch of churning surf, white horses galloping to the shoreline, expending themselves, retreating and regrouping, gathering strength for the next charge.

The ship turned clumsily and headed directly for the shore. Leake wondered how the skipper had managed to turn her at all. The wind was freshening as they made their approach into the bay and foundered further down into the water. The crew brought in the sails and Leake could see them clinging to the masts, looking anxiously toward the turbulence ahead. He contemplated his chances of survival should he attempt to swim to dry land, but he could only think of the wild patch of surf that separated him from the beach, and he knew that only luck and not skill, nor strength, would save him. The men on the bucket gang also kept their silence, no doubt each one of them, like George Leake, contriving how he might best escape his fate.

With each yard she advanced through the channel, the *Georgette* dropped inches lower into the water, and Leake knew if she did not beach herself soon she would become little more than a raft.

‘Breakers ahead!’ called one of the crew.

An instant later the ship lifted at the stern and rolled and lurched toward the shore. Within a minute her final voyage was over; she stopped moving forward, but settled down and groaned like a heifer in labour. Loose effects rolled from her decks into the water: a lady’s bonnet, a lantern, several boots and a child’s porcelain doll tossed and heaved toward the beach on the current. The doll was summarily dashed on to the shore and broke into fragments that swirled back and forth in the shallows like the petals of a flower.

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The *Georgette* slumped over in the water, her fore trysail still set and flapping uselessly in the breeze. Every few minutes a large breaker would lift her up as if to nudge her a little closer to the shore, but then she would drop again, planting her keel resolutely on the sea bed. Godfrey shouted an order to stop bailing. Men came up from the stoke hole and lazarette and milled around quietly on the deck. Women and children started to rush out of the saloon. He looked down from the bridge at the silent gathering on the deck and suddenly rued the lack of first and second officers aboard the ship.

‘What next, Captain?’ William Sinclair asked the question on behalf of them all. After the recent debacle with the lifeboat, Godfrey knew the answer would be unpalatable. From her draft, he guessed the ship to be sitting in about two fathoms of water. In other circumstances, she might be floated off on the high tide – but not in these waters, where the tides rose by no more than two feet.

Between the *Georgette* and dry land lay two ships’ lengths of heavy surf; a continuous salvo of waves six to eight feet in height, culminating in a bruising shore break. The pinnacle, built to take up to twenty people, presented the only means to convey the people to safety. Godfrey took stock of the beach, wondering what amenity it might afford to the shipwrecked party. But the land had nothing comforting about it, nothing to distinguish it from the

endless array of beaches along this desolate bit of coastline. Like all the others along the coastline, it was no more than a wide empty expanse of white sand, studded with sprawling rocks the colour of gunmetal, overhung by a ridge of sandy dunes bearded with sparse outcrops of scrub.

Unwelcoming though the shore appeared, it would be untenable to remain on the ship. Godfrey needed to act quickly to get the people off before nightfall. Knowing it would be too dangerous to row the pinnace between ship and shore, he ordered for her to be prepared with hauling lines.

Godfrey mustered six able seamen – Hearne, Cameron, Brand, Munce, McGovern and Turpin – to get her ready for launch. On his instructions, the men tied one end of a long length of hauling rope to her stern and secured the other end to the ship's anchor bollard. Next they attached a second hauling rope through a ring bolt at the stern of the pinnace and stowed the coiled slack under the centre seat.

Hearn and Munce got into the pinnace and unhooked the falls, releasing the boat down the port side. As she touched the sea's surface, the men held her steady while the other three men clambered over and into her one after the other. The impact of their landings caused the pinnace to rock wildly for an instant, until each man in turn took his seat and grasped a set of oars. Sitting at the stern, able seaman Hearne acted as coxswain while the other four began rowing strongly. They made swift distance from the ship, helped by the momentum of the ocean's swell.

Propelled on the surge, the pinnace hurtled into the shallows. Only yards from the beach, unseen by the occupants of the boat, a massive breaker pounced from behind. The craft was tossed and rolled like an injured mouse in a cat's paws. The six men scattered asunder, disappearing under the waves before emerging one by one to chase and grasp at the pinnace as she was dragged back and forth in the surf.

Bowled over by a surging wave, James Hearne was sucked under the surface and bobbed up directly in the path of the charging pinnace. It struck him on the back of the head, mowing him down again before it continued on its trajectory. Godfrey scanned the surface of the water, dreading that a bloom of blood would appear on the surface, or worse, a severed head. But a few yards further toward the shore the able seaman's broad back broke the water.

After a brief bout of gagging and snorting of seawater, Hearne seemed to be set right again, and lunged out to catch the pinnace as it was carried on the swell back toward the beach.

The Captain's voice could not carry to the men across the roaring surf, so he could do no more than watch the accident unfold and hope they had the presence of mind to regain control of the boat. With much effort, the men managed to wrangle it on to the sand. Despite the drubbing she got in the capsize, the pinnace remained connected to the *Georgette* by the hauling line tied at her stern. The second hauling line was still fixed to the bow, but in the overturn its slack had been tossed into the sea and sunk. After several dunkings, they managed to retrieve it and pass it to the shore.

Four of them remained on the beach to handle the line, first securing it to the boat's anchor and burying the anchor securely in the sand. Hearn and Munce got back into the pinnace, launched her into the shallows and began to row her out, her bow pointing to the ship. At the same time, several hands on the deck began to haul the pinnace back to the *Georgette* until it reached the ship's side. As the pinnace drew up alongside, the first group of women and children waited on the gangway. They were helped in to the little craft and once loaded, sat in silence, clinging to the gunwales and to one another. The men on the beach hauled on the line, drawing the pinnace toward the shore, while the two men in the boat used the oars to steady her.

For an instant, as the boat drew near the shore, its bow just starting to scrape on sand, it seemed to Godfrey that a safe crossing had been achieved. But then in a great rush, another marauding breaker reared up out of the sea, broadsided the boat, lifted and flipped her over. Fortunately for the occupants, the water was so shallow that most were able to stand up and walk to shore, dragging their skirts heavily behind them in the water.

But three of the boat's occupants were not so lucky. Two of the children, too weak to gain a foothold, were caught up in the pull of the surf, carried repeatedly on the waves to the shoreline, dumped and rolled, then grabbed again and taken out to sea in a vicious shuttle. One lady regained her footing, only to be bowled over in a most undignified way, her gown and petticoats swirling around her; her shoes, having parted company from her feet, bobbing about on the surface like toy boats.

As two of the men on the beach rushed forward to help them, Godfrey noticed a plume burst from the crest of the dunes – was it smoke or fine dust? – and an instant later the forelegs and head of a horse appeared and as it scaled the apex. He could see the beast carried a rider – a man – and he immediately thought of the horse and rider he had seen earlier, on the cliff top near the river mouth. Following close behind, a second horse appeared over the dunes, carrying a smaller rider, a girl or woman her long hair streaming behind her, parallel to the horse's tail. The riders tacked their horses deftly through the mosaic of rocks and guided their horses to the water's edge.

From that instant, Godfrey, unable to shout orders, could only look on at the confusion of activity taking place on the shore: men handling the boat and lines, sodden passengers extricating themselves from the shallows, and the two horses and their riders in amongst the fray. He saw the situation worsen when the girl's horse, becoming entangled in one of the lines, panicked and reared. The girl slid off the saddle toward the horse's hindquarters, and for an instant Godfrey thought she too would be thrown into the drink; but then the animal steadied enough for her to regain her seat, and she was able to steer it clear of the line. She coaxed the horse a little way into the shallows, reaching the side of the lady in difficulty, who was by now standing unsteadily. The girl leaned over and took the woman's hand, leading her to dry land, while the other rider, who appeared to be a black servant, helped the two children to the safety of the beach.

With the first landing of passengers completed, and help having arrived so promptly, Godfrey's anxiety alleviated a little. The plan he had devised for conveying the passengers to shore was working; and with luck, as the men became more competent, the subsequent crossings would be executed with less difficulty. He felt that the mood of those remaining on the ship seem to brighten; and for himself, he perceived a possibility to gain exoneration, if not redemption, for his skillful handling of the ship's evacuation at Calgardup Bay. Surely this heroic deed, leading to the preservation of fifty souls, would eclipse the loss of a handful of lives out to sea?

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Watching as the pinnace made repeat crossings between the steamer and the shore, George Leake thought of his mother and father, who, whatever the outcome of this disaster, would soon be waiting for word of his survival or otherwise; and Amey would be waiting anxiously in Adelaide for a brother who would never arrive to collect her. Absurdly, he was reminded of the classical teachings he had received as a boy from his masters at Bishop Hale School in Perth, of the ancient Greek tale of Hades and the Underworld. This stretch of water before him was the River Styx, the pinnace was the ferry that would convey them all to the other side, the men in the pinnace were the ferrymen, and the desolate beach across the water was sweet life – not, he hoped the life of the hereafter as it was in the legend, but the sustaining life of this physical world, should he manage to cross to it without drowning.

He could see the Aboriginal servant building a fire on the beach while the girl attended to the women and children. The orange glow of the fire mirrored the fast-approaching sunset, and Leake was growing impatient for his turn to be rescued. After hours of being doused with seawater, his shirt and trousers were stiff with salt; they grated against him until his skin was tender and smarting.

He was eventually landed on the final crossing of passengers, together with Messrs Geddes, Lambe and Connor. As the pinnace neared the shore, he could see the face of the girl clearly, guessing she was no older than his sister Sarah perhaps, small and slight, with dark hair, a broad high forehead and round, nut-brown eyes. The man was older than the girl, of staunch build, and he wore a long, untrimmed beard in the style of many of the native men.

With a rasping sound, the pinnace touched bottom. Connor was first to climb out, trousers drooping indecently at the back. Leake was glad that it was not the girl who helped Connor to the beach, but rather the native man, flanked by two deferential crewmen. Next, Leake lowered himself into the lapping waves, and began to trudge toward the fire. Only once on *terra firma* did he notice that his head was giddy and his legs were quaking.

Leake made an embarrassing stumble in the soft sand. As he struggled to get up from his knees, a small hand appeared in front of his face, the hand of the girl. Not wanting to be churlish, he accepted the hand; her grip was firm, the skin of her hand cold, the inside of her forefinger lined with a ridge

of callous. His sense of deportment made him release the hand quickly. His voice came out in a fragmented crackle, was scattered by the onshore wind.

‘Thank you, Miss, it is very good of you to help us. How did you know we were in difficulty?’

‘Sam saw the ship floundering, about twelve miles south of here. He rode to the homestead to get help. We arrived as quickly as we could.’

‘Which homestead?’

‘Wallcliffe.’

‘Ah. Mr Alfred Bussell’s property.’

‘Yes, you know of us?’

‘Of course. And which of the daughters are you?’

‘Grace.’

## Chapter 14

*10 o'clock pm, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876. Injidup.*

AFTER twelve hours of lying like a corpse in a casket with her feet propped up on the gunnel, Annie stood swaying on the beach, still holding Henry close, feeling the tingle of blood draining from her head down her body to her legs. She took a step forward toward the treeline and felt a barb of pain in the heel of her right foot. Annie crumpled to the sand; Henry was wailing as he went down with her, still wrapped in Bill Dundee's shirt. But Harry's landing was soft and Carrie Hall lifted him from the beach and soothed him until Annie could be helped to drier sand, a sufficient distance from the tideline.

Annie hadn't noticed her injured foot – had she twisted it landing in the lifeboat, or just now on the beach? It could not take her weight; she could only sit where she was, her throbbing foot stretched out in front of her, huddling Henry close to keep them both warm, while the others scurried around her in the dark. The men wasted no time in harvesting branches from the peppermint trees that edged the beach, tearing and rustling at them with their bare hands. A makeshift mattress was built around her; she slid on to it and presently the other women and children joined her.

Willie Dempster led a party to find help, joined by Bill Dundee, Archie McLeod and James Hearne. They trudged away from the white strand of beach, their damp, weary bodies suddenly engulfed in the dark curtain of peppermint trees. The other Dempster – James – departed on his own separate quest, hoping to find the gig, which had been provisioned with food, water and spirits before it was launched from the steamship. In the bright moonlight Annie could see his thin coatless figure receding along the shoreline, silhouetted against the glistening black sea, going north with the sou'westerly to his back. He returned perhaps an hour later, with no sighting of the gig to report.

Three other women and three children shared the rough vegetation bed, the boughs beneath them crackling constantly as their bodies sank into the fronds, contouring little dens for themselves. Their feet pointed seawards, their heads toward the land; their lullaby that night was the sound of wind

riffling through the trees, mingling overhead with the murmur of waves rolling on to the beach.

‘This is better than the steerage cabin,’ said Miss Weeks, who had quickly regained her good-natured demeanour. ‘No smells, no engine noise, no sickness. One couldn’t buy better lodging than Nature’s own hostel.’

‘So long as it doesn’t rain,’ said Annie.

‘So long as we’re not attacked by a tribe of Aborigines...or a mob of kangaroos.’

Laughter came to them readily, and even Mrs Dixon managed a weak smile. *What a resilient lot we are*, thought Annie. *We’ve just survived an ordeal at sea and now we’re in a terrible predicament, castaways on a lonely beach with nothing to eat or drink. But still we can laugh.*

One by one, the women and children went quiet. It seemed as if a short time had elapsed – it was still dark – when the sound of men’s voices nearby caused her to bolt up to a sitting position. Some twenty yards away, between the sleeping women and children and the shoreline, loomed the shapes of three men and a horse. They stood silhouetted against the black wall of ocean and night sky. Once Annie’s eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she was able to pick out the shirtless bulk of John Dewar, or ‘Scottie’ as they had all come to address him. The moonlight reflected off his bare, alabaster Celtic skin, giving his upper body a luminous glow. The voice from the slender figure next to him sounded like a Dempster – probably James she thought – unless Willie has returned already.

But who is the third man? Annie strained to hear him speak.

‘This beach is on our coastal run. Our homestead is twelve miles away at Quindalup but we spend a great deal of time on the run, minding the cattle.’

‘Have you seen our gig washed up?’

‘I have not, but I shall keep an eye out for it. Please stay where you are, and ask everyone to be patient. At first light I shall arrange a bullock cart to collect you all.’

The man mounted his horse and rode north along the shoreline until they dissolved into the gloom.

‘Who was that?’ Not being able to get up, Annie called out to Dewar and Dempster. Those lying next to her began to stir. They did not mind being

woken when it was explained to them that a local landholder, Mr Daniel McGregor, had found them and was going to arrange their rescue as soon as it was light.

‘We are saved!’ It was Carrie Hall who led the celebrations.

‘It will take some time – the distances are long and the bush is thick,’ James Dempster cautioned.

‘Did he have any food with him?’

‘No, he stumbled upon us quite by accident.’

‘Any news of Willie and the others?’

‘Mr McGregor has not seen them – but they walked inland. He has been following the coast.’

With lighter hearts, the survivors fell back to sleep. Annie woke at dawn, her lips puckered by salt and mouth gritty with sand. But she was distracted from her hunger and thirst by the pounding pain in her ankle. It made her feel ill to look down at it, now swollen to twice the size of the uninjured one. The swelling looked like a knotty growth, a barnacle made of flesh. It forced her foot to curve inward and her toes to curl into small tight balls.

And Henry was ailing too; he was fractious, his skin was raw and red, his buttocks dotted with a livid rash. She turned on her side to feed him, hoping she would have enough milk. The flow felt meager to Annie, but he seemed comforted and went quiet again. They both drifted off to sleep.

When the others awoke, they all complained of hunger and thirst. The children cried and fretted and the women were listless, even the usually lively Carrie Hall. An easterly wind blew from behind them, blasting sand at their backs as the early morning sun edged over the treeline and the moon, almost drained of colour, dropped slowly into the ocean.

The party of four men had yet to return. James Dempster, who seemed to know something about the bush, disappeared into the forest and came back with hands full of wild plants. He handed them out to the survivors and told them to chew on the whites of the roots. Annie took one and crunched the moist, pithy pulp and it slipped down her throat, pungent and earthy, not at all pleasant, but it eased her hunger pains. She asked Dempster if she could have another.

‘Best not – too much of it can make you sick.’

After the roots were gone, the group became lethargic again. As the sun’s intensity increased, so did the thirst of the stranded, and their skins began to redden with the force of its rays. They moved their camp from the beach into the shade of the trees.

Around mid-morning, Annie thought she could hear the faint thud of horse’s hooves coming from the bush. James Dempster rushed in the direction of the sound and returned a few moments later, walking next to a pair of horse and riders, neatly dressed horsewomen, one of them leading a pony. It seemed that news of the stranding was travelling like quickfire around the district. The ladies, Mrs Abbey and Miss Guerrier of Quindalup, told them how Dempster, Dundee, McLeod and Hearne had found their way to a Mr Harwood’s homestead after a night of rambling in the dark over criss-crossing timber tracks. One of Mr Harwood’s servants rode to the Abbey homestead for provisions, and the ladies had followed him back.

‘The four gentlemen are tired, but have been well fed by the Harwoods and are none the worse for wear,’ Mrs Abbey told them. ‘They told us one of the ladies has an injured foot, and asked us to bring the pony to carry her to the bullock cart.’

The pony had been used for a pack horse, laden with fresh water, bread, meat and milk for the children. Mrs Abbey and Miss Guerrier unloaded the animal and distributed the provisions, and waited with the castaways for word that the bullock cart had arrived. But the lonely beach remained their home until sunset, when finally a man arrived on foot at the camp, stepping out without warning from the cover of the trees behind them. From his voice, Annie knew him to be Daniel McGregor, the man who had found them on the beach the night before.

‘A bullock team is waiting about a mile back from the beach. We’ve cut a track to bring the cart as close as possible.’

In the dimming light of the dropping sun, Annie could see that Mr McGregor was a tall, strongly built man, in his sixties she guessed, with a thick head of greying hair waving into peaks at the temples, close-cut whiskers cladding his cheeks and blooming into a full white ragged beard in need of a good trim. His large eyes peered at her from below a prominent

brow; they were deep-set and kind, not like the leering looks of the men she'd encountered in the streets of Fremantle. She saw him looking at her enlarged ankle.

'You must be the lady with the injured foot. Let me help you on to the pony.'

Daniel McGregor helped her to her feet and offered his arm to hold. Annie knew she must have looked a terrible sight, standing barefooted on one foot, like a stork, having come out of the ocean with her hair all matted into strings, saturated in dried sea water and sand, her dress hanging in shreds, the money wad from her pocket and the marriage certificate next to it a mass of pulp. And Henry, clad in a tattered little dress, wrapped in the oily shirt donated to him by the second mate, was no less of a fright to behold.

But self-pity was not possible in Mr McGregor's company. With a subtle twitch of his eyebrows, he started to smile, not with his mouth but from the corners of his eyes. It was a look that would become familiar to Annie in the coming weeks. McGregor lifted her on to the pony and led it while Dewar carried Henry on foot. Looking down from her position on the pony's back, Annie thought the group looked such a sorry little band as they straggled off from their open, sandswept camp, following the two ladies on horseback, and made their way into the forest. Scotty Dewar was lacking not only a shirt, but shoes as well, and James Dempster was now bare from the waist up, having given his shirt to Mrs Dixon for her baby boy.

The bush was dense; it yielded reluctantly to the party as they followed Mr McGregor inland through a trackless tangle. Tight thatches of casuarina trees blocked the moonlight, left them walking blind. Mr McGregor stepped sure-footed, no doubt accustomed to negotiating tracks at night, but the rest could do no more than place one foot in front of the other, following the shadowy shapes of those ahead.

'You must be very accustomed to walking through such difficult terrain, sir.'

'You are correct, Mrs Simpson. This is but a mild stroll for me. But then, I have spent a lifetime walking over long distances. When I was a young man living near Bunbury, in the days before the mail cart, I had the job of

taking the mail to Perth and back. Carried it all the way on my shoulders, along the old coast road. A very lonely trek it was, but I kept it up.'

'I suspect you were more reliable than the mail steamer ever was.'

Annie's quip made McGregor laugh, and again she was surprised at how humour could win out even in the grimmest circumstances. They kept advancing through the bush with much crackling and rustling, hands raised as shields against branches that whipped backwards into raw, sunburnt faces. Presently the forest gave way to a small clearing, under an opening to the sky just enough for the moon's rays to penetrate, revealing the cart and four bullocks attended by a native servant. The clearing could barely contain all of the congregated assembly of people and animals, and there was some disorder until everyone was settled in place and ready to move on. Already becoming saddlesore, Annie was glad to be given a seat in the cart, and also glad to be reunited with Henry. She cradled him in her arms for the final leg of the journey.

And it was a long leg. It was not until two o'clock the next morning that they finally arrived at the homestead of a Mrs Scott. Along the way, Henry cried miserably, and Annie fed him often, indulged him his comfort to the detriment of her modesty, but it was dark and no one seemed to care, so long as there was some respite from Henry's wails.

It was too dark, and she was too tired to take much notice of her surroundings. Mrs Scott, who had been expecting them, took in the women and children, while the men were taken to Mr Yelverton's homestead nearby. The old lady had made sleeping places on the floor, scattered in odd corners of the homestead, furnished with makeshift swags of quilts, hessian bags, cloaks and shawls. Annie and Henry lay down on one such nest in a corner of the front parlour and slept until daylight, when a hot breakfast of porridge and tea awaited them in the kitchen. The taciturn Mrs Scott accepted them into her household in a matter-of-fact way, showing no animation or curiosity, as if the arrival of shipwrecked castaways were an everyday occurrence in the area.

Breakfast was followed by basins of warm water and soap brought to the front verandah, and Annie did her best to remove the grime and salt from face and extremities, hers and Henry's, though she longed for full immersion

in a hot bath. As she rested on a wooden bench on the verandah, still unable to walk more than a step or two, she studied her new surroundings and breathed in the serenity of the place. Its front garden was part-civilised, part-savage, studded with weird black stumpy trees that were capped with comical thatches, and an array of woody, spiky plants Annie had never seen before. But near the house, it was a little English garden; hydrangeas in shades of periwinkle and lilac, climbing rose bushes strangling the railings to the steps; a ragged bed of white sweet alyssum defining the boundary between the settler's house and the untamed bush.

This was the first time she had seen any part of the Swan River Colony other than the shabby port of Fremantle. And before Fremantle, the only world she had known was the smoky grey drabness of northern England. Here, at this place they called Quindalup, the air was so clear that she wondered if her eyes had somehow been cleansed during her ordeal. Certainly, she had never seen the world appear so clean and bright.

A track, grooved with the wheels of carts, led away from the house and curved to the right before disappearing into a stand of tall trees – trees such as she'd never seen before. They were straight and sentinel-like; their bark was streaked in several shades of silver, grey and brown; and no branches sprouted until nearly at the top. The branches were dressed with sinuous blue-grey leaves and round white flowers, soft and brushlike, and they were falling to the ground softly and prolifically, like large spent dandelion heads.

It was the same track they had taken the night before, as they made their final approach to the house, toward the cheery encouragement of the flame from a sole lantern hanging on a hook on the bullnosed verandah. As she relived that sweet moment, the indescribable relief of arriving at a place of comfort and safety, a horse and rider trotted around the bend and into plain sight.

The rider was a woman, a mature lady, perhaps in her forties. She was not as elegantly dressed as Mrs Abbey and Miss Guerrier, had a cheerier nature than Mrs Scott and a direct, efficient manner. In a swift and economical movement she dismounted her horse and bounded on to the verandah, made a quick assessment of Annie and Mrs Dixon, both sitting on benches with their babies, and addressed them bluntly.

‘Which one of you is the lame one?’

She spoke with a thick Scottish brogue. Annie found her brisk but easy to like. It was a good thing that she did.

‘My husband has suggested that you come and stay with us until you are ready to travel again.’

All at once it all fell into place. The lady was Mrs McGregor, the wife of Daniel, the man with the bullock cart – although Annie thought at first that the lady looked young enough to be his daughter.

Mrs McGregor went inside the house and could be heard talking to Mrs Scott. Annie could not make out their words, but as the discussion went on the ladies became more animated. Presently Mrs McGregor came out again and strode resolutely to her horse. As she remounted, she called over to Annie.

‘I shall send my son to come and collect you this afternoon.’

The remaining time at Mrs Scott’s was uncomfortable for Annie, as their hostess made it clear to them that she had a large enough household already, and that the McGregors should take more in. Annie felt sorry for the others staying on there, especially the grieving Mrs Dixon with a baby to care for. But within the hour news came by telegraph that Mr Herbert Dixon was arranging for his wife’s return to Fremantle from the Vasse aboard the schooner *Ione*.

Annie had no things to gather together, and had little to do but sit on the verandah with Henry until the arrival of the younger Mr McGregor. She did not have long to wait before a man on horseback came up the track leading a second horse. He dismounted and stepped on to the verandah, filling the space at the top of the steps with his tall, broad-shouldered frame.

‘Are you Mrs Simpson?’ he asked.

His eyes were deep-set like his father’s, and pale, a bluish green hue that reflected the colour of the eucalypt trees in the background. Unlike his father he did not sport a beard, but a moustache only. It was dense, stiffly waxed and bent downward like a horseshoe.

‘I am Gaven McGregor. I have come to take you to Comet Vale.’

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Annie was hoisted onto a horse by a Mr McGregor of Quindalup, and for the second time she felt

self-conscious about her appearance. *I must look like one of those witches one reads about*, she told herself. *And Henry – what a grubby little urchin he is, still in the same dress he was wearing when we were wrecked.*

Her shoeless, stockingless limbs dangled down the side of the horse, in full view of Gaven McGregor. Annie tried to tug her dress downward to cover her legs, but the brittle, salt-stiffened material tore away, leaving her holding a ragged scrap of the dress in her hand. Mr McGregor's eyes crinkled at the corners, just as his father's had done the day before. There was no way to keep her dignity, nothing to do but make a joke of it. She made a face at him – a mock-stern face, she hoped, as if to say, *Do not laugh at me. I am a poor survivor of a shipwreck.*

Gaven McGregor laughed, and Annie stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed even harder. And then Annie laughed. There was no reason not to. Life was sweet again.

## Chapter 15

*Six-thirty pm, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876. Calgardup Bay.*

SAFELY delivered to the beach, George Leake gathered near the fire with the others. He turned himself around in increments, like a carcass on a spit, feeling the damp steam out of his clothing. His luggage was still aboard the ship and he wondered if he would ever see it again. But his greater anxiety was for the emotional state of his family, especially his poor mother who would be distraught when the news reached Perth that the *Georgette* had been wrecked. He suspected the identity of the souls lost from the lifeboat would take some time to be confirmed, and heaven knew what had happened to Willie and James and the others who went in the gig. *What a state Mama will be in, he thought, not knowing if I am amongst those drowned. I must take the first opportunity to send her a telegram.*

Miss Grace Bussell was scuffing around in the sand in a pair of battered, mannish boots that poked out from the hem of her dress. He wondered how she'd managed to perform such an impressive feat of horsemanship at all, wearing as she was such a heavy worsted gown. Leake still had a vivid image of the girl hurtling down the dunes on that black steed and guiding it through the rock-strewn terrain of the beach. He was certain that none of the girls he knew in Perth, even those who rode with the hunt club, could have managed such a splendid ride.

For the brief time she remained on the beach, Grace Bussell did much to distract Leake from his discomfort. She was mainly preoccupied with the women and children, offering them what comfort she could; but for one moment she gave Leake her full attention, regarding him in an ingenuous sort of way. The setting sun was behind her, burning a halo around her head. The wind pushed strands of hair across her sun-browned face like twine around a spool. But unlike the well-bred young ladies of Perth, who fended off the elements with their bonnets and silk parasols, Miss Bussell did not try to shield her complexion from the sun or repair her wayward locks.

She conversed with Leake in this unselfconscious stance, eyes half closed, talking to him without any hint of shyness, until the man servant came

over and told her it was time to go back to the homestead. He approached his employer's daughter not with the diffident demeanour of the servants at home in Perth, but in an almost authoritative way. Leake was surprised to see Grace acquiesce immediately and appear to take no offence.

‘Sam is right – we must get back to the house, and we will send help immediately. You will all come to Wallcliffe and stay with us until you are able to continue your journey.’

Leake watched them as they rode the horses back up the dunes. With the weary-looking horses making cumbersome progress up the slope, the riders stood up on their stirrups and leaned forward to help them overcome the resistance of gravity and soft sand. They crested the dunes and clambered over the other side, disappearing from sight with a puff of sand and a final flick of the horses' tails.

With Grace gone, the beach seemed a lonelier place to Leake, in spite of the company of the other survivors – a total of fifty people, by his count. Thomas Connor and Captain Godfrey sat on the opposite side of the bonfire, talking quietly between themselves. With his emerging legal brain, Leake began to analyse the events of the past hours and the implications for the owner and the master, and wondered what was transpiring in the minds of the two men who stood to shoulder the greatest responsibility for this disaster.

He cast his thoughts back to his first night on the ship and the insult of finding wet bedding in his cabin. At the time, in his queasy state, he had not considered this to be more than a discomfort; but now, he realised it as a sign that the pumps were failing, and the ship badly maintained, and he wondered why the Captain had not turned the ship around and headed her back to the Vasse.

He remembered the scuttlebutt in the saloon, particularly the complaints of the know-it-all alarmist Mr Geddes: ‘I have never seen so much water in the ship. The bilge is three feet deep under the engine room.’

But the other men, even the often seagoing Dempster brothers, had seemed unconcerned about the ship's seaworthiness, and Leake had soon forgotten about Mr Geddes' remarks. In any case, the severity of his seasickness had overtaken him again, and he gave no thought to anything other than his own wretched suffering, until the moment he was called up on

deck. The ensuing events had taken place so precipitously, with such confusion and alarm, that Leake was not sure of the accuracy of his own observations. As his legal studies had taught him to do, he made a mental audit of the facts he knew to be reliable: seventy-two people, crew and passengers, had been aboard the ship out of Bunbury. Fifty had been landed on this beach. Twenty-two were unaccounted for – some lost from the lifeboat, the rest still missing on the gig. And an iron sail and steamship, three years ago the long-awaited pride of the colony, lay foundering miserably fifty yards off the shore, wrecked beyond redemption.

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Before he returned to Wallcliffe, the native servant had shown the men a nearby creek. They carried back buckets of fresh water to the survivors' camp; it was a great comfort to know they would not go thirsty while waiting to be rescued. But Leake's stomach, having been soured for so long by sickness and fear, was now griping for want of food. Like most of the others, he lay down, hoping that sleep would let him pass the hours in oblivion until help arrived. With the sun gone, the warmth had leached out of the sand; and in turn, it felt as though the cold sand was leaching the warmth from his body. He edged nearer to the fire, lay on his side, drew his knees up to his chest and tried to sleep, but a bout of the shivers kept him agitated and wakeful. Leake lay in that position, watching the arc of the ascending moon as if it were a clock telling him the passage of time, until he sensed a dull vibration in the sand, followed by the sound of approaching hoof beats. He bolted up to see four riders pulling up their horses near the circle of survivors.

He was startled to see Grace again. *What an extraordinary girl*, he said to himself: *She has made the twelve mile ride again, and in the dark.* Grace dismounted and made directly for Leake, followed by a gentleman and a lady, who introduced themselves as Mr John Brockman and Mrs Brockman. The fourth person kept his distance, remaining mounted and holding the reins of the two riderless horses. His complexion did not catch the moonglow as the others' had, and Leake recognised the fellow as Sam, the same man who had accompanied Grace earlier in the day.

Leake also knew members of the Brockman family from Perth, and the connections fell further into place when Mrs Brockman described herself as an elder sister of Grace Bussell. In the weak light, Leake could see the resemblance, but it was the similarity of the sisters' voices, refined and sweet, that struck him most. He thought his family would be comforted to know he was in the hands of people from families of such high standing in the colony.

The rescuers had carried what provisions as they could on horseback – some tea and sugar, and flour for damper – and gave them to the crew to prepare some sustenance for the shipwrecked party. Mrs Brockman attended to the women and children, offering them such comfort as she could. But the poor wretches were cold, wet and miserable, and nothing could be done at this late hour to spare them from a night of exposure on the beach.

Mrs Brockman then turned her attention to Leake. He was a little overwhelmed at her solicitude; he thought she fussed over him rather more than he, a grown man, should deserve, when there were others far weaker than he needing succour. He was doubly embarrassed when the lady insisted that he should ride the servant's horse back with them to Wallcliffe, rather than spend the night on the beach with the others. But after some persuading, Leake mounted the horse and rode with the rescue party back to the homestead. As they left the stranded women and children behind, Leake thought he had betrayed his usual code of gallantry. But Mr Brockman gave assurance that a bullock cart would be sent to collect the others at first light.

'There is nothing to be gained from staying on here. They have the protection of the Captain and crew. You will be better off coming with us tonight to Wallcliffe.'

The servant went on foot next to him and they rode for what seemed an interminable time. Leake began to wish he had waited for the bullock cart. His skin, already tender from many hours spent in wet clothing, chafed against the saddle so severely that it made his eyes water. The palms of his hands and insides of his fingers, raw from bailing water, were scored by the rigid leather of the reins.

They reached Wallcliffe at about midnight. To Leake, the two-storey homestead looked a place of substance, an edifice of light and refinement in a gloomy wilderness. Candlelight or lamplight glowed from nearly every

window. As they rode up the driveway, Leake could hear voices coming from within – the sing-song voices of women and girls. The sound reminded him of the Leake household in Perth, which he had shared with as many as seven sisters, now only four since the weddings began. He and his only brother John often found the girls' chatter an irritation, but tonight he was nostalgic for it.

The front door opened and a jumble of shadows, backlit from the lamps within, capered out onto the verandah and the front lawn. Leake could make out three Bussell sisters and two small boys, two black women servants and lastly Mr Alfred Bussell, a man he had met before, a former colleague of his father's in the Legislative Assembly. The glistening-eyed gentleman gave him an effusive, two-handed handshake, just falling short of an embrace.

Leake felt quite overwhelmed at the attentions of Grace, her sisters Mary, Edith and Charlotte. They fed him wholesomely, gave him warm water and soap to wash, a promise of a bath in the morning and a night shirt of Mr Bussell's. Leake was put to bed in the boys' room, feeling something of a boy himself from having so much mothering from the girls, though not from a frail-looking Mrs Bussell who greeted him briefly in the kitchen and apologised for being too poorly to help tend to his needs.

Leake was given Jack's bed while the boys shared the other; it turned out to be quite a jolly arrangement for the time of his stay at Wallcliffe, rather like being at school again. They all slept late into the morning, and when he finally stirred, Grace brought tea and toast up to the room. The tray was embellished with a crockery vase full of multi-coloured flowers – roses, daisies and lavender. Much to his surprise, Grace wished him a happy birthday.

'How did you know?'

'You told us last night, do you not remember?'

Leake did not recall telling them he would turn twenty today. He was somewhat embarrassed at having done so, but enjoyed being briefly feted by the Bussell family until the first lot of people arrived in John Brockman's bullock cart and a chaotic spell at Wallcliffe began in earnest. The women and children arrived first, followed by Mr Connor and the male passengers.

Leake was glad he had arrived singly, in advance of the others, and was already comfortably installed in the boys' bedroom. The other survivors

were billeted wherever places could be found, even in the dairy and servants' quarters. His relief at finding himself rescued and in the kind hands of the Bussells was tempered by his concern for his family, who would be waiting anxiously for news of his fate. Later in the day, he was frustrated to learn that Mr Connor had quietly given one of the servants a telegram to deliver to the Vasse for sending to Perth. It seemed that Mr Connor's telegram had merely stated that the *Georgette* had been wrecked, with some loss of life and some missing. Leake could not restrain himself from speaking to the ship's owner about it.

'Had I known you were sending a telegram, I would have given the servant one of my own. Now it is too late, as he has left for the Vasse already.'

Mr Connor made an offhand excuse that he was obliged as the ship's owner to notify the authorities as quickly as possible. Leake said nothing, but found some comfort in penning a telegram to his mother in the hope that someone could take it to the Vasse in the next day or two.

His outlook brightened that evening. A visitor from the district called in to the homestead and offered to take telegrams to the Vasse. This same visitor brought with him some excellent news: the gig had landed safely in a bay further north and all occupants were apparently well and billeted at various homesteads. Leake found the information welcome, but incomplete. Who was in the gig when it came ashore? The last time he'd had a fleeting view of the chaos, Willie was in the gig, James was in the water, crewmen were clinging to the upturned lifeboat and women and children were bobbing about everywhere. How many of them had been rescued? And was the pretty lady from steerage – Mrs Simpson, he recalled her name to be – amongst those saved?

## Chapter 16

*2<sup>nd</sup> December 1876. Calgardup Bay.*

THERE was little that Godfrey could do about the looting. It began almost at first light the next morning. The crew launched the pinnace and began a series of shuttles, using the hauling ropes in the same manner in which they had unloaded the passengers the day before. Godfrey made certain they salvaged his locker and some clothing on the first run, as well as some food from her galley for the shipwrecked souls on the beach. But once he was reunited with his own belongings, in particular the contents of his locker, he took little notice of whatever else the men took from the ship. Some of the passengers became agitated, claiming the crewmen were taking their effects, so to keep the peace Godfrey told the crew to take the male passengers aboard and let them retrieve their own luggage.

On a remote beach such as this, Godfrey would have expected to see no other human life, not at least until the arrival of the promised rescue party. For this reason, it staggered him when people began to arrive over the dunes, some on horseback, some on foot, to gape at the ship, seeming more interested in what the vessel might have on board than concerned about the welfare of the stranded survivors. How did the news spread so quickly in this god-forsaken place?

When a group of the rough fellows (Godfrey suspected they were ex-convicts) tried to take the pinnace out to the ship, some of the *Georgette's* men intervened, leading to a standoff on the beach. The dispute was in progress when Mr John Brockman and a servant arrived at the top of the dunes with a bullock cart. Mr Brockman delivered a stern warning to the would-be looters. He was evidently a man of some standing in the area, and a Justice of the Peace, and left the interlopers with no doubt that they would be prosecuted to the full the extent of the law if they tampered with the wreck or the goods and chattels aboard her.

But if Brockman made any impression on the would-be plunderers, it was lost when he left the beach, taking with him the women passengers. The gathering of onlookers loitered and gaped as the *Georgette's* men made a few

more runs to the ship, until the late afternoon brought thundering breakers and no one, rightfully or by pillage, would be taking the pinnace into the ocean.

When the sun disappeared into the sea, the locals disappeared behind the dunes, leaving the shipwrecked to spend their second night on the beach. The day's salvage served them well, providing them with dried meat and spirits; they dined and drank more copiously than ever they would at sea. In the morning, as the sun crept over the sandhills, so did a vanguard of the curious and the sticky-fingered, zig-zagging down the sandbank like scavenger crabs.

The remaining men from the *Georgette* did not have long to deal with the interlopers – a fortunate thing too, as they were enfeebled from their ordeal and sore-headed from a surfeit of bad whiskey the night before. Reinforcements arrived in the form of a pair of policemen on horseback, carrying chains and handcuffs. The locals retreated to a discrete distance at the foot of the dunes, or evaporated from the beach altogether.

Early in the afternoon, a ship sailed around the northern headland; Godfrey recognised her as the schooner *Ione*. She turned into the bay, making for the wreck, and Godfrey could see her Captain, John O'Grady on the bridge. But he knew the rescue mission would be futile in the eight-foot swell, and indeed she turned and disappeared from view, leaving them resigned to spend another night on the beach.

The next morning, a Monday, Mr Brockman returned with his bullock cart, carrying with him Mr Alfred Bussell and Mr Joseph Davis, the Magistrate from the Vasse. It quickly became clear that Mr Brockman would not only perform the role of rescuer, but of judiciary as well. The three proceeded to take a statement from Godfrey, and told him about the gig.

'She came in to shore at Injidup, about twenty miles north of here,' Mr Davis advised. 'All souls were saved – a credit to the crew for landing her at all. Mr Dundee has already given his statement to the Police at Forrest.'

They left again to return to the Bussell homestead. While he was relieved to know that no further lives had been lost from the gig, Godfrey brooded about the useless Dundee, and wondered what the first mate had said in his statement.

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Godfrey and the men weathered on the beach for another week, alternately shivering on the wind-blasted shore by night, roasting in the sun by day until the skin on their faces was cured and split. The whole time they were chaperoned by a policeman, with the guard changing midway through when a P.C. Hackett arrived from Kojonup with a native to replace P.C. Keen, who was needed at Busselton. Apparently there was a lot of trouble at the Vasse Show, with a lot of hard drinking going on.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December, a police cart arrived, bringing two men from Fremantle who were well known to Godfrey: Mr Owston, the surveyor and Mr Storey, the shipwright who had cleared the *Georgette* at Fremantle. They had called in at the Bussell homestead on the way to collect Mr Connor, intending to inspect the wreck, but were foiled by the heavy seas and returned the next morning, forced to declare the ship condemned without setting foot aboard her.

Godfrey and the crew waited another three days, hunger setting in as their rations dwindled. They were caught out by the early period of excess, not expecting to languish on the beach for so many days, and sharing their dwindling provisions with P.C. Hackett, as he had brought none of his own.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December Mr Yelverton of Quindalup arrived with three bullock teams. It was a day of rare calm and they were finally able to launch the pinnace and resume the salvage operation. Successive trips between the ship and the land yielded passenger luggage and whale oil and a find of a very macabre nature: the body of a boy. Godfrey was on the beach when he heard shouting from the deck of the ship, and in due course he saw two of his men coming out of the steerage cabin, each holding the end of a blanket, slumped in the middle. They lowered the parcel into the pinnace and brought it in with the next load of cargo.

To Godfrey the face was unrecognisable, but by its size, and the reckoning of the steward (on account of the berth it occupied in the cabin) the corpse was deemed to be that of the boy Herbert Osborne, one of the souls presumed drowned out to sea. P.C. Hackett was left to deal with the formalities of the awful discovery.

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Godfrey was initially taken by horse to Mr Bussell's. He spent an uncomfortable day and night there, trying to keep his distance from the likes of Mr Geddes and other remaining survivors, who treated him as something of a pariah. His men had been taken by bullock cart to Yelverton's mill; he would much liked to have gone with them, but he was to undergo further questioning by the magistrates at Wallcliffe.

A day or two later, after several more rounds of interrogation, Godfrey reached Yelverton's, a substantial settlement at Quindalup established around a timber mill. He arrived well after dark, was fed generously and given an indeterminate sort of grog to drink – not whiskey, but strong and warming. The *Georgette's* men were housed in crowded quarters with a large contingent of ex-convict workers. The lodgings were far from salubrious – but after the ordeal on the ship and a week and a half on the beach, they were grateful to have shelter, food in their bellies and their bodies and souls intact.

The mill was the lifeblood of the area. It sustained the local economy, created demand for butter, cheese, potatoes and meat to feed its workforce of two hundred or more. Yelverton's had a store and a primitive little public house proffering little in the way of imported spirits, but a limitless supply of the nameless grog that they had been given on arrival, no doubt the issue of one of the many illegal stills operating in secluded glades and thickets of the Vasse and the Margaret.

Godfrey thought he could lose himself in the thrum of Yelverton's, but wherever he went he had the suspicion that people were whispering behind his back. He'd heard that the four crewmen who went in the gig had managed to land it. He'd heard they'd arrived at the mill ahead of them. The information unnerved him; no doubt tongues had been wagging.

And indeed, at breakfast he encountered four ghosts, McLeod and Nunan, Dewar and Dundee. The reunion was none too comfortable. The last time he'd seen the four they were crammed into the gig with ten passengers as it receded further and further behind the ship. *They are gone*, he'd thought at the time, and was convinced he would never see the occupants again. Mortified to be facing them now, he affected an attitude of solicitous relief.

'Well done, all of you. I had little doubt that you would bring the gig in safely. What a heroic effort, lads.'

The men were sullen in their response. They snubbed him over the following days while waiting for word from the judiciary about the inquiry that would shortly take place. It unsettled Godfrey to see not only the men from the gig, but all of the *Georgette's* men forming little cliques and circles, holding quiet confabulations and looking furtively over their shoulders.

Their enforced sequestration at the timber mill left them little to do other than drink. William Sinclair and John Haurigan huddled together in the public house, thick as thieves. William Dundee and McLeod kept company together. Godfrey drank alone. He was surprised one evening when John Dewar sidled up next to him at the counter. 'It's a tedious business this, waitin' around for the inquiry, wouldn't ye say so Captain?'

'I would rather be skippering another ship than hanging about here.'

'How d'ye think it'll all turn out?'

No amount of grog could make Godfrey as drunk as he would like to be. He sculled half a glass in one go and peered at Dewar through unfocused eyes, swaying his head this way and that as he pondered the question. 'What I mean is, Captain – who's ta blame for lettin' the pumps get ta such a sorry state? For not attendin' ta the leak till it was too late ta turn back? And who's ta blame for the boat stovin' in to the ship and capsizin'? I think they be sittin' right over there. And there.'

He gestured in turn toward Sinclair and Haurigan, who were drinking at a table near the door, and at Bill Dundee who stood at the far end of the bar. 'I put the blame squarely on them, Captain. You and I, we did our duty, we did the best we coulda done under the circumstances. It's a pity about the poor people bein' drowned, but it would've been many more in the end if not for our quick thinkin'.

A warm flush bloomed in Godfrey's chest, and it was not entirely due to the grog. With a sloppy smile crumpling across his face, he ordered two more drinks, one for himself and one for the second mate.

'You and me Captain, we know where the blame lies. We have ta keep our stories straight, if ye get my drift. We'll come outa this all right.'

.....

*2<sup>nd</sup> December 1876. Wallcliffe Homestead.*

The rest of the passengers arrived by bullock cart. Leake's luggage was amongst the macerated bits of salvaged effects. His portmanteau was soaked through, its contents moist and musty-smelling. The next day he aired his things in the sun and restored them to a serviceable state. He changed out of his borrowed clothes from Mr Bussell and put on his own trousers and shirt. Only then did he begin to feel much more himself.

The Bussells embraced him into the bosom of their family, and he had little to do with the other rescued passengers. Of this he was grateful, for when he was walking in the garden, Messrs Lambe and Geddes caught him up and pulled him into a distasteful conversation. They proffered him an astounding theory: that the ship's officers had deliberately scuttled the *Georgette*.

'It makes absolute sense,' said Geddes. 'The engineers had not maintained the pumps. The Captain and officers showed no concern at the increase of water in the ship. I know the *Georgette* – she did not feel right from the moment she left Fremantle. I told the Captain so, but he was decidedly casual about it all.'

Geddes was working himself into a state of agitation. His complexion, already ruddy from wind and sun, was becoming livid, and his words were coming out in a flinty whisper. 'Godfrey could have put back much sooner, when the ship could still make it back to Geographe Bay. Why did he not do so? Why? Because he was under orders from Connor to make sure that voyage would be the *Georgette's* last.'

Geddes' malicious scenario was a nonsense to Leake. 'Why in God's name would they scuttle the ship and risk their own lives as well as ours?'

'The insurance, of course. Connor would have put them up to it with the promise of a backhander to the officers. Once he got his payout, of course.'

Lambe sided with William Geddes. 'Connor was in trouble. He'd lost the mail contract, his railway contract at Geraldton was running late and costing more than budgeted. By claiming on insurance he'd have pocketed a tidy sum for the *Georgette*, enough to leave the colony and start up again somewhere else.'

'And he may yet do that,' Geddes added.

Even as Geddes spoke, Connor came around from the side of the dairy and the rumour-mongers hushed up. Leake, though he had not been an accomplice in perpetuating this scuttlebutt, felt embarrassed to have been a party to the conversation. He excused himself and joined the Bussell ladies in the kitchen.

Leake had seen little of Mrs Bussell since arriving at Wallcliffe, but now he found her sitting at the table, distantly watching the industry going on about her, unresponsive to the purposeful chatter of Grace and Mary as they made soup and bread and plates of cheese and bacon for the survivors; and Edie as she drained leaves from Wallcliffe's sprawling aloe bush, preparing to make a poultice to treat the cuts and abrasions of the shipwrecked.

As he watched the girls, Leake remembered the facetious name certain wags and given to Wallcliffe: *Castle Dangerous*. It was said that the beauty of the Bussell girls would undo any man who came to visit. Seeing them together at close quarters, Leake thought they were all indeed very lovely, but he admired Grace the most, even if she was a rather gauche little thing, the antithesis to her name.

And so it was that later that day, when Grace asked him to attend a ball at the Vasse Show, Leake was as pleased as Punch. Under less fraught circumstances he would have expected to accompany Mary or Charlotte (as those sisters were nearer his own age) but they could not be spared from their duties at Wallcliffe. So it was a small party of three that left the homestead for the Vasse on the following Tuesday – just Leake and Grace, riding out with John Brockman. They arrived in Busselton – the town that bore the family namesake – to find a most unruly situation, with drunkenness and disorder everywhere, and few police in sight. ‘Liquor up!’ was the popular salutation of the day, followed shortly by the popping of corks from brown bottles of ginger beer. The three rode carefully through the streets, skirting around cavorting drunks, steering their horses away from similar brown bottles as they exploded over the paving stones.

They put up at the cottage of Grace's grandmother, and went about preparing themselves for the ball. Leake did himself up as best he could, but had no frock coat to wear, only his pinstripe sack coat and grey vest salvaged from the ship. He felt a poor cousin indeed next to Johnnie Brockman, who

had donned a dark grey, long-tailed cut-away coat, topping his ensemble with a satin-banded top hat. Grace also was transformed, in an ashes-of-roses pink and cream gown with lace-edged cap sleeves that left her pale arms exposed. To her wrists she looked as soignée as any Perth debutante, until the eyes followed down to her hands, where the skintone changed from alabaster to beige, like a pair of gloves, or rather, like the gloves she should have worn religiously while riding, but evidently had not.

They strolled to the Commercial Hotel, arriving at nine o'clock as Busselton society alit from conveyances and poured into the establishment. News of the shipwreck had travelled ahead of Leake's party. As an impromptu celebration of his survival, the organisers of the ball had declared Leake its patron – a rather embarrassing honour, considering his inappropriate attire. Luckily, the black woman servant at Wallcliffe had managed to renovate his garments somewhat, though he thought he still looked shabby next to the other distinguished guests. Amongst them were the Governor and Mrs Robinson, and his uncles Luke and Steere, who were holidaying in the southern districts with their wives.

But even dressed as he was, Leake was given a hero's reception. He was hailed as if he had been the rescuer – not one of the rescued – in the shipwreck incident. And as for Miss Bussell, she was also smothered in an effusion of praise, though it seemed the story of the events at Calgardup Bay had been somewhat distorted in the telling.

'My dear Grace, they say you pulled fifty people out of the wild surf. What a remarkable feat! You deserve a medal.'

Grace had the modesty to protest; indeed she appeared overwhelmed to find herself at the centre of so much attention. A clique of matrons set upon her and stormed her with questions about the rescue. They allowed little opportunity for Grace to give proper responses; nor did they seem to notice how diffident Grace was: rocking from one foot to another, making brief, non-committal comments until Leake took pity on her and led her from the circle of ambush and onto the dance floor. The crowd looked on adoringly as Leake and Grace performed the triumvirate of popular couples' dances – the waltz, the polka and the two-step – until the obligations of pre-committed dance cards sent them into the arms of other partners. One of the matrons

gushed at Leake as he navigated her around the room – of necessity with some degree of assertiveness – since the lady’s form was considerably bulkier than Grace’s and her step not nearly so light or fluid.

‘Mr Leake! Everyone is remarking at what a charming couple you and Miss Bussell make.’

And so it went on throughout the evening; by supper Leake and Miss Bussell were all but betrothed. Even his Aunt Louisa, with whom he was paired for the last waltz, was complicit in this figment, insisting that she relinquish her dance to Grace.

‘George, I’m sure you’d rather dance with Grace than your old auntie. You seem very fond of each other, and not surprisingly after meeting under such remarkable circumstances.’

Grace was a skilled dancer, a trait that Leake would not have expected in a country girl. She was slight of form, even a little bony (or was it the stays of a corset he could feel)? Leake was not sure, and did not want to think about it too much. His right arm could more than span her back; in fact, he was obliged to hold his elbow out a little to the right, or risk encircling her waist altogether. His eyes fixated on her pointed chin, tilted up to him, carving a little point like a ship’s bowsprit, and her bright brown eyes staring into his in a manner at once shy but also disconcertingly candid.

Grace was not a fluent conversationalist, and she was certainly not a flirt, and carried no fan. When she spoke, she did so bluntly, monosyllabically, not volunteering very much beyond what he prompted in his repartee. Holding her right hand in his left, Leake once again felt the calloused outer edge of her index finger. The sensation transported him back to the beach, to that awful day when he had briefly accepted Grace’s hand before slumping down into the sand. On this evening he was himself again – physically well, dancing with his customary *élan* – but his mood did not correspond with the gaiety of the occasion or let him savour the pleasure of holding a pretty young girl in his arms. Instead he re-imagined the scene of the women and children hunched around the fire and thought what miserable wretches they had looked compared to the ladies in the ballroom, these matrons and ingenues in their multi-tiered gowns of taffeta and silk, outlandishly wide hoop skirts and ringleted coiffures.

As he and Grace took their positions for the final quadrille, he thought retrospectively how the poor women and children from the *Georgette* had had a far worse time of it than the men. Every woman and child aboard the ship had been put into the lifeboat and tossed into the sea. By the grace of God, some had managed to get back to the ship, but Mrs Simpson and her baby had not been amongst them. He could only hope she had been taken into the gig – and what of the infant? The chances of their both having survived seemed remote.

In the morning Leake woke up fretful. He needed to set his mind at rest, or conversely, find out the worst. He called into the Busselton Police Station where, after some persuading, a haggard-looking Sergeant Wisby leafed through a wad of crinkled, soiled papers that bore the hallmarks of grubby fingers, dusty satchels and horse sweat, and found the page of the Police report listing the survivors. He held it up in front of Leake's face. Leake scanned the list of typewritten names, trying to keep his composure in front of the sergeant.

*'List of Crew and Passengers Landed at Forrests*

*In Boat from S.S. Georgette*

*Viz. W. Dunee, 1<sup>st</sup> Mate, John Dwyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate, Arch. McLeod, A.B., James Mooney, K.B.*

*Passengers:- J. & W. Dempster, Miss Welsh, Mrs H. Dixon & 1 child,*

*Mrs Simpson & 1 child, Mrs Stammers & 2 children.'*

When he came to the final line and found the names he was most avidly seeking, he could not help but make audible comments, to himself more so than Sergeant Wisby: 'The Dempsters, ah marvellous. And Mrs Simpson - splendid, well done, brave lady, and God bless your boy.'

Leake had heard rumours that fourteen had been landed; the Police list accounted for only twelve. No doubt the final count (and the correct spellings of names) would be confirmed in due course. But meanwhile, Leake was delighted to find his friends the Dempsters were safe. They were top fellows, and now heroes to boot. And it was quite miraculous that the young mother and child had escaped drowning. *I am sure Willie and James had something to do with it*, Leake told himself.

His elation subsided when he arrived at the Vasse jetty to catch the *Charlotte Padbury* back home. There was no wind to take them out and he was obliged to remain onshore another night. The following day, a light wind was blowing offshore; they got away at last, but once out at sea they encountered a fresh nor-westerly wind running dead against them. Leake was hopelessly sick. To his relief, the ship put back to port to wait for a change in the weather. As another day went by, the winds increased to gale strength, with no signs of abating.

The portents were too auspicious to ignore. He caught the mail cart back to Perth, arriving on time to attend an At Home at Government House, a most amusing evening of theatricals and dancing. He was home again.

**Part III**

**21<sup>st</sup> December 1876 to June 1934**

## Chapter 17

21<sup>st</sup> December 1876. Busselton Courthouse.

1<sup>st</sup> For that the said John Godfrey, Master of and in charge of the S.S. *Georgette* between the 12th and 24th November, did without due regard to the safety of the Ship and Crew take in a large quantity of Jarrah Timber hastily, violently, and incautiously, thereby injuring the vessel, and causing her to leak, resulting with loss of the Vessel and lives of Passengers.

2<sup>nd</sup> That he did proceed to sea with an insufficient number of Boats, such Boats not being seaworthy

3<sup>rd</sup>. For placing Passengers in a leaky Boat, the upsetting of which caused the loss of several lives.

4<sup>th</sup>. For proceeding to sea, his Chief Officer not having a Certificate of Competency or service.

5<sup>th</sup>. That the Ships Pumps were damaged and not in good working order.

*(Charges preferred against Captain John Godfrey, master of the Georgette by the Board of Inquiry into her sinking).*

ON the after deck of the *Ione*, there was much smoking and little conversation as she sailed on a northerly bearing from Quindalup toward the Vasse. Puffs of blue-grey smoke rose from the bowls of pipes, like the emissions of numerous little ships' funnels, as the men travelled, silent and pensive, toward the reckoning that awaited them in Busselton.

The *Ione*, which carried the ship's company and some of the stranded passengers, disembarked the men at Busselton jetty and carried on to Bunbury and Fremantle to deliver the rest of the people from their ill-fated voyage. During the interval of waiting at Quindalup, Godfrey had seen factions form and disintegrate, but apart from himself and Dewar, with whom he had a shared understanding of the events leading to the wreck of the *Georgette*, the situation now seemed to be every man for himself. Even the first and second

engineers, having appeared complicit in the beginning, appeared to have fallen out.

Godfrey knew that for he, as Captain, ultimate responsibility for the debacle rested on his shoulders. But it was possible that the inquiry could find any of the officers derelict of duty. It was not out of the question, he told himself, that the burden of censure could be borne by others, even to the extent of his own exoneration. And on that eventuality he was fervently counting.

Seeing that the officer cohort was fragmented, and that every man was likely to skew his story to save his own skin, Godfrey and Dewar had shrewdly formed an accord between the two of them, an accord in which they had devised an agreed recollection of events. They had paid particular attention to the critical details pertaining to the five charges laid.

Godfrey was a pragmatist. He was confident Dewar would watch his former Captain's back, but he was realistic enough to know that Dewar would not be doing it out of loyalty. The truth of the matter was, Dewar also had a chink or two in his armour. The second mate had served as stevedore when the logs were loaded at Bunbury. Dewar would certainly be questioned in respect of the charge that the logs were incautiously loaded. He was also at risk of being found negligent for failing, on the late evening of 30<sup>th</sup> November, to tell the engineers that the deck pumps were not working.

But by and large, Dewar had acquitted himself well, even heroically, some might judge. He had not hesitated to go overboard to help the passengers who were thrown from the lifeboat. He had helped bring the gig in to land with no further loss of life. And then he had spent the night trudging through the forest to find help – and all of the castaways had lived.

Godfrey too, had some redemptive aces up his sleeve; after all, he had landed the crippled ship against all odds. He had overseen the difficult but orderly evacuation of the vessel at Calgardup Bay. Neither man had acted flawlessly in the crisis, but between them they had done more than anyone else to preserve the lives of sixty-four people. Godfrey would vouch for Dewar's conduct, for exercising his duty of care for the passengers and fellow crew members. And reciprocally, Dewar, having served on the *Georgette* longer than any other officer, and having supervised the maintenance of her

boats, would vouch for their capacity and seaworthiness. Yes, indeed, a united front would give Dewar and himself favour and credibility. It might even get them off the hook with the board of inquiry.

The *Ione* anchored in Geographe Bay and disembarked the crew in boats to the jetty. Although it was only seven o'clock in the morning, the intense sunlight was starting to bake the occupants. They alit at the foot of the jetty and walked to the white limestone building on the corner of Marine Terrace. The building housed the courthouse, police station and post office. It had a grim appendage – a long, narrow annexe, reminiscent of horses' stables, a mean sliver of stone and shingle stretching out at right angles to the main building. This was the Busselton gaol, as Godfrey surmised without any prompting.

They were led into the courthouse through a main door, quickly filled a small vestibule and filed through into the adjacent courtroom. It was stifling for want of air even at this early hour of the morning. The room was very small, measuring only some twenty feet square, with a fireplace of disproportionately large size on one internal wall; and a tall, narrow window in the opposite wall. The window was opened for cooling, though it faced in the wrong direction to catch the sea breeze off Geographe Bay.

With five charges preferred against him, Godfrey had half expected to be placed in the prisoner's dock. But to his relief, he was told to sit on one of the front benches with the other deponents. His spirits lifted again when he was told that, as an unrepresented defendant, he would have the opportunity to cross-examine the other witnesses if he felt so inclined.

And of witnesses, there were many: the other officers and several of the crew; the stewardess and a number of passengers: Miss Hall, Mr Geddes, Mr Lambe and Mr Connor. The latter he had not spoken to since the day they inspected the wreck, but given the rumours circulating – rumours that Connor had ordered the ship scuttled for insurance – Godfrey knew that the *Georgette's* owner would deny any wrongdoing on the part of the Captain and crew. Of Connor's deposition at least, Godfrey had no concerns at all.

As it happened, the magistrate from Vasse had taken ill. Mr W. Pearce Clifton, the Bunbury magistrate, had come down to chair the inquiry in Mr Harris's stead. Godfrey was comfortable with Clifton; the esteemed

magistrate and farmer was getting on in years, but he did not look dodderly at all, and Godfrey had heard that Clifton was a reasoned and fair man. Assisting Mr Clifton was Mr John Brockman, already known to Godfrey as the local gentleman who had brought provisions to the castaways that first night on the beach after the *Georgette*'s loss. The Board had also engaged three of the colony's most learned maritime experts to hear the intricacies of the case: Lieutenant William Tooker, navigator, Mr G.A. Forsyth, harbor master and Mr William Eldridge, marine engineer and nautical assessor.

Owing to the rumours of a scuttling plot, additional police had been brought down from Bunbury, just in case criminal charges should be laid. The courtroom could not have taken in one more additional person, what with the police, the witnesses and a few curious members of the public cramming into the boxy little space. Other gawkers, unable to gain entry to the overcrowded courtroom, stood outside the open window to hear the proceedings.

After the charges against Godfrey were read, William Dundee was the first to be called. Clifton began by asking Dundee if he held a certificate of competency. 'I did have a certificate of competency from the Local Board, sir. My certificate was lost in the *Georgette*.'

The Board seemed satisfied with this answer. The looting of the ship was well known, and Dundee had lost other effects, including his trousers. Godfrey had not been overly concerned about this charge. He had sighted the certificate with his own eyes. But he did wonder who had spread the rumour that Dundee was uncertified.

Next, Clifton asked Dundee to give his account of the ship's final voyage, from when the first mate joined her in Fremantle on the 29<sup>th</sup> November. Dundee himself seemed to have sprung a leak – semi-circles of sweat were spreading under his arms, his face and neck looked to be melting like a candle. His story, for the most part, concurred with Godfrey's recollection of events, and nothing untoward was mentioned until Dundee was asked about the condition of the boats. Dundee replied: 'The *Georgette* had not sufficient boat accommodation for the number of passengers on board. I do not consider the lifeboat to be a fit boat – she was not large enough – only 25 to 27 feet long. She was seemingly a very old boat.'

Godfrey was not worried about Dundee's opinion of the boats. Dewar would soon contradict the first officer. And in any case, if the inquiry found inadequacies in the state of the boats, this would likely reflect badly on the owner, not to mention the inspectors who cleared the ship at Fremantle.

It was what Dundee did *not* say in his deposition that made Godfrey exercise his right to cross-examine. 'Mr Dundee, you omitted to say what happened after you got into the lifeboat, in the final moments before it capsized. Do you recall the order I made at that time?'

'You told me to make for the sand patch on the beach and keep clear of the reefs.'

'That was not the only order I made at that time. Do you not recall my ordering you to slack the painter?'

'The painter was fast around the thwart. I had it in my hand, not through the ring bolt.'

'You may have, but I believe you disobeyed my order to slack the boat astern.'

'I would have slacked the boat astern, even if orders had not been given, but there was not enough time to do so before the gunwale caught under the counter of the ship.'

Godfrey decided to leave it at that, knowing that Dewar would have something to say about it. By the time the second mate was called, the crowded courtroom whirred with the beating of numerous makeshift paper fans. Drops of sweat gathered in the upper reaches of Dewar's beard, drained down to its ends, formed droplets that clung momentarily before falling on to his sleeves and hands.

Mr Clifton asked the second mate to give his account of the final weeks of the *Georgette*, starting with her loading at Bunbury in November. Dewar was measured and confident in his reply.

'The timber was carefully and cautiously stowed. There was no difficulty in getting the logs down into the hatch and none of the logs slipped out of slings. I laid short boards from the casing to the helm. In my opinion the casing was totally protected. No injury could have been caused by loading the timber into the hold.'

William Eldridge was not ready to let the matter of the loading rest. ‘There were eyewitness accounts to say that one very large log struck the framing of the ship – the noise was heard from quite some distance. What do you say about that, Mr Dewar?’

The question visibly eroded the second mate’s composure. ‘The ship was at times rolling about very much and some of the logs did strike the framing. Not with sufficient force I consider to do any injury. I think not sufficient force to start a rivet.’

Eldridge did not press the matter of the loading any further, and Dewar was allowed to move on to the next series of events, from departing Fremantle to launching the doomed lifeboat. Dewar spoke of being consumed for much of the voyage with trying to rectify the deck pumps, under the orders and supervision of the Captain. Godfrey thought that Dewar gave a good account of himself as a harried second officer, struggling to get the pumps in working order. In fact, Dewar nicely set up the deficiencies of the engineers.

Dewar’s testimony flowed on uninterrupted before a mesmerised courtroom, silent save for the fluttering of paper and cawing of seagulls flying overhead. Then Dewar reached the part of the evacuation into the lifeboat: ‘There was no rush of passengers towards her. All was orderly – I considered the boat at that time perfectly seaworthy.’

Ah, a cue for Godfrey’s cross-examination. He made a note on scrap of paper he had brought in with him.

Dewar went on with his story: ‘I and the cabin boy were picked off the life boat by the gig – she was quite seaworthy when I got into her – with myself there were fourteen in her – she might have held four more.’

In his cross-examination of Dewar, Godfrey sought more detail about the moments leading up to the lifeboat’s fatal accident. ‘What reason were you given for launching the lifeboat, Mr Dewar?’

‘You said you would put the females into the boat to tow astern till you saw whether the ship was likely to go down.’

‘How did Mr Dundee conduct himself when I ordered this plan to be carried out?’

‘The mate looked frightened when you ordered him to go in the boat, and I asked you to let me go. I did not then think there would be any danger in going in the boat.’

Behind him, Godfrey could hear restless feet shifting about the timber floor. The noise came from the vicinity of Dundee’s position on the bench. *We’ve got him squirming*, he thought. Godfrey pressed on: ‘And how did Mr Dundee handle himself when he got into the lifeboat?’

‘She had a good side above water – when the mate got into the boat he stood in the bows. She was down by the head and he did not order the passengers into their proper places.’

‘What happened next, Mr Dewar?’

‘You stood at the gangway handing the people into the boat. You ordered the mate to slack away the boat, but he did not do so. The mate did not answer when you sang out ‘slack away’ – ‘slack away’.’

‘After the capsize of the lifeboat, when Mr William Dempster, having taken charge of the gig, went to the rescue of people in the water – what took place next?’

‘When you told me to jump overboard, the poop deck was about two feet above the level of the water – I did not think she would float an hour or half an hour. Anyhow, I never thought she would reach the land.’

Godfrey let this pronouncement of doom hang in the stagnant courtroom air. A few seconds’ silence squeezed an embellishment out of Dewar. ‘I believe you were correct to put the women and children into boats.’

Godfrey let Dewar squirm again. *Come on man – you can be more convincing than that*. Dewar could not bear the silence; nor could the people in the courtroom. Against a crescendo of coughing and scraping, Dewar capped off his testimony.

‘No Captain could have done better. You did all you could do.’

.....

Being the small man that he was, William Sinclair looked even more diminished in the stand. Like most of the shipwrecked men, he had suffered some loss of personal belongings. Indeed, on this day he was wearing an oversized jacket, possibly borrowed or purchased second-hand. His

voluminous threads made him unrecognisable from his former persona, that of a proud maritime officer, known for his well-tailored coats with exaggerated horsehair shoulder padding designed to give him the illusion of physical substance. His assiduously polished black boots with elevated heels to give him extra height. The boots he had managed to retain, as he had never landed in the drink at any time during the ordeal. Other members of the ship's company – Dundee, Dewar and McLeod – had jettisoned their footwear to avoid drowning.

Initially, Sinclair was required to answer questions about the ship's workings, her engines and pumps, the boiler and machinery. He described the equipment to be in 'average' condition. The board accepted his opinion and moved along, led by Mr Eldridge. 'Mr Sinclair, would you judge that any damage was done to the ship during the loading of timber at Bunbury?'

To this, Sinclair gave a careful reply. 'I am not aware that any injury was caused to the ship by taking the timber into the hold. I do think it quite possible that injury may have been done to the frames of the ship. She got several severe shocks and jars, but I don't think it could be avoided, as she was rolling about a great deal.'

'Mr Sinclair, do you believe that those blows against the ship may have caused her to spring a leak?'

'It is possible, but not likely. The damage was high up the hull, just below the deck level. I do not believe that any damage in that location would have caused a serious leak, certainly not enough to sink her.'

The inquiry moved on to the evening of 30<sup>th</sup> November. Sinclair's account of this period was vacillatory. He was firm that at eight o'clock he had told Captain the bilge pump was not working. On hearing this statement, Mr Eldridge asked Sinclair if he also had mentioned to the Captain the increase of water in the ship.

'I think I told the Captain, but I cannot swear. I think there was between two and three feet of water in engine room at the time. The stoke hole plate was about three feet above the bilge in the stoke hole, and the engine room platform about four or five feet above the bilge.'

'Did you not find this amount of water alarming, Mr Sinclair?'

‘No, I did not think it serious. And then I went off watch. I left the second engineer in charge below decks with instructions to call me if the water increased.’

‘When did you first realise the ship was leaking?’

‘The second engineer sent a fireman to wake me at midnight. The water had increased a little – six to eight inches – I began to feel a little uneasy. I formed the idea that the leak was in the fore part of the ship.’

‘And then what did you do?’

Sinclair recounted the steps he had taken next. He explained how he had opened the sluice valve in the bulkhead abaft of the engine room to let the water run aft, so the deck pump could be of service. After that he had remained in the engine room for the rest of the night, till the engines stopped.

Mr Eldrige made no comment on Sinclair’s account of the events of the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> November. Like a terrier with a bone, he returned to his earlier line of inquiry. ‘Mr Sinclair, I would like you to think carefully about what might have caused the ship to leak. You said she received some knocks during the loading at Bunbury. Are you aware that she was damaged after a stranding in Warnbro Sound in 1873?’

‘I am, sir, although I was not with the ship at that time.’

‘Do you know what repairs were made after that accident?’

‘Her hull was patched in several places, sir.’

‘Do you know whether those patches were still intact at the time of her loss?’

‘Yes sir, one of the patches had given away. One of the forward patches, I believe.’

‘How long ago?’

‘I am not sure, sir. The patch was in that condition when I joined the ship a year ago.’

‘Is it possible the leak could have come from that part of the ship?’

‘It is possible, sir.’

‘And if so, why did the leak not happen sooner?’

‘On her last voyage, she was deeper than I had ever seen her before. I had never known her to labour so much, or in such a way that might cause her to spring a leak. I think something must have given way.’

Sinclair paused. Eldridge said nothing further. Sinclair seemed to find the silence awkward, and made a lame attempt to fill it.

‘It is also possible that the ship might have seen an injury at Bunbury and that such injury would not show, till she began to labour and strain on this voyage with the weight of the timber in her hold.’

‘Hmm. So the ship may have had a weakness from a much earlier injury – or she may have come to grief – fatally – last month at Bunbury. Either way it is reasonable to assume she was structurally compromised – would I be correct, Mr Sinclair?’

William Sinclair responded inaudibly, nodding, uncertainly, shrinking further into the clothing that draped him like a sack. Godfrey found reason for hope; he was pleased that the Warnbro standing was brought up. It offered an alternative theory as to the cause of the leak. That theory preceded his time on the *Georgette*. But whether it would provide absolution on the first charge – of incautious loading at Bunbury – it still remained to be seen.

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Joseph Haurigan was not sworn in until the late afternoon. Mr Clifton asked Haurigan to give his account of the evening of 30<sup>th</sup> November. From his first faltering statements, it seemed that the second engineer’s memory did not serve him well, or else he had not rehearsed his story well enough; whichever was the case, he hung himself out to dry.

‘In consequence of what Chief Engineer told me, I went aft to examine the pump – I did not open the sluice valve.’

‘What time was that?’

‘I cannot recollect whether it was at eight or twelve.’

Mr Clifton looked sceptical. ‘You must have been in a quite a muddle that evening, Mr Haurigan. And what did you do after you examined the pump – at eight o’clock, or was it at midnight?’

‘The rose of the deck pump was clear and I went down to the engine room.’

‘And for how long did you remain in the engine room?’

‘I was there between eight o’clock and midnight.’

‘So you either checked the pump at eight o’clock before you went into the engine room, or perhaps it was at midnight after you left it. Are you certain you did not leave the engine room during those four hours?’

‘I will not swear that I did not leave the engine room between eight and twelve – but I do not think I did further than go to the top of the ladder.’

The members of the Board gave sidelong glances at one another. The courtroom emitted some stifled snorts and chuckles.

‘That evening, did any passenger make mention of the increase of water in the ship?’

‘No passenger remarked to me in the engine room that there was more water in the bilge than usual. I will swear that no passenger did make such remark to me that night.’

‘Do you know a Mr William Geddes?’

Haurigan’s face went florid.

‘Ah, yes. I meant to say that no passenger made such a remark *after* eight pm. I told him I did not think the extra water was of any consequence.’

‘According to Mr Sinclair, you had him called from his berth at midnight. Why did you do that, if you thought the extra water was of no consequence?’

‘I decidedly did *not* at that time believe that there was a leak. I sent for the Chief Engineer because I could not manage the engines *and* attend to the bilge pump which was working so badly. Mr Sinclair came almost directly – I reported to him that the bilge pump was very troublesome, working occasionally and then stopping. I made no remark to him about the increase in water.’

‘So you remained in the engine room until midnight with Mr Sinclair, attempting to overhaul the bilge pump?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And when did you next leave the engine room?’

‘Between two and four I went to the lazarette to examine the deck pump. I returned to the engine room and remained there till I went to change my clothes, which I got wet when examining the pump in the lazarette.’

‘When did you first come to suspect the ship had a leak?’

‘When I was leaving the ship, sir.’

‘Did you form an opinion as to the location of the leak?’

‘No, I had not the slightest idea.’

Murmurs and sniggers came from around the courtroom.

‘Let us then explore a theory that has already been raised today: the question of the loading of timber at Bunbury between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November. Were you aboard the ship at that time?’

‘I was on board while the *Georgette* was loading at Bunbury – I saw the end of one of the logs – when going into the hold it struck one of the frames pretty close up to the deck on starboard side, I think before the foremast. It was a heavy blow, and I think sufficient to start the frame and rivets. I did not mention this to anyone. The incident escaped from my memory till the water was coming into the ship. I now believe the ship was injured by that blow.’

‘Did you report this injury to the Captain, Mr Haurigan?’

‘No sir, the Captain was not present at the time. I thought he may have gone ashore, as he had done at other times while we were in Bunbury port.’

Godfrey had a rush of blood to his head. He jotted a note to himself. His body went into a fighting state. He was ready to cross-examine, but it was already six-forty in the evening. The courtroom was growing dim, but it was still oppressive with heat. Mr Clifton adjourned the hearing. Godfrey would have to wait.

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*23<sup>rd</sup> December 1876. Busselton Courthouse.*

The Court was reassembled at ten o’clock the next morning. Godfrey got his chance to cross-examine Haurigan straight away. ‘Mr Haurigan, where were you when the framing of the ship was allegedly struck by a log in Bunbury?’

‘I was standing in the alley way when the log which struck, about a foot below the deck. I did not think the guy prevented the log from striking the frame.’

‘What did you do after you witnessed this incident?’

‘I did not go down to look at it – although I thought at the time the knock would do her no good. It afterwards went out of my head. I made no report about it to you, nor to the first or second officers.’

Godfrey thought Haurigan’s candour would provide some measure of immunity. After all, if the Captain had no knowledge of the accident, how could he be blamed for failing address any damage caused by it?

As the day went on, one deposition followed another. The proceedings carried over into the next. Eventually, since none of the remaining deponents had been on the ship when she was loaded at Bunbury, the matter of whether she was damaged during that operation was put to rest and the Board moved on to other matters.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> of December was mercifully cooler than the previous days. The spell of milder weather helped make the tedious depositions more bearable to hear. To Godfrey, it was all quite irritating, with the witnesses often duplicating one another and putting forward their own minor variations of the same points. Most of the things they told the court were of little consequence – at least as far as Godfrey’s interests were concerned.

Late in the afternoon, the proceedings turned a corner when Archibald McLeod took the stand. When questioned about the final moments before the capsizing of the lifeboat, the able seaman placed the blame squarely on John Godfrey.

‘I called to the Captain that there were enough passengers in the boat – the Captain said he would not put more in, and told me to sheer off. I could not do it, because the gunwale of the boat got under the moulding and caused her to fill with water.’

‘How far was the boat from the ship when the Captain called the order to sheer off?’

‘The orders were not given to slack away the painter, at least not until the boat was under the moulding.’

Oddly, McLeod seemed to have no recollection of Dundee having been in the boat at all. As such, McLeod’s scenario lacked some credibility, and it placed no one else in the line of fire – no one disobeying orders, and no one failing to slack the painter. No one other than the Captain, who, by McLeod’s account, had given a belated order to sheer off.

As such, the story as told by McLeod lifted some of the culpability from the shoulders of William Dundee. For Godfrey, McLeod's testimony made a bad end to the day. He could only wait for other witnesses to testify, and hope that they would put Dundee back into the frame.

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*24th December 1876 to 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1877. Busselton Town.*

With the 24<sup>th</sup> of December being a Sunday, and Christmas Day falling on the Monday, Godfrey had another two interminable days to wait. He had received some relief from the tedium by way of a letter from his wife, Johanna, which had found its way to him at the Ship Inn. But the letter gave him little comfort. Johanna was mortified to go out in public in Fremantle, feeling like a pariah on account of the drowning of little Ada Dixon, as the Dixons were such a prominent family in the town, and with the Godfrey name now dishonoured. Johanna feared that they would end up in the poorhouse if her husband did not clear his name of this odious business soon and get himself back into gainful employment on a ship.

Godfrey passed the yuletide in a state deadened by spirits, as did most of the other men detained in the Vasse, unable as they were to join a ship or return home. Henry Yelverton put on a Christmas dinner at the Ship Inn, and the men from the *Georgette* mingled with his ex-convict timber workers, with the inevitable consequence of fighting and disorder. Godfrey carried his intoxication quietly and minded his own business.

When the enquiry reconvened on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, the Board was most eager to investigate the moments leading to the boat's capsize. Thomas Connor, who had helped to drop the lifeboat astern in those fraught final moments, was in a better position than many to testify. 'I did not see the women put in, and cannot say whether was any water in her. My attention was first called to the boat by Captain Godfrey calling out to the mate, *slack away, slack away or you will drown everybody in her.*'

Goldfrey saw the opportunity to draw greater attention to this point. In cross-examination he asked Connor if the mate had obeyed that order.

‘He did not, and I am sure the boat would not have capsized if the mate had obeyed his orders and kept her off the side.’

‘And did you, Mr Connor, believe it was correct to put the women and children into the boat?’

Connor remained loyal to his skipper, as Godfrey had predicted he would. ‘Indeed, you made the correct decision, Mr Godfrey. I and all on board thought it was hopeless with the ship.’

William Dundee was recalled, resworn, and asked if he had heard Captain Godfrey’s order to slack astern. ‘When I was standing in the bow of the lifeboat, with the painter in my hand I *did* hear Captain Godfrey say ‘slack away’. I *did* slack away in obedience to that order, but she was close alongside the ship at that time, only a foot or two when the Captain gave the order.’

It would not go well for Godfrey if the Board went with Dundee’s account. Fortunately, John Dewar was recalled straight away and asked for his recollection of the order being given. ‘Yes sir – I heard the Captain give the order when she was about a fathom or fathom and a half off the ship. It was not immediately obeyed. There was nothing slacked away till she came up against the ship’s side.’

Dewar spoke with assurance. His voice resonated around the courtroom in the manner of a man who said what he believed, and believed what he said. His demeanour compared well to Dundee’s faltering bleat. Godfrey hoped the Board would see it.

The remainder of the depositions of the 26<sup>th</sup> December concerned the seaworthiness of the boats and the ship herself. William Owston, the Lloyd’s surveyor, was called to testify. He gave an assured account of the soundness of the gig. ‘I did consider her perfectly seaworthy with the patch of lead on her.’

Mr Eldridge asked Owston if he considered the ship seaworthy after she had sustained damage on the Murray Reef three years before. To Godfrey, it seemed a moot question: how could Owston give anything but a favourable report, having himself cleared the ship at Fremantle on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November?

‘Most of the patches were in the forehold. There was one on the starboard side about thirteen feet from the stern, as well as I can remember.

The patches were put on over all, and riveted, without exception. As far as I am aware she was right and tight when I passed her.’

‘And did the *Georgette*, at the time of her loss, have sufficient boats for the number of passengers on board?’

‘By the court, I believe she did. I should not have passed her if she had an insufficient number of boats.’

With all depositions taken, the Board retired to private quarters to deliberate.

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The courtroom emptied out into Queen Street. The deponents and accused milled around and smoked, mixing the smutty inhalations from their pipes with the sweet-salty air of the *Geographe*. The same factions that had formed at Yelverton’s re-formed outside the court, like schools of fish aggregating for safety against sharks: Godfrey fraternising with Dewar and Thomas Connor; Dundee with McLeod; Sinclair banding with his firemen while Haurigan paced about on his own, probably mortified by his appalling performance in court.

Godfrey had left the court feeling confident but not cocksure; he thought Dewar and Connor had shown impressive solidarity. They had both endorsed the state of the ship, the boats and the master’s handling of the evacuation into the lifeboat. He thought he had a fighting chance; and if he did, he would owe a particular debt to John Dewar, a man he had treated none too kindly aboard the ship.

‘Mr Dewar, you are a natural for this courtroom business. You have been most convincing.’

‘I can only hope so, Mr Godfrey, for your sake.’

Dewar was turning to stone again. His performance in the courtroom had earned him credibility. The Board had cast no aspersions on him. There was little chance he would attract charges now, not at this point in the proceedings.

As they returned to the courtroom, Godfrey felt suddenly alone. Mr Clifton’s reading of the charges, followed by the Board’s verdict for each one, took an excruciatingly long time. Godfrey breathed high and shallow, jiggled

his left foot up and down like a piston till all five charges were read. *Acquitted.* And again. Acquitted five times over. He took his first deep breath, ready to emit a long sigh of relief, when Clifton's next words hit him like a slap.

‘Being the circumstances of the lifeboat, the state of the wind and sea and the fact that the ship floated for another six hours after the boat was capsized we consider that Captain Godfrey was not justified in placing passengers in said boat and was guilty of a grave error of judgement in so doing.

‘We are of the opinion that Captain Godfrey was guilty of a grave error of judgement in not taking steps to ascertain the condition of his ship at eight pm on November 30th, with a view to putting back, seeing the report of the chief engineer with regard both to the unsatisfactory working of the bilge pump and the suggestion that the deck pumps should be got ready for working.’

So it was not yet over. Clifton paused, took a breath and carried on. With relief, Godfrey realised that the next finding of guilt was not against himself, but Joseph Haurigan.

‘That seeing the second engineer was aware of the increase of water in the ship during the evening of 30th November, he was guilty of neglect of duty in not reporting to the Captain.

‘That seeing the first engineer saw the unusual quantity of water within the ship at eight pm on 30<sup>th</sup> November – he is guilty of neglect of duty in not having directly reported same to the Captain.’

Godfrey found this finding contradictory. The first engineer had indeed reported the ingress of water, as Clifton has just stated in the first finding. It was indeed contradictory, but possibly to Godfrey's advantage.

‘That seeing the second engineer was evidently aware of the increase of water during the final watch on 30 November, we consider that he was guilty of neglect of duty in not having taken further steps to ascertain its cause.’

Godfrey thought this finding unjust. Why was only Haurigan judged to be negligent? Surely Sinclair should also take some responsibility for failing to find the cause of the water?

‘That the first officer was guilty of his disobedience of orders in not steering the lifeboat astern when directed to do so by the Captain – loss of life resulting from such disobedience.’

Godfrey glanced at Dewar and gave a discreet nod, as if to say, *Well done. The Board has chosen to believe us.* Dewar was impassive. Godfrey knew he was being cut, alliance dissolved, no longer needed. *It matters little,* he thought. He knew he was not yet Scot free, but the case against him was diluted by the findings against the others.

No penalties were handed down pending a second enquiry, after which His Excellency the Governor would decide on the fates of the men. Clifton ordered their certificates to be retained and adjourned the court until the 30<sup>th</sup> of December. Godfrey feared he would be locked up; but the gaol was bursting with the human detritus of a drunken yuletide, and the *Georgette*’s men were all permitted to remain at large.

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*3<sup>rd</sup> January to 28<sup>th</sup> January 1877. Busselton Courthouse.*

In the second enquiry, only one of the accused – William Sinclair – was exonerated. The Board found that he had indeed made a report to the Captain about the rising water and faulty pumps. Godfrey, in his deposition, had made no argument that such report had been made; rather, he discredited the report as careless and disingenuous, lacking in *gravitas*, misleading and providing no sound basis for a decision to put back and run for the land. Godfrey hoped that by belittling Sinclair’s report, he would get himself acquitted of his final charge. But Sinclair reciprocated by saying that Godfrey had made no further enquiries that night about the level of the water or the state of the pumps.

Haurigan took the stand after Sinclair and made the same claim - nearly verbatim: ‘Captain Godfrey did not at any time during my watch come into the engine room or make any enquiries of me.’

Sworn in for the last time, Dewar came across as rather less dogmatic than before, but he maintained his support of the Captain – or at least made an effort to undermine the engineers. ‘Neither of the engineers spoke to me

during the first watch from eight to twelve. I had no directions or enquiries from either of them.’

‘During that same period, did the Captain voice any concern to you about the state of the ship or pumps?’

‘No sir, I had no orders whatever from the Captain with reference to water in the ship, except to try the pumps at eleven thirty and tell the chief mate to try them at two am.’

‘Did he say anything about putting back?’

‘No sir, he did not. I did not know of any reason why he should put back – had no idea of it.’

And then Clifton, out of the blue, asked Dewar about the Captain’s sobriety that night.

Godfrey was aghast. What had prompted this question all of a sudden? Had Clifton formed his suspicion on his own? Or had someone said a quiet word to him?

‘At the time I was overhauling the poop pump with Captain Godfrey – he was not, nor at any time during the evening and night, as far as I was aware, under the influence of liquor.’

Godfrey thought Dewar gave his answer a tad unconvincingly. Certainly the members of the Board looked unconvinced. Someone must have said something to them – but then who? It did not look good for Godfrey. Rashly, he made a final quivering plea to the court.

‘As soon as the leak was reported to me, I thought the ship was going down fast, and I ordered out the lifeboat and put the women and children in for their safety, intending to tow the boat till the ship sank. If I have done any thing wrong I hope the court will look on it as an error of judgment and not through any negligence or fault of mine.’

But his plea did him no good. Clifton delivered his verdict: *guilty*. He ordered Godfrey’s certificate of competency to be suspended for eighteen months. Johanna’s letter spoke to Godfrey from his pocket.

*My dear Mother has given me five pounds to fill the larder and pay the doctor, as Clifford has been ill again. Our boy has spent two days at hospital in the croup tent but is home again now and much better. We are all hoping that this*

*inquiry will end soon, and that you will be able to find work on another ship, or I shall be soon obliged to take in sewing work to make ends meet.*

While Godfrey fretted about his financial straits, and what he would tell Johanna, Clifton read out the next verdict: Joseph Haurigan – guilty of both charges. Haurigan's certificate was to be suspended for twelve months.

Dundee's fate was the last to be announced. As Godfrey had done, the mate asked to make a final plea to the board. What more could a man have done, he asked the cross-armed, stony-faced Clifton and the impassive frieze of men flanking him, if placed in the same situation? Ordered into the boat in the most precipitous and unprepared manner, only to find her already two feet deep in water. Ordered to slack the painter in the blink of an eye when it was securely tied around one of the thwarts. (And it was even not a true painter, just a scrap of rope found in a moment of urgency). And then, to make the situation truly hopeless, the passengers had sealed their own fates by standing up and causing the boat to capsize. How could this disastrous chain of events be deemed to be his fault?

But still, the Board found Dundee guilty of disobedience of orders, with a qualification: that such disobedience was not wilful, but rather arising from incompetency.

Godfrey looked with contempt at the co-convicted Dundee. To think that this ineffectual mariner, only new to his ship the day before, could bring him down, cost him his ship, his career, the respect of his family, the patronage of his wife's mother. He wished he'd never laid eyes on the man, never let him on his ship. What was that running down Dundee's pudgy pink face? Tears? Dundee would have more reason to blubber if Godfrey ever encountered him in a dark laneway.

With the inquiry concluded, the court resumed its usual business, hearing cases of stealing, assault, breaches of tickets-of-leave, drunkenness, roguery and vagabondage. Godfrey languished in the bar of the Ship Inn while he waited for a vessel to take him back to Fremantle. He considered his options, what work he might find during the suspension of his certificate, and toyed with the thought of joining a windjammer out of Port Adelaide. The grain trade was always short of men, and masters of ships on the clipper route

to Europe could not afford to be discerning about certificates. He would settle for mate, or even second, so long as the officers' rum ration was a pint a day and undiluted.

And then, when Godfrey's certificate was returned, he would come back to the colony, chastened but not reviled, for he had heard undercurrents of public opinion, whispers in the streets of Busselton to say that he, John Godfrey, had been made a scapegoat for the shortcomings of the ship, the inefficiencies of the engineers; that any other competent skipper would have taken the same actions; that he had acted with valour under the most harrowing of circumstances.

Pondering his situation through the lubrication of whiskey, Godfrey began to feel reconciled, even marginally hopeful about what the future might bring. But as he wallowed in his reverie about John Godfrey *redux*, he was rudely interrupted by the arrival of Sergeant Back and Sub Inspector Wishy. The two policemen swooped upon Godfrey at the bar, charged him with manslaughter, handcuffed him, marched him to the police station and put into a stinking hot cell with nothing more than a blanket on the stone floor and a bucket permeated with the smell of stale piss. Godfrey's mind was kept almost as dark as the cell in which he was confined; only after several days did a lawyer come to see him. And only then did he learn from that lawyer that William Dundee had also been arrested on a charge of manslaughter, at the behest of the Governor, and their fates were in the process of being deliberated by the Attorney General, who was none other than the father of the young master George Leake, lately passenger on the *Georgette* and a survivor of her wreck. And by the way, the lawyer asked, could Godfrey find fifty pounds in bail money?

Godfrey rarely saw Dundee during his time of incarceration, other than in the most indelicate of circumstances when both were taken to use the two-holed privy at the same time. Theirs was a misery that did not want company; quite the contrary, as each blamed the other for this ignominious state of affairs.

The Attorney General must have found cause for clemency. William Dundee was released on the twentieth of January. Dundee's release gave Godfrey some reason for hope. The lawyer paid another visit and advised him

that Mrs Godfrey's mother had come forward with the fifty pounds. On the twenty-eighth of January, Sergeant Back released Godfrey gaol on fifty pounds bail and two sureties of twenty-five pounds each, paid by one Thomas Connor.

## Chapter 18

*16 January 1877. Wallcliffe Homestead.*

*'As our beloved mother drew her last breath, the little children, even all the servants were crying and wringing their hands.'*

...Excerpt from the diary of Fannie Bussell

THE web was coarse and stringy on Ellen's face. She tried to swat it away but it sprang back and tickled her nostrils. She opened her eyes and saw that the web was black. She felt the friction of a rough shirt against her ear, sensed the bracing of arms under her back and legs. Then she realised she was ascending the stairs. A thud-creak sounded with each little rise, and the air became warmer as she neared the upper reach of the dark cave of stairwell. Her bearer stepped through the door of the bedroom, into a flood of light from the window that made her squint.

He placed her on the four poster bed, and as he backed away she saw that he was Sam Isaacs. How strange. Had she fallen off her milking stool and dashed her head on the ground? Surely not again – she'd done it once before at Ellensbrook, had seen stars, her gown and petticoat all rucked up around her knees. And Sam had carried her into the house, just like now. *Oh dear, how silly of me. I must get back to the milking straight away. But no, I'm hurt – my chest. How it hurts to breathe.*

Upstairs in the bedroom, which had been rendered a hotbox by draughts of summer air rising up the stairwell, Ellen felt warm at last. In an instant of clear-headedness, she remembered how cold she'd been these last few days, even now in high summer, when the cows stood still and lazy under trees and the dogs heaved with the effort of panting and her older girls flung shawls they didn't need over their gowns to hide the dark crescents of perspiration under their arms. Ellen had even been cold in the kitchen, sitting right there next to the Metters and shivering away, despite the heat it threw off with four loaves baking inside.

Faces went in and out of her vision: black faces, white faces. Words issued from the mouths of those faces, and she tried to answer what they said, but they just went 'shh, shh' or ignored her altogether and whispered amongst

themselves. It was all such a shambles, there was so much commotion and clatter in the room. She tried to tell them, 'go away, let me sleep,' but no one took any notice.

Ellen was startled by the sound of a frightful cry. She thought it came from Edie, whose face loomed in front of her with an open-mouthed stricken grimace. She started to say to her daughter, 'what's wrong, dear?' But another cry came out and Ellen realised it was she who was making this awful racket. An almighty pain seared through her upper body. The groans kept coming out against her control. Next came the insult of cold metal being thrust into her mouth, rattling against her teeth, and a terrible bitter taste spreading across the top and sides of her tongue.

Darkness cloaked the room. The pain went blessedly blunt, the room blessedly quiet. Ellen dreamed chaotically, dreamed of strangers in her house, cows going unmilked, the baby fretting in the arms of Lucy, trying to escape, straining toward her mother who had no strength to hold her any more. Several more times, Ellen felt the clanking of cold metal inside her mouth followed by a bitter taste. When that was gone she felt a warm syrupy glow flowing through her body, like liquid butterscotch.

When the early light brought the room back into view, the first thing Ellen saw was a little pointed, anxious-eyed, red face peering down at her. A small hand cupped her own. Ellen could feel the roughness of a callous along the inside of its finger. A rider's finger.

She said to Grace, 'Your face looks very flushed, my child'. And that was all she could say before her eyelids dropped. Then she slipped back into her dreaming. She saw her darling Grace galloping Shiner along the cliff top toward Wallcliffe. Thank heaven, Grace was almost home. It was time for Ellen to stop worrying.

## Chapter 19

*August 1877. Perth.*

*I hereby certify that I saw Miss Grace Bussell riding down a very precipitous hill at full speed, rush into the surf where the boat was capsized... and assisted twenty persons to reach the shore. During the time she was in the surf, her life was in great danger. Being on the steamer at the time I saw the full danger, and felt certain that both herself and horse would be drowned. The native servant who accompanied her ran the same risk.*

– Thomas Connor, to the Royal Humane Society.

*'I consider that the risk to herself incurred by Miss Grace Bussell was mainly owing to the force of the sea and the consequent danger of being swept from her saddle. The greatest depth to which she rode I should judge at about four feet. I did not see Miss Bussell plunge into the surf a second time, and to the best of my knowledge the woman and child were the only persons rescued by Miss Bussell. As I have before stated, all the others reached ashore without assistance except the man who was left struggling in the surf, apparently almost exhausted when the native servant 'Sam' referred to, plunged in almost instantaneously with Miss Grace Bussell and assisted the man ashore.*

— Georgette passenger James Lambe, in a letter to S.S. Davis, Resident Magistrate of Bunbury, 22 August 1877.

*Miss Bussell's father is a Gentleman of Standing in the colony, and I feel sure that some such recognition of her courageous conduct as that which I venture to recommend would not be misplaced, and should be gratifying to the whole community.*

– Outgoing Governor His Excellency William Robinson in a letter to the Secretary of State Lord Carnarvon, 31 August 1877

GEORGE Leake stepped out into the radiant cold of a cloudless Perth winter day. Recovering from a bout of influenza, he was venturing out of doors for the first time in a fortnight. He stood for a moment by the front gate, one hand on the gate post, giving himself time to adjust to the blast of biting air and unfiltered light. He felt the shock of being physically present in the same vista that he had lately only experienced through the glazing of windows.

The sun's glare was golden bright, but carried no heat. His eyes squinted against the sharp intrusive rays, then began to smart and water. After two weeks in a supine position, straining in dim light to read his law books or lethargically studying the undulations of intricate ceiling roses overhead, he felt as if his body and senses had atrophied, developed a hypersensitivity to the stimulations of the external world. His legs were still slightly weak and wobbly; his ears – accustomed to the subdued sanctum of the house – heard the street sounds at *fortissimo* volume. Mama had questioned whether he should venture out quite so soon, but Leake had reassured her that a brief stroll to the Post Office would do him no harm; at any rate, the outgoing route was a descending one, and he would certainly return back up the hill on the horse-drawn tram.

He began to walk east toward the Terrace, passing by the Pensioner Barracks on the left, and arrived at the corner of Mill Street, where his old *alma mater*, Bishop Hale's School – a rather Tudor-like red brick affair – dominated the highest point of the ridge that loomed over the Perth port and river. Looking down to his right, he had a clear view to the Swan, smooth and glistening like a blue satin ribbon.

He made his way down St George's Terrace to the Post Office at the corner of Barrack Street. His was a simple mission that day, to call in and collect the household mail, an errand that any of the servants or his sisters could have easily made. But he was keen to demonstrate the completeness of his recovery and return from his outing with red cheeks and a robust countenance.

The next evening was the Weld Club's farewell ball for His Excellency Governor Robinson and Lady Robinson. Leake could not abide the thought of being absent from the most auspicious society gathering this winter; the senior Leakes would all be there at the Town Hall, and his sisters

and cousins; Lord Carnarvon and the entire Legislative Assembly no doubt; and some of the Dempsters, he hoped, would travel down from Buckland. In fact, Willie Dempster might be in attendance, showing off his new fiancée – by and large a long overdue milestone in Willie’s life, as he was twice the age of his betrothed, the sixteen-year-old Maude Sweeting. Leake would be most pleased to see Sir Archibald Burt in attendance, particularly if the Chief Justice’s party should happen to include his daughter Louisa. Leake was already rehearsing a little scenario in his mind, of the words he would say to Miss Burt when they met again, and how he would ask the sweet-faced young thing for a dance.

Inside the Post Office, a long queue of customers waited to send telegrams. Leake had never before seen so many people at the telegraph desk; but then, there were so many more destinations for telegrams these days, most notably London, which was now connected to Perth via the line to Adelaide. He wondered how people in the colony had ever managed before the advent of this modern miracle in long-distance communication.

The mails, too, had improved since the *S.S. Rob Roy* had come into service. The new coastal steamer was keeping to schedule with far greater regularity than her predecessor had ever managed to do. The *Rob Roy*’s success put the poor old *Georgette* to shame, or at least the *Georgette*’s former owners. Since the wreck, Mr Connor had withdrawn from his remaining enterprise in the colony, the Geraldton to Northampton railway project, and with no competent contractors to be found, work on the line had come to a halt.

Amongst the letters handed to him by the mail clerk, one envelope was addressed to Leake, bearing the seal of the Office of the Colonial Secretary. Leake opened it then and there in the Post Office. He found it to be correspondence from Henry Clay, a senior public servant in the colony, seeking information about the circumstances of the sinking of the *Georgette*. In particular, Mr Clay wanted to know about the conduct of Grace Bussell during the rescue at Calgardup Bay.

*...The incident has fetched Miss Bussell much acclaim and admiration in the Australian and overseas press, and I am recently in receipt of a letter from the Royal*

*Humane Society in London seeking corroboration of the brave deeds attributed to the young lady. The Society has received a number of submissions on behalf of Miss Grace Bussell, urging that a medal be bestowed upon her in recognition of her heroism leading to the saving of fifty lives...*

Indeed, Leake had heard about some of this fuss, and not without some sense of annoyance. He thought the newspaper reports had greatly exaggerated Grace Bussell's actions by reporting that she had personally pulled most of the survivors from the surf. Watching the events as they occurred, from his position on the deck of the ship, Leake had seen no such thing. In fact, from his own observations the native stockman – in going to the aid of a man clinging to the overturned boat – had ridden much further into the water than Miss Bussell.

He could have taken the initiative to write to the newspapers, not to discredit Grace Bussell (whose actions in rushing to the aid of the shipwrecked were admirable) but to give the real stalwarts their due. And in his mind, he had no doubt that those stalwarts were the Dempsters, for their plucky actions that saved a number of lives at sea; and later on the crew, for evacuating fifty souls to the beach under the most difficult and harrowing of circumstances. But Leake had decided to keep his own counsel on the matter, rather than make a public declaration of his thoughts and risk offending the Bussells who had been so kind to him, particularly so soon after the death of the much-adored Ellen Bussell.

But at times the publicity was almost too much for Leake. One journalist had declared Miss Bussell to be 'Australia's Grace Darling', comparing her to the English girl who some forty years before had famously helped rescue thirteen people from a shipwreck in the Farne Islands. Leake viewed the report as fawning, licentious journalism, the concoction of a dubious association between two unrelated events on the flimsy excuse of a shared given name.

He had even heard rumours that Grace Bussell was in receipt of proposals of marriage from men around the world. *Extraordinary*, he thought, *for men to be swooning over a girl they have never laid eyes on. Those distant*

*swains will have to hurry, as is rumoured that Freddie Drake-Brockman has been calling on the young Miss Bussell these past few months.* Seemed that after reading about the incident in the newspaper, the besotted chap had ridden his horse all the way down from Perth to Margaret River to meet the most celebrated of the Bussell girls.

Wishing to put the *Georgette* matter to rest, Leake decided to answer Mr Clay's letter that very afternoon. In his response, which went on for six pages, he gave a detailed account of the ship's final hours. When he arrived at the part about the landing of passengers in the pinnace, Leake worded his account as diplomatically as he could:

*I do not think that either of the riders were in any great danger at all for they did not get amongst the breakers as been said in fact it would have been impossible either for a horse to keep its legs or a rider his seat in such as surf as there was there running. I hope it will not be thought that there is any attempt to detract anything from the praise due to Miss Bussell: indeed I consider she behaved admirably and had there been any necessity to go out further than she did, she would have attempted it without a moment's hesitation.*

Leake put down his pen. The exertion of writing – or perhaps it was the morning's walk to the Post Office – had drained him. But he felt pressed to get on with some legal work for his father. Picking up a sheaf of papers from his writing desk, he took it into the parlour and laid down on the chaise lounge to swot up on the case.

His father was acting for the plaintiff, who was none other than the ever-litigious Connor & McKay. Apparently, Thomas Connor had collected on the *Georgette*'s insurance and done a bunk to New Zealand, where he was contracted by the Government to build a jetty at Port Lyttleton. George Leake senior's client was seeking 1500 pounds in damages for the failure of a certain ship's Captain to deliver a load of timber from Bunbury to New Zealand in March that year. The ship, the barquentine *Harrison*, was (by the Captain's statement) 'tight, staunch, strong and seaworthy' when she left Bunbury fully loaded with timber. But by the time she rounded Cape

Naturaliste, she started to make water. Nearing Cape Leeuwin, she was taking in six inches of water an hour, and labouring heavily. The Captain made the decision to turn her round and put back toward Bunbury. But instead of putting in at Koombana Bay, the Captain kept her on a northerly course, making for Fremantle. In plain daylight and fair weather, he managed to run her aground on the Murray Reef. The *Harrison* was floated off the reef and taken to Careening Bay for repairs; and there she had remained ever since, her timber cargo unaccounted for and almost certainly misappropriated. In any case, not a stick of that load ever went into the building of the jetty in New Zealand.

The confoundingly odd thing about the case was the name of the *Harrison's* skipper – Godfrey. But it was not the same Captain Godfrey lately of the *Georgette*, as Leake quickly learned – rather he was a Harrison Godfrey, master mariner, who had bought the American ship and named her after himself.

It was all rather overwhelming for Leake, especially in his somewhat debilitated state: the account of the bungled voyage, the heavy timber, the leaky ship – even the ship's pumps were not working properly – brought to his mind the grievous final journey of the *Georgette*. A superstitious traveller in the colony could be forgiven for boycotting any ship skippered by a Godfrey.

Leake wondered what had happened to the other Godfrey – John Godfrey. He understood the man to be at large and his certificate of competency returned. Leake knew within himself that his own personal survival of the wreck had palliated the case against Godfrey, given it was his own father, the Attorney General, who had granted the *Georgette's* master clemency.

John Godfrey had since vanished. His name was not appearing in the colonial shipping news. Perhaps he had gone east, or joined an intercontinental line. What did it matter? Leake's preoccupation now was the case before him, and like most civil shipping cases, complex. In his delicate post-convalescent state, he had difficulty keeping his mind on the finer points of the case: the charter party transaction, whether it constituted freight or a

loan, and whether Harrison Godfrey had abandoned the ship because it was more profitable than to have her repaired and continue to her destination.

Leake's eyes lost focus on the page. He was oblivious when his mother came into the salon and placed a rug over him. He was dreaming of a hatless windblown young woman with a touch of sunburn. She was soft and diminutive against the blue hardness of the seascape behind her. She looked at him in a diverting way, at once shy but penetrating. The dream was still vivid when he woke. The girl was not Louisa Burt. And she was not Grace Bussell.

## Chapter 20

*June 1934. St Paul Minnesota, USA.*

*Yes, I had some kind of a feeling that your parents had passed over the Great Divide and when we know our time is coming soon we too shall hear the call.*

—Annie Simpson in a letter to Gaven McGregor, 29 May 1919

A long rectangular Ford hearse parked outside the Johnson-Peterson Funeral Home in South Smith Street, waiting to take the casket to the Oaklawn Cemetery, just across the bridge on the north bank of the Mississippi River. As it turned out, it was a good thing that the larger of the two chapels was available that morning. The Simpson family had booked the smaller room, but it soon filled fit to bursting, and the people kept coming. The undertakers ushered the visitors next door into the big room and sent one of the girls outside to direct the incoming arrivals. From the looks of it, the ranks of the genuine mourners were boosted by onlookers who'd read about the poor lady's demise in the papers. Automobile accidents – or at least ones that killed people – were still a pretty rare thing in St Paul. There were even a couple of newsmen with their big Kodak cameras, waiting outside the Johnson-Peterson white gable-roofed funeral home, hoping to get a shot of the grieving family as they came out.

Aside from the blow-ins – the morbidly curious and the down-and-outers who had no other diversions in their lives, nor any place to go as comfortable as the plush interior of the Johnson-Peterson Funeral Home – most of the people appeared to be respectable citizens. There were men in three-piece suits, holding their straw fedoras respectfully on their laps, and women in summer dresses with scalloped necklines, yoked skirts and blouses with sailor collars, smart peep-toe pumps, flat-brimmed hats with veils. The mourners seemed better-heeled than the lady they had come to mourn. Or if not, they were putting on a good show of prosperity. It was a tribute to Mrs Annie Simpson that so many of her clientele had come along to pay their

respects, especially as some of them had stopped using her laundressing services since the Crash.

The manner and violence of the lady's death had greatly shocked the citizens of St Paul. As she stepped off a Twin Cities Transit Company streetcar in Marquette Street near the Foshay Tower, Mrs Simpson was hit by a Chevy coupé driven by an inattentive salesman who had overshot the stationary streetcar, propelling the elderly woman twenty-five feet along the road. By any measure, it was a nasty and abrupt way for any person to die. News of Mrs Simpson's death had been widely reported in the press, drawing a large assembly that even the big chapel at Johnson and Peterson's filled to standing room only.

Mrs Simpson's family – three sons and a daughter and their families – took up the front pews. The eldest son was himself nearing old age, testifying to the extreme youth of Annie Simpson when she gave birth to her first child. The morning sun, shining through the bright lime-coloured leaves of early summer elm trees, cast a wash of green light on the white walls of the chapel. Mr Peterson opened the service with the hymn, *Abide With Me*, accompanied by Mr Johnson on an upright Hammond organ. Then, the undertaker asked all to rise for The Lord's Prayer, following this by intoning a mournful dedication to Annie Simpson, who he described as having sailed to America from 'Austria'.

Smiling glances darted among those seated in the front pew, leaving those behind to wonder what the family members could find so amusing at such a sombre occasion. And then it was time for the eulogy. The first-born, small of stature and balding, wearing a serge suit shining at the elbows, his old crumpled brown brogues shining where the leather was not worn away in nubby patches, stepped up to the lectern and turned his dignified, clear-eyed gaze to the assembly of mourners, cast a brief smile toward the front pews, and began to speak.

'Good day to you all, and thank you for coming along to farewell our beloved mother, Mrs Annie Simpson. I'm Henry, her oldest son, and I speak today for my sister Grace and my brothers Ernest and Alfred.

‘The three of us are finding it awfully hard to come to terms with our mother’s death. It doesn’t seem fair that she’s been taken from us in an automobile accident, at the age of seventy-four. She deserved many more years of life and to finally go in peace and dignity with her family around her. But maybe I shouldn’t dwell on that. Mom would have wanted me to look at the positive side of things, just like she always did.

‘I’m sure many of you know that Annie Simpson was dealt some bad cards in life. She buried a baby daughter and a son in Australia. She worked long hours to support us, doing mending and laundry and housekeeping work, and she only got a chance to rest when we children were old enough to earn some sort of living of our own. She brought us up without a Dad around and she gave us the best life she could here in St Paul.

‘Mom adopted this city as her home. But I know she missed England right up to the end. She often talked about England as ‘home’ even though she left there when she was sixteen. But she never complained; she just reminisced about it a lot and kept writing faithfully to her friends and family over there, although most of them are gone by now.

‘What you may not know is that Mom nearly lost her life in Australia, not long after she went out there from England. The incident happened in 1876, when Mom was only seventeen years old and I was a baby of six months, on a voyage between Western Australia and South Australia. The steamship we were travelling on began to leak and was in danger of sinking. Mom and I were thrown into a lifeboat. It capsized, but somehow Mom managed to stay afloat in the choppy sea, holding my head above the water to keep me from drowning. Luckily, we were taken into another small boat and finally made it to the shore. Eight other women and children passengers were drowned, making our survival all the more special.

‘Mom and I owed our lives to the courage and skill of the men who got us to shore alive. I can’t remember all their names but she used to speak of a Scottie and a Dundee, and a pair of brothers, William and

James. They were passengers but they were pretty handy around boats. I don't think Mom would mind me telling you this now, but she was pretty sweet on another passenger, a young man name of George – said he was kind to her aboard ship, even though she was poor and he was a pretty high faluting sort of guy – went on to become a big-name politician over there.

‘Once we were landed safe on the shore, we were still not out of danger. There was nothing to eat or drink, no shelter and we had nothing more than the clothes we were wearing. We owe a lot to the McGregor family, who came to get us off that hostile beach and took us in until we could resume our journey. Over the distance of miles and years, the McGregors continued to hold a special place in Mom's heart, and she kept writing to them until one by one they also passed away.

‘I wish I could say that after that incident life was happy for Mom, but unfortunately it wasn't. I don't want to speak badly of her husband, our father, but family life in Adelaide and later on Melbourne was not pleasant, and Mom had no choice but to move on and make her own way in the world. So she made the brave decision to sail to America with Alfred and Grace and me in tow, and Ernest was born on the ship outside Baltimore. Mom gave us the best start in life she could. She never complained about the hardships and the loneliness that went with being a mother on her own in a foreign country. Mom never lost her English accent, so she stood out from a lot of people, and she must have felt like a stranger in some ways. But she always appreciated the nice people in the beautiful city of St Paul and having the chance to start over in life.

‘Mom would often say to us, ‘life is sweet’. It sounded kind of quaint: ‘sweet’. We used to try to get her to say ‘swell’, in the modern way, but she never did take to the American slang. But it was good that she somehow managed to find life ‘sweet’, after all the hardships she faced and that close brush with death on the voyage. Without Mom's courage and determination to survive, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you today.

‘Most boys have had fathers in their lives – fathers they can look up to and say, ‘that’s my dad and he’s my hero’. We may not have had a dad to call our hero, but in our eyes our mother, Mrs Annie Simpson, was every bit a hero – as much of a hero as any man could ever be, and a lot more than many. We will always remember her so.’

### Author's Note

HIGH above Redgate Beach, a red gravel track leads to a clearing in the wind-battered dunal heath. In the centre of the clearing is a plinth denoting the historical significance of this place. It is inscribed with the story of the *Georgette*, the ship that grounded in the sandy seabed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1876. The words tell the stirring tale of Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs, said to have ridden horses into the surf and pulled up to 50 souls to safety from the stricken vessel.

When the surface of the sea below is not overly churned with whitecaps, you may glimpse the ship's shadow about seven metres off the beach. Looking down at the agitated surf, you may wonder about the plausibility of the deed attributed to Sam and Grace. Redgate Beach is a windswept, exposed, 350 metre-long shoreline backed by three active blowouts that launch seaspray high up the sides of the 50 metre bluffs backing the beach. Off the shore, the average wave height is 1.5 metres. Two permanent rip currents cross the inner reaches of Calgardup Bay and stream toward the rocks at the far ends of the beach.

Given the turbulence of these waters, you may question whether even the sturdiest and calmest of horses could have made their way out into such powerful, dumping surf; whether they could have tolerated the thrashing of panicked humans clinging to their sides and necks. Such is the conundrum I have pondered since 2009. It was in the late summer of that year, after yet another pilgrimage to the Redgate Beach shrine, that I decided to write an historical novel about the shipwreck. A number of small books, mostly intended for junior readers, had already been published about the incident. All of those books spoke glowingly of the rescuers, especially of Grace, but some less so of Sam. Many of the narratives have helped perpetuate the story that most, or all of the rescued passengers owed their lives to the two riders from the Wallcliffe Homestead.

One of those small books, A. Ferguson Stewart's *Australia's Grace Darling* (1946) did pay homage to the other *Georgette* rescue that took place further north along the coast: the extraordinary feat of courage and ingenuity on the part of Bill Dundee, John Dewar, Alex McLeod and the Dempster

brothers in bringing the gig in safely at Injidup, and then walking through the forest in the black of night to find help. Other versions have omitted or understated this thread of the story.

When I chose the historical novel genre for the retelling of this story, I committed myself to filling over three hundred pages with the tale. The task of executing a work of novel length brought with it the onus of research and scholarship and an undertaking to find out ‘the whole truth’. I’d barely received my researcher’s ticket from the Battye Library of Western Australian History when I began to bump up against contradictions. One of those sources of contradictions was the transcript of the inquiry into the *Georgette*. That transcript proved to be a motherlode of information. The inquiry was held just weeks after the event. All of the key players were there and giving depositions: Captain Godfrey, William Dundee, the engineers, members of the above-deck and below-deck crews; the surveyors and constabulary. One of the most provocative lines of enquiry concerned the loading of logs onto the *Georgette* at Bunbury. Most accounts, including that of A. Ferguson Stewart, give the alleged ‘incautious’ loading as occurring on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1876, while she was en route to Adelaide on her final disastrous voyage. However, the inquiry transcript squarely places the loading as taking place from the 12<sup>th</sup> November, during an earlier voyage. The operation, delayed by bad weather, took more than ten days, after which the vessel steamed north again to Fremantle, fully loaded with hewn jarrah, to pick up the passengers who would join her for her ill-fated last journey.

The *Georgette* did stop again at Bunbury on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, but only briefly on her way southward to offload a couple of passengers. The trajectory of her shipping route during that second half of November seems rather unorthodox: loading the timber at Bunbury and proceeding north to Fremantle, even though the wood was ultimately bound for Adelaide. However, this route is corroborated by inquiry deponents and also substantiated by reports in the shipping news of the day.

Putting the question of loading dates and the anomaly of her convoluted route aside, what caused the *Georgette* to spring a leak on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November? On this point, the Board of Inquiry made no conclusion. They ruled out the theory that she had been damaged by a log striking her hull

at Bunbury, even though she did apparently suffer a blow, according to the Second Engineer Joseph Haurigan. He testified that he saw a log strike one of the frames high up on the starboard side of the ship. The force of the blow bent a rib and pulled it away from the iron plating. As a result, a number of rivets holding the plating and ribs together were popped. The damage was high enough to the deck level, well above the water line, that it was unlikely to cause any serious ingress of water except in heavy seas.

The board also ruled out the possibility that repairs to the ship's damaged rudder, stern posts and holds, made after an accident three years earlier, had come undone. The surveyor who gave this opinion admitted that he had not seen the ship out of the water since the repairs were made, but considered her 'right and tight' when he passed her at Fremantle on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November.

The inquiry was primarily concerned with the loss of lives when the lifeboat capsized, hours before the ship foundered in Calgardup Bay. The transcript of the inquiry made little reference to the later events of that day, including the purported horseback rescue attributed to Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs. However, one survivor at least – the young George Leake – had written his account in a letter to his sister Mary, four weeks after the rescue. Leake described the ordeal in an oddly laconic way (considering he had narrowly escaped death by drowning the day before his twentieth birthday). His description of the actions of Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs belied the hyperbolised rumours and gossip about the rescue that quickly spread throughout the colony and overseas: "The vessel was seen going ashore by one of Mr Bussell's stockman and he and one of the Miss Bussells (Grace) came down to us on the beach; it was a great relief to see them for then we knew help was near."

Leake's narrative is a far cry from the gushing accounts of the press of the day. The following report from the *Northern Argus*, published several months after the event, not only credited Grace Bussell with saving fifty lives – it also suggested she performed the deed entirely on her own, making no mention of the second rider, Sam Isaacs: "Reaching the shore she urged her horse into the boiling surf, and rode out beyond the second line of roaring breakers until she reached the boat to which the affrighted women and

children were clinging. Miss Bussell's horse stumbled over the rope and she was nearly lost, but she managed to get alongside the swamped raft and to bring off the women and children...So fierce was the surf that four hours were occupied in landing fifty persons..."

About the time this article was published, the Colonial Secretary's Office was writing to eyewitnesses, seeking their accounts of the rescue at the behest of the Royal Humane Society in London. The passenger James Lambe's recollection was closely aligned to Leake's; but the ship's owner, Thomas Connor, was far more effusive in his praise of Grace Bussell. Whose report was more accurate? I have reason to hold Connor's version in doubt, given his commercial interests in the colony as a construction contractor and his need to rely on propitious relationships with the powerful and influential. After all, the Bussells were a powerful family; Alfred's brother John was a member of the Legislative Assembly, which held sway over the commerce of the colony and its capital works programs.

I have been fortunate to have researched and written *The Capes* as a component of my thesis for a PhD in Creative Writing at Curtin University. My thesis, comprising this novel and an exegesis, has explored the question of how writers of historical fiction can ethically negotiate the divide between fact and imagination. I decided to base my retelling on the most reliable primary sources I have been able to find. I hope that in doing so, I have managed to bring some little-known information about this event to light, such as the magnificent response of the people at Quindalup who came to the aid of the survivors landed in the gig. I believe the family names of McGregor, Harwood, Scott, Yelverton, Abbey and Guerrier should be remembered alongside the Bussells who are more famously celebrated for rendering assistance to the other group of survivors at Wallcliffe.

Wrestling with the ethics of writing this novel, my main concern has been to be as true as I can to the characters, for most of them are based on real persons. Of course, every story that has heroes is also likely to have one or more villains, or at the least one or more unsympathetic characters. In the available records about the *Georgette*, Captain John Godfrey emerges as a mixed and murky character, sometimes vilified, sometimes praised. He is a shadowy figure in history; I have found little recorded about him. So with

little else to go on, I have written him as a man who battled with the bottle. Why? In the inquiry, his sobriety was called into question several times. In 1882, having secured the captaincy of another ship (the brig *Laughing Wave*) Godfrey fell overboard early in the voyage northward from Fremantle, and drowned. One newspaper report has him jumping overboard ‘in a fit of temporary insanity’.

I hope that I have not maligned John Godfrey; and if I have done so then I apologise for any offence this may cause to his descendents. Like all of us, he was flawed, he may have shown poor judgement but he did act with skill and courage in the hours after the *Georgette* foundered. Many more souls may have perished without the benefit of his skilled seamanship.

Throughout the novel, I have quoted from various journals and records of the day. Where a quote appears at the start of a chapter I have provided its source. In a number of places I have also inserted verbatim or closely paraphrased passages from characters’ testimonies as recorded in the inquiry transcript. I have done this in order to achieve greater authenticity, when it seemed there was no better way to tell the story than to let the character say it in his own words. In such instances I have embedded the quotes in the narrative without citation, although a bibliography at the end of this volume lists the main sources consulted. In other instances I have invented content that may appear to be direct quotes from historical records. The letter from Captain John Molloy to Alfred Bussell is a figment of my own imagination, as are the letter from Henry Clay to George Leake and the eulogy for Annie Simpson given by her son Henry.

I propose that the heroism associated with the *Georgette* rescue was more broadly shared amongst crew, passengers and people on the shore than most accounts would suggest. As for whether Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs really did perform the incredible feat of riding horses into the surf for four hours and pulling up to 50 people onto the shore, I am sceptical. However, we can rely on the known facts that Wallcliffe was about twelve miles from Redgate Beach; that Grace and Sam rode the distance through rough terrain; that they remained to help people on the beach for a period of time; that they rode back again to Wallcliffe to get help; and that they made the same return trip in the dark that night with John and Fanny Brockman, laden with food

and blankets for the survivors. In my estimation those acts alone deserve to be called 'heroic'.

Walking the tightrope between fact and imagination, I hope I have found some integrity in my retelling of this tale based on information I have gleaned from a number of credible but obscure sources. Guided by these primary sources, I have found the confidence to bring forgotten or little-known facts to light, while using my imagination to breathe new life into this story from a contemporary viewpoint. In the words of the great Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood: 'The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.'

**Marcia van Zeller**



**COMPONENT 2 – EXEGESIS**

## 1.0 Background of the *Georgette* shipwreck

On the first of December 1876, early into her doomed voyage between Fremantle and Adelaide, the *S.S. Georgette* began to take on large amounts of water. Captain John Godfrey gave the urgent order: “Run for the shore!” Sails set, her propeller dragging, the vessel was kept afloat by a bucket gang, but only just long enough to reach the shelter of Calgardup Bay. A hundred feet from dry land, she grounded on the sandy bottom – but the distance may as well have been a hundred miles, so treacherous was the surf between the vessel’s stranded hull and the beach. The fifty souls aboard looked toward the shore and wondered if they would ever reach it alive. Captain Godfrey ordered a lifeboat launched to row people to shore, but the boat capsized, leaving women and children struggling in the breakers.

Suddenly a horse and rider, and then a second following close behind, crested the coastal dunes and scrambled down the soft sandbank, weaving their steeds through a maze of rocks to the water’s edge. The riders, 16-year-old Grace Bussell, a landowner’s daughter, and Aboriginal stockman Sam Isaacs, are said to have swum their horses through pounding waves to the sinking ship, pulling survivors from the water and helping them to shore.

The *Georgette* shipwreck is a revered part of Western Australian lore. The story has been retold in numerous tourist brochures and several children’s books. All of these accounts speak glowingly of the rescuers, especially of Grace, but less so of Sam. Over the years I have made a number of pilgrimages to Redgate Beach – the scene of the rescue – peering from a lookout high above, where a plaque commemorates the event, hoping to glimpse the shadow of the ship lying in her watery grave. But more often than not, the sea has been churned with whitecaps, obscuring any view of what lies under the surface. The more I have studied the site, the more sceptical I have become about the feasibility of the rescue as it has been described in many accounts, including that of A.E. Ferguson Stewart in his 1946 booklet, *Australia’s Grace Darling*.

But Grace Bussell – for it was she, and with Sam Isaacs – had neither doubts nor qualms. Firmly she urged her horse with coaxing

words, and spur when all else failed, into the breakers. They won beyond them and came towards the ship, the horses swimming strongly, albeit with white, startled eyes.

The two riders called and waved to the people on the ship. At length they made their purpose clear and one after another passengers and crew went over the ship's side and into the swirling waters. They struggled the short distance toward the horses and then, clutching to mane, to the riders' clothes and even to the horses' tails, they let themselves be towed shoreward (29).

The title of Stewart's booklet takes its name from the English heroine, Grace Darling, who in 1838, at the age of 23, joined her lighthouse keeper father in a perilous rescue of shipwrecked passengers from the ship *S.S. Forfarshire* off the coast of Northumberland. As news of the *Georgette* rescue spread, the tale of the original Grace Darling resonated with journalists and Grace Bussell came to be known as "Australia's Grace Darling"

#### An Australian Heroine

If ever a courageous British girl deserved to be likened to Grace Darling, the Northumbrian lighthouse-keeper's daughter, and to receive the Royal Humane Society's brightest medal for exertions in saving life, such a maiden is Miss Bussell, of Perth, Western Australia ("An Australian Heroine").

In fact, Grace Bussell was only one of several namesakes of the original Grace Darling. In 1849, British ship's stewardess Annie MacQuaid was posthumously declared "Albion's Grace Darling" for her part in saving lives when the *S.S. Wairarapa* hit rocks off Great Barrier Island on a voyage from Sydney to Auckland. In 1863, New Zealand acquired her own "Grace Darling", a Maori woman named Huria Matenga, who rescued eleven passengers from the Canadian brigantine *Delaware* in Whakapuaka Bay. In their paper about Haria Matenga's actions in the *Delaware* wreck, Katie Pickles and Angela Wanhalla explore the mythology of women and life-saving in maritime colonies: "In their creation and circulation, mythologies about and commemoration of heroines are constantly restructured to reflect or reject the societal values and aspirations of changing eras. For heroines in

history, it is common for the lines between fact and fiction to be blurred” (364).

In Australia, fascination for Grace Bussell and the *Georgette* has endured to the present day. As recently as 2011, two children’s books, inspired by the *Georgette* incident, have been published. Both books perpetuate the narrative of the two riders urging their horses into the surf numerous times throughout a grueling afternoon and hauling imperiled passengers to dry land. In *Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck*, Michelle Gillespie shakes up the racial bias of the colonialist narrative by imbuing the Aboriginal stockman with a more active role in the rescue than is portrayed in many traditional accounts, even listing Sam Isaacs’ name ahead of Grace Bussell’s in the book title.

Sam winks at her and with a splash of water, reins his horse back into the surf. Grace follows, leaving Smiler’s hoof prints deep in the sand.

After hours in the saddle and everyone safe on the shore, Sam dismounts and starts rubbing his horse’s legs.

‘I’ll ride home and send blankets and food,’ Grace says.

Sam nods. ‘You just be careful on that Smiler horse, Miss Bussell. Big mischief, that Smiler’ (27).

*Amazing Grace: An Adventure at Sea* more traditionally portrays Grace Bussell as the dominant force in the rescue:

And so Grace and Smiler brought the woman and her children to safety at last.

Sam was not far behind, a child in his arms and a weary man clinging to his horse.

‘C’mon Sam, let’s do it again!’ Grace yelled, as their passengers staggered up the beach and collapsed into the arms of other survivors, who had rushed forward to help them.

Grace and Sam guided many more people to safety that afternoon, while others braved the waves alone and made their own way in (Owen Reeder 73).

In her retelling of the *Georgette* rescue, Stephanie Owen Reeder invokes a moment in which Captain Godfrey, delivered to the beach, pays

tribute to his rescuer. “She’s Australia’s Grace Darling, that one ... “What a brave lass!” (74). The attribution of such a statement to the Captain, in the immediate aftermath of the safe landing of all fifty passengers on the beach, is at odds with documented accounts of the actual method used to convey the passengers to dry land. The Captain and crew employed a system known in modern nautical terms as a “breeches buoy”. They connected two ropes to the pinnace (the only boat remaining with the ship when she reached Calgardup Bay). Securing one end of one rope to the ship, they rowed the boat to the shore, disembarked several crew members who secured the loose end of the other rope, possibly to an anchor lodged in the sand. The pinnace was hauled back and forth between the ship and the shore using the two ropes in an operation that took several hours. If Godfrey were to praise anyone at that point, it would have been his men who had executed this technically difficult task with no loss of life, despite the boat having capsized several times in the surf break zone.

Standing on the ship waiting to be rescued was the young passenger George Leake, who in a letter to his sister Mary several weeks after the disaster, wrote this account of his deliverance:

One boat remained on board and with this steps were taken to get us on shore. Five of the crew went in her first and took a line ashore with them and this was made use of to haul the boat to and from the ship. The great danger in landing was the heavy surf which although the wind was off the shore was fully six or eight feet high the boat was swamped three or four times but no accident occurred, the only harm done was a wetting (Leake).

Another passenger, William Geddes, briefly described the landing in his deposition to an inquiry held in Busselton several weeks after the wreck. “The landing of the people from the Ship was effected with difficulty, but without loss of life – we were landed with the Pinnace” (Geddes). Little more was said about the Calgardup Bay during the inquiry, and no mention was made about the rescue by two people on horseback. The board was primarily concerned with determining culpability for the most tragic element of the *Georgette* disaster – the earlier loss of eight lives out to sea during a botched attempt to launch a

lifeboat. That thread to the *Georgette* story has been generally eclipsed in the popular literature and is often represented as a sub-plot of the ship's fatal final voyage that culminated in the thrilling dénouement on Redgate Beach. Yet in the aftermath of the lifeboat accident, a survival story and rescue of truly heroic proportions unfolded. Those responsible – the Dempster brothers and several of the crew – have remained largely unsung in the annals of history for their feat of rowing a tiny gig overloaded with fourteen people, in heavy seas, to a beach further north up the coast at Injidup, and then walking miles through dense bush in the black of night to find help.

While the Injidup rescue was mentioned in some newspaper accounts of the day, that part of the *Georgette* story did not earn medals for the Dempsters, nor for the crew members. Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs were, on the other hand, earmarked for glory. The following year, the Colonial Secretary's office, endeavouring to construct a case for bestowing official honours on the two riders, asked for testimonials from eyewitnesses. George Leake was one of those approached. In a letter to Henry Clay, a senior public servant in the Colonial Secretary's office, Leake attested: "I do not think that either of the riders were in any great danger at all for they did not get amongst the breakers has been said in fact it would have been impossible either for a horse to keep its legs or a rider his seat in such as surf as there was there running" (Leake).

Another passenger, James Lambe, also wrote to the Colonial Secretary. His account of the actions of Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs was no more glowing than Leake's. "The greatest depth to which she rode I would judge at about four feet. I did not see Miss Bussell plunge into the surf a second time, and to the best of my knowledge the woman and child were the only persons rescued by Miss Bussell" (Lambe). Leake's and Lambe's accounts of the events at Redgate Beach were opposed by other, more fulsome testimonials, including one by the ship's owner Thomas Connor, who happened to be aboard on the last fateful voyage. Connor made this pronouncement in a letter addressed to the Royal Humane Society:

I hereby certify that I saw Miss Grace Bussell riding down a very precipitous hill at full speed, rush into the surf where the boat was capsized ... and assisted twenty persons to reach the shore. During the time she was in the surf, her life was in great danger. Being on the steamer at the time I saw the full danger, and felt certain that both herself and horse would be drowned (Connor).

Governor Robinson, in despatching the testimonials to the Royal Humane Society, added further *gravitas* to the case in his covering letter.

“Miss Bussell’s father is a Gentleman of Standing in the colony, and I feel sure that some such recognition of her courageous conduct as that which I venture to recommend would not be misplaced and would undoubtedly be gratifying to the whole community” (Robinson 502).

In January 1878, Grace Bussell was awarded a silver medal from the Royal Humane Society, while Sam Isaacs received a bronze. The hagiographic tributes to Grace Bussell that undoubtedly helped earn the rescuers their honours are sharply at odds with the pragmatic reportage of Leake and Lambe. Such contrast and contradiction cast a shadow of doubt about the veracity of the heroic act attributed to the two riders at Redgate Beach. To the reasoned and impartial observer, a visit to the windswept beach, with its permanent rip currents and pounding surf, is likely to fuel conjecture about the very possibility of such a feat.

Like many before me, I have been captivated by the *Georgette* story, and for a time, enthralled with the idea that a young girl could possess such physical courage, horsemanship skills and the altruism to risk her life to save others. Later, as certain contradictory evidence came to light, admiration turned to scepticism. The urge to find out ‘the truth’ became compelling. The *Georgette* became my ‘Ancient Mariner’ story, to borrow from Margaret Atwood.

As for novelists, it’s best if they confine themselves to the Ancient Mariner stories, that is, the stories that seize hold of them and torment them until they have grabbed a batch of unsuspecting Wedding Guests with their skinny hands, and held them with their glittering eyes or else their glittering

prose, and told them a tale they cannot choose but hear (*In Search of Alias Grace* 38).

## 2.0 Research Question, Objectives and Methodology

### 2.1 The Research-Question Model

Margaret Atwood's reference to "Ancient Mariner stories" (*In Search of Alias Grace* 38) was made in her Boyer Lecture address in 1997, the year after she published her own historical novel about a girl named Grace. In 1843 Grace Marks, a servant girl in Markham, Ontario, was convicted of murdering her employer. English settler Susannah Moodie documented the case in her journals, and for generations her account was accepted as authentic. But Atwood, writing about the matter in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in her novel *Alias Grace*, was obliged, unlike Moodie, to go back into the past. She found the past largely in paper – diaries, newspaper articles, official records – and on that paper she found numerous discrepancies and contradictions that cast doubt as to whether Grace was actually guilty of the gruesome murder. The experience caused Atwood to question the value of such records: "If you are after the truth, the whole and detailed truth, and nothing but the truth, you're going to have a thin time of if you trust to paper; but with the past, it's almost all you've got" (*In Search of Alias Grace* 33).

Like Margaret Atwood, I turned to paper in my quest to find the 'truth' about the *Georgette* shipwreck. Finding many discrepancies early on in my research (particularly the differing versions of the events on Redgate Beach mentioned in the previous section) I realised that the task I had set for myself, a century and a half after the sinking of the ship, posed many dilemmas. Would any amount of research resolve those inconsistencies, or reveal information that had so far eluded me? On what basis should I choose between differing versions of events, without riding roughshod over history or doing injustices to the key figures? It became clear that my project was as much about the *writing* of history as it was about the history itself. I decided that in order to write the novel, I would need some theoretical and ethical scaffolding to help me determine what to include, what to leave out, what to invent; and ultimately to give proper justice to a tale that I have discovered to be far more significant than a perilous scramble from a stranded ship.

I enrolled in, and subsequently achieved candidacy at Curtin University for a Doctor of Philosophy: Communication and Cultural Studies. The thesis comprises a creative work accompanied by an exegesis. The

creative production component of my thesis is the historical novel, which I am calling “Cruel Capes”. The exegesis is structured in the “research-question model”, in which the exegetical component and the creative component both strive to answer the same central research question: “How can a writer of historical fiction ethically negotiate the divide between fact and imagination?” Explaining the research-question model, Barbara H. Milech and Ann Schilo stress that each component provides an independent answer to the same research question, “independent because each component of the thesis is conducted through the ‘language’ of a particular discourse, related because each ‘answers’ a single research question. Thus the two components of the research thesis are neither ambiguously related, nor does one undermine the language – the autonomy – of the other” (9).

Central to the research-question model is the concept that creative production is, in itself, research. The model requires students to articulate their topic in the form of a research question and to explore ways in which others have addressed the problem through creative/production practice and theory. Students develop the central research question through the process of writing the candidacy proposal, and from this question emerges a set of objectives for the research and a methodology. Students should undertake the creative/production work and the theoretical investigation, not sequentially but concurrently. “It [the model] asks them [students] to shape their own work (creative and expository) in terms of understandings gained through such investigation. It encourages them to understand that expository research pieces can be ‘creative’” (10).

## *2.2 Objectives and Methodology*

The exegesis addresses five research objectives. A specific methodology is aligned to each of the five objectives.

### *2.2.1 Objective 1*

The first objective is to undertake a review and analysis of discourses by literary theorists and scholarly historians on addressing the ethical divide between fact and imagination in historical novels. For my methodology I have performed a bibliographic review and analysis of the discourse of historiographers, historians and literary

theorists, including R.G. Collingwood, Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon, Inga Clendinnen and Herb Wylie.

### 2.2.2 *Objective 2*

The second objective is to undertake a review of critical commentary on several contemporary historical novels from Canadian and Australian authors, exploring the various epistemological, ethical and creative approaches the authors have used to resolve the tensions between fact and imagination. For my methodology I have reviewed a selection of contemporary historical fiction from Australia and Canada. The works I have chosen to review are: from Canada – *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood and *The Englishman's Boy* by Guy Vanderhaeghe; and from Australia – *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville and *Wanting* by Richard Flanagan. I have selected these four as they are all set in the nineteenth century and all have themes pertaining to white settlement and accession of lands inhabited by indigenous peoples, development of colonial holdings and exploitation of resources, early contact and relations between white invaders/settlers and indigenous peoples. This literature review also includes the review and analysis of memoirs by, and interviews with the writers on researching and writing their historical novels.

To set the context for this literature review, I have researched and written brief comparative histories of Australia and Canada and a discourse of the debates that have taken place in both countries on the representation of their histories and issues of national identity.

### 2.2.3. *Objective 3*

The third objective is to explore, in the development of the exegesis, the implications of various approaches and techniques deployed in the retelling of historical events in narrative fiction. For my methodology I have conducted a critical analysis of the material gathered from the studies of historiographic narrative theory and Australian and Canadian historical fiction described in 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 above. Through this analytical process I sought to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of contemporary creative and research

methodologies and approaches to the handling of factual historical material in historical fiction.

#### *2.2.4 Objective 4*

The fourth objective is to conduct research into the events surrounding the wreck of the *Georgette*, the rescue of its passengers and the people associated with these events. For my methodology I have conducted bibliographic and archival research, experiential research and field research and a small amount of oral history research with descendents of figures in the story.

#### *2.2.5 Objective 5*

The fifth and final objective is to select the approaches and techniques explored in the exegesis that best serve the retelling of the events surrounding the *Georgette* rescue, and deploy these in writing a novel of historical fiction. For my methodology I have discussed my reflections resulting from my review of historiography and literary theory; from my literature review of four historical novels from Australian and Canadian writers; and my analysis of the above materials. I have explored how the knowledge acquired has influenced my approach to researching and writing my own historical novel. I have also reflected on my creative practice, a form of research in itself, and described strategies used for analysing, reconciling and deploying in the novel the various forms of expository research undertaken.

### 3.0 Literature Review of Historiographic Theory

To the best of my knowledge, my own fictional history, “Cruel Capes”, is the first novel-length narrative about the *Georgette* written for an adult readership. At no time have I considered telling this story in any genre other than historical fiction. I am not an historian by profession, nor am I trained in the complex analytical methods applied by practitioners of this discipline; nor am I an expert in maritime heritage and engineering. For these reasons I dismissed early on the idea of writing a scholarly factual history about the *Georgette*. By choosing to write the event as a fictional history, I reasoned that I could use some degree of licence to deploy my imagination to plug information gaps in the available records. I could be ‘free’ to propose my own version of what transpired off the Western Australian coastline on the 30<sup>th</sup> November and 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876.

Some contemporary discourse on the writing of history argues in favour of this approach. In the wake of the questioning of mimetic models of representation, the hybridity of the historical novel, so troubling for those insistent on distinctions between the fictional and the real, has provided the departure point for a sustained challenge of the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind that insistence. The result is not just a more historiographically liberated form, in which the materials of history are highly malleable, but a much more diverse, heterogeneous, and self-conscious form (Wylie, *Speculative Fictions* 15).

However, along with the liberation afforded by writing in the historical fiction genre came the burden of responsibility. If evidence (or perhaps more dubiously, intuition) should lead me to adopt an alternative hypothesis, I would face the prospect of discrediting a story that gave not only Western Australia, but the nation as a whole, one of its first heroines and (though to a less exalted extent) one of its first Aboriginal heroes. The task of constructing the *Georgette* story upon insubstantial and conflicting source material may indeed place me – epistemologically and ethically – on shaky ground.

In addressing Objective 1 – that is, to undertake a review and analysis of discourses by literary theorists and scholarly historians on addressing the ethical divide between fact and imagination in historical novels – I identified three major streams of historiographical thought on which to build the necessary theoretical and ethical scaffolding for my project: 1) the notion of the ‘historical imagination’ and historical re-enactment promulgated by R.G. Collingwood; 2) the ‘tropological system’ and modes of historical narrative devised by Hayden White; and 3) historiographic metafiction, a term originated by Linda Hutcheon to describe a self-reflexive postmodern literary form. In this section I will discuss the salient points and ramifications of each of these schools of thought as relevant to the focus of my enquiry.

### 3.1 R.G. Collingwood, *Re-Enactment and the Historical Imagination*

R.G. Collingwood was an Oxford-educated historian and philosopher whose posthumously published seminal work, *The Idea of History* (1946) established the terms “historical imagination” and “historical re-enactment” into the discourse and vernacular of contemporary historical theorists and historiographers. In the following passage, Collingwood problematises the historian’s labour in striving to know the past, and posits a solution, that being his often controversial doctrine of ‘re-enactment’:

How, or on what conditions, can the historian know the past? In considering this question, the first point to notice is that the past is never a given fact which he can apprehend empirically by perception. *Ex hypothesi*, the historian is not an eyewitness of the facts he desires to know. Nor does the historian fancy that he is; he knows quite well that his only possible knowledge of the past is mediated or inferential or indirect, never empirical. The second point is that this mediation cannot be effected by testimony. The historian does not know the past by simply believing a witness who saw the events in question and has left his evidence on record. That kind of mediation would give at most not knowledge but belief, and very ill-founded and improbable belief. And the historian, once more, knows very well that this is not the way in which he proceeds; he is aware

that what he does to his so-called authorities is not to believe them but to criticize them. If then the historian has no direct or empirical knowledge of his facts, and no transmitted or testimonial knowledge of them, what kind of knowledge has he: in other words, what must the historian do in order that he may know them? My historical review of the idea of history has resulted in the emergence of an answer to this question: namely, that the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind (Collingwood 282).

This notion of re-enactment lies at the core of Collingwood's philosophy of history. It is one of the strategies by which he declares the historian "creates history; not, of course, in the sense of making it up, but through the use of the techniques that give history its autonomy" (Johnson, 67). Re-enactment consists of an array of tools, amongst them, perhaps most controversially, the tool of empathy, described by Johnson as "a charitable bringing back to life of a lost existence" (111).

Inaccurately, and sometimes pejoratively, the terms 'empathy' (variously known as 'applied empathy' and 'sympathy') have also been attributed to R.G. Collingwood's body of discourse. Hughes-Warrington attests that Collingwood did not actually use the terms 'empathy' or 'sympathy' as cognates of the term, 're-enactment'. "Importantly too, nowhere does he use the English term "empathy" to support his historiographical claims, despite the fact that commentators persistently connect him with it" (73).

Semantic deliberations aside, in order to understand Collingwood, it is essential to understand what he meant by 're-enactment'. In turn, to understand 're-enactment', it is necessary to understand the distinction he makes between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of an event. The 'outside' of an event he defines as "everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements..." while the 'inside' is "that in it which can only be described in terms of thought" (213). Once the historian knows the facts of an event or action (the 'outside', or sometimes referred to as the 'external side'), in order to know the inside (or 'interior' or 'thought-side') he must endeavour re-think the event or action.

For some critics, Collingwood's idea of re-enactment appears gratuitous, a mere excuse for the writer of history to invent whatever he or she pleases. According to Dray, subscribers to such views have often misconstrued what Collingwood meant by re-enactment, regarding it as a method for discovering *factual* information about the past, rather than the *thoughts* of the historical agent. But in the defence of such critics, Dray cites a mitigating factor. "Collingwood's language does sometimes make it look as if what he is telling us how to go about making discoveries, whether of the thoughts expressed in past actions, or of what constituted their 'outsides'" (Dray, Kindle location 491).

Perhaps less ambiguous is Collingwood's oft-repeated credo that the historian must rely on evidence. He or she accepts that writing history is an inferential process, but insists that inference must be based upon evidence. In re-thinking the thought of an historical agent, the historian should not attempt to simply *re-experience* another's experience, but rather should engage in a practical act of reasoning to understand *why* the agent took a particular course of action. In so doing, the historian should examine the context and circumstances of the event or action, along with the motivations and goals of the agent. He or she should analyse the outcomes of the action or event, and finally determine if those outcomes were ultimately aligned to the contexts and circumstances of the event, and to the motivations and goals of the agent. "To use Collingwoodian language, the historian's re-thought thought and that of the agent must be identical in their 'mediation', not in their immediacy" (Dray, Kindle location 746).

In Collingwood's body of theory, the idea of 'historical imagination' is closely linked to re-enactment. Some critics equate the two terms, but Dray argues that imagination, though related to re-enactment, is a faculty that enables the historian to progress beyond the compilation of information, the mere 'scissors-and-paste' activity. Collingwood sees the interpolative, constructive aspect of historical thinking, working from selected sources and proceeding in accordance with certain principles of inquiry, as gradually elaborating a 'web' of accepted fact, an increasingly plausible and detailed 'picture' of a portion of the past, composed of assertions made in the sources

which have survived criticism, and inferences from them (Dray, *Kindle* location 2431).

I will conclude this discussion of R.G. Collingwood with an example from Penny Russell, an historian at the University of Sydney. In her essay, “Almost Believing: The Ethics of Historical Fiction”, Russell describes her experience of coming to understand an historical figure, Lady Jane Franklin, the wife of the Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin. Russell has access to the woman’s prolific diaries; these are the materials with which she works within her speciality of interpreting the personalities of historical figures.

As a scholar I am conscious that she is unknowable: or rather, that I can know her only as a woman formed of words and images, not of spirit and flesh. But if she remains only an assemblage of quotations, scattered woodenly across my pages, the intellectual purpose of my work is lost. To make her human, I must write with a combination of empathy and creativity. For my book to work, I must almost believe that I know her, inside and out (111).

In the next stage, applying the rigour of the scholarly historian, Russell navigates through the arduous process of transcribing selected passages, making connections between them, letting the fragments combine and separate and morph into more defined patterns. This organic process leads to a first draft, then second and third drafts, until by the final draft she reports, “I am writing inside my head, historical intuition at full stretch, imagination and creativity breathing my chosen significance into a subtle blend of two writing voices: Jane’s and my own” (113).

To Russell, intuition is a vital part of the process of understanding a person from the past. Applying intuitive faculties may not sound highly scientific for an academic historian, but Russell insists that intuition is not a “mystical force, but the collation of a thousand hints collected and interpreted subliminally, barely consciously. “The more we read one person’s diaries, the more we come to feel – perhaps with some justification – that we have a ‘hold’ on that person’s character” (114).

### 3.2 Hayden White: *Metahistory*

Hayden White is a leading figure in the philosophy of history. From the 1960s White's scholarly enquiries and writings were inexorably shaped by his existentialist humanist views, influenced by his early study of writers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. White embraced the fundamental existentialist belief that we are all responsible for our own moral choices. In order to live rational, responsible lives, he asserts, we must unshackle ourselves from the chaotic and oppressive past. We must re-interpret the past to find new, liberating meanings in it, but in so doing, we must accept the burden of making a moral judgement for which we are personally responsible.

His *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973) stimulated robust debate amongst historical scholars and historiographers as no other book had done since Collingwood's *The Idea of History*. White's body of work, spanning over more than fifty years, has been variously described as perplexing, sometimes contradictory, and difficult to codify. However, it is possible to find a unifying theme by way of White's views on moral awareness and the writing of history.

The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator? (White, *Content of the Form* 21).

In *Metahistory* White asserted that twentieth century historiography had stagnated within a nineteenth century ironic perspective. Historical inquiry was splintered by a wide schism between the past and present. Historians were attempting to understand the past in isolation, without reference to the present day. In *Metahistory* White proposed his theory that an historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*" (2). The model for his verbal structure is a system of arguments, ideologies, plots and tropes, the complex linguistic tools by which an historian understands and represents

the past. According to White, historians can only begin to interpret the past once they have arranged the events that they are investigating into a rudimentary chronicle. At that point, the subject matter (which he called the ‘historical field’) is yet to become a story; the story only emerges once the events are set out in a manner that prompts the historian to ponder the ‘whys’, the ‘whats’, and the ‘what nexts’? Then, in order to forge a story out of the historical field, the historian must organise the events into themes and patterns, or inaugural, transitional or terminating motifs, to use White’s terminology. (5).

Eventually the story materialises, but still the historian’s task is not complete. He must then fashion the story into either an ‘argument’ or a ‘plot. In the case of the former, the historian achieves an ‘explanatory effect; for the latter, the act of ‘emplotment’ gives stories meaning; it elucidates the ‘point’ of a story and leads to comprehension of its meaning and significance. At a deeper level of analysis, the historian employs tropes (technical instruments for analysing the poetic elements of historical writing) to help him make sense of the historical field. Finally, he filters his story through one of four ideological viewpoints: anarchist, radical, conservative or liberal.

In White’s model there are four modes of emplotment, four arguments, four ideologies and four tropes. He set these elements into a configuration that have come to be known as the “quadruple tetrad” (Paul, Kindle location 2059). White intended the quadruple tetrad to be used in a flexible manner – that is, historians could combine any mode of emplotment with any argument, and so on. However, White also believed that the historian’s choice of trope – whether it be metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or irony – should be made first as a precursor to selecting the other three elements of historical representation. The trope is determined by prefiguring the historical field – that is, by analysing, at a deep level of consciousness, what is real and what is not. Once the trope is decided, the process of electing the other elements can follow naturally.

On this level, I believe, the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the

specific theories he will use to explain ‘what was *really* happening’ in it (*Metahistory*, x).

Throughout his career, White has persistently questioned the notion of historiographical realism. According to White, when historians write history, they are not writing accounts of what *really* happened. History writing is not embedded in reality, but rather in the language that historians deploy. Herman Paul, in his recent biography of White, provides a succinct interpretation of this fundamental Whitean principle:

Over against those insisting that the historian’s knowledge must *match* historical reality, White claimed that knowledge *makes* reality, or rather that what counts as historical reality is a product of the historian’s language (Kindle location 2489).

White’s views challenge the claims of those who would like to see history accepted as a science. Indeed, his philosophy suggests that invention is a necessary activity, not only for the writer of fiction, but also for the writer of history.

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by ‘finding’, ‘identifying’, or ‘uncovering’ the ‘stories’ that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the act to which it belongs (*Metahistory* 6).

Ann Curthoys and John Docker, in the introduction to their collection of essays entitled “Is History Fiction?”, concur with White on this question of ‘history’ and ‘fiction’. Both forms rely on underlying narrative forms that make meaning out of past events.

History cannot escape literature, as Hayden White, one of the writers who has insisted on the fictive character of history, has famously suggested. History cannot escape literature because it

cannot escape itself: history presents the results of its enquiries, its research, as narrative, and so necessarily enters into and partakes of the world of literary forms. We also agree with White that literary qualities and literary forms and genres are not something decorative or merely added to an account or analysis, but help *explain* what the historian in the present takes to be the meaning of past events and occurrences (Kindle location 254).

### 3.3 Linda Hutcheon: *Historiographic Metafiction*

In her opening words from Chapter 3 of *The Politics of Post-Modernism*, Linda Hutcheon provides an apt segue from the previous section.

In the light of recent work in many theoretical areas, we have seen that narrative has come to be acknowledged as, above all, a human-made structure – never as ‘natural’ or given. Whether it be in historical or fictional representation, the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order (59).

Hutcheon goes on to say that the imposition of order in an historical narrative, culminating in a defined ending, suggests the application of both teleology and closure on the part of the historian, and that the result of creating such order is a ‘totalising’ representation of history. Totalisation has come under the scrutiny of post-modern literary theorists, notably Michel Foucault, the French philosopher. Foucault was a strident critic of ‘totalisation’, regarding it as an underpinning methodology for writing what he termed ‘traditional history’. “Maintaining the coherence of the series, the traditional historian ignores, excludes, or renders invisible the competing and contradictory perspectives and elements that may interfere with the teleology of reason” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 138). The post-modern anti-totalisation movement seeks to dismantle the continuity in history-writing and replace it with ‘discontinuity’, an analytical tool that helps the historian to discover, in Hutcheon’s words, “the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous narratives that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 63).

Hutcheon coined the term, 'historiographic metafiction' to describe a post-modern literary genre that liberates historians and historical novelists from a unitary, ordered approach to writing history. According to Hutcheon, in works of historiographic metafiction: "We now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men" (*Politics* 63). Hutcheon's explanation of historiographic metafiction carries echoes of Hayden White's narrative theory; Hutcheon describes a process of "making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences" (*Politics* 63). The postmodern historian eschews the universalising and totalising impulse of the traditional historian, opting instead for the counter-methodologies of contextualisation and particularisation. Such methodologies may leave ambiguities in historical texts, but Hutcheon asserts that such an outcome is to be expected. "Historical meaning may thus be seen today as unstable, contextual, relational and provisional, but postmodernism argues that, in fact, it has always been so. And it uses novelistic representations to underline the narrative nature of much of that knowledge" (*Politics* 64).

According to Hutcheon, the production of historiographic metafiction involves a "self-conscious thematizing of the processes of fact-producing" (*Politics* 75). This self-conscious act of writing history is often performed with tacit subjectivity; the writer endows the historic material with his or her own meaning and interpretation. Herb Wyile likens this process to an act of creative manipulation. "The illusion that historical discourse draws back the curtain that separates us from the past has been shattered; what we have instead, it is often suggested, is something akin to a puppet show orchestrated by the historian" (*Speculative Fictions* 8).

Hutcheon states that we know the past *did* exist, but we have no capacity to know it in the present, other than through inference. She asserts that "knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording" (70). Such representations might manifest, for example, in the form of anachronistic intertextual references, intended by the writer to bridge the divide between past and present. For Wyile, the absent past, and the problems of knowing the

absent past from the present, pose the most fundamental question in historiography.

This problem has customarily been addressed as a hermeneutic one, the assumption being that through proper methodological procedures and critical awareness, the past can be made present in such a fashion that we can ‘see it’. This ideal, however, has been seen as compromised by the tendency of historians to project their contemporary concerns on representations of the past (*Speculative Fictions* 10).

The distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘event’ is another central problem in post-modern history and fiction. Hutcheon states that all past events are potential facts, but they only become facts if they are narrated. Narrators of history, by analysing the past through the lens of their own social and cultural backgrounds and biases, determine which events become fact; and then through the language of narration, those events are rendered into facts. Hutcheon’s notion of the event-to-fact dialectic resonates with Hayden White’s constructivist view of historical facts; White characterises facts as “events under description” (*Metahistory* 22) and asserts there can be no ‘description’ without the historian’s interpretation. Therefore, no facts can exist without interpretation. Facts, according to White, are not plucked from the absent past, but rather, they are formed in the historian’s language, which is shaped by the linguistic tools – trope, emplotment, argument and ideology – described in 3.2. It is evident that the path from event to fact runs a roughly parallel course according to White and Hutcheon’s theories; but then Hutcheon underscores that historiographic metafiction is not a narration of those facts created as an outcome of this process; rather, it is a self-conscious exposition of the *process* through which an event becomes fact. Post-modern historical novels focus on “the dubiousness of the positivist, empiricist hierarchy implied in the binary opposing of the real to the fictive, and they do so by suggesting that the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as fiction” (75). It is not surprising, therefore, that fictive histories have come under much criticism and debate for their apparent blurring of invention and reality, and their scepticism toward the authority of archival texts that provide the feedstock of historical inquiry; and, that in themselves, are interpretive narrations from past documentation of events.

For the archival researcher, a fundamental rule of discovery is to trust primary sources over secondary; but even first-hand eyewitness accounts can differ greatly from one onlooker to another, whether due to personal bias, different vantage points, cognitive or affective differences in the individuals. Thus the archival document “can offer no direct access to the past; then it must be a replacement or representation through textual refiguring of the brute event” (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 77). Works of historiographic metafiction simultaneously harvest from the historical archive while looking askance at the integrity of what they find in it. It is common for writers of historiographic metafiction to include forewords or afterwords in which they signal that their novels are derived from archival records, but contoured by fictive elements. In addition, they often employ paratextual forms such as chapter epigraphs and footnotes, devices that, according to Hutcheon, “move in two directions at once: to remind us of the narrativity (and fictionality) of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity” (*Politics* 82).

Gerard Genette coined the term ‘paratext’ to refer to “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers” (261). Paratext, such as the examples mentioned in the previous paragraph, resides outside the threshold of the main text. By contrast, “intertext”, according to Roland Barthes, is “a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text” (39).

Intertextuality, often connected with parody, irony or pastiche, is a central concept in postmodernism. Hutcheon states that intertextual parody in historiographic metafiction “enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers; it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces – be they literary or historical” (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 125). The presence of intertextuality in historical fiction acknowledges that other discursive texts have gone before; it liberates the narrative, opens it up to the incursion of wider, often contradictory contexts. Intertextuality is also a characteristic of factual history; in fact, it may be seen as a point of convergence between history and

fiction: the novelist and the historian both configure their narratives from the same scraps of information, but the novelist's objective may be – unlike the historian's – anti-mimetic. The novelist may set out to question the historical record, not to confirm it.

## 4.0 Australian and Canadian Authors Renegotiating Their Nations' Histories

### 4.1 Australia and Canada: A brief comparison of key historical influences and events

Since the 1960s, a revisionist mode of historical fiction has proliferated in Canada and Australia, riding on the back of political, cultural and ideological movements in both of those countries. Australia's pantheon of contemporary historical novelists includes: Geraldine Brooks, Richard Flanagan, Kate Grenville, Thomas Keneally, Louis Nowra and Kim Scott; and from Canada: Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findlay, Daphne Marlatt Michael Ondaatje, Jane Urquart and Guy Vanderhaeghe. Note: The Australian novelists listed in the preceding sentence were selected from the PhD candidate's own reading experience and bibliographic collection. Canadian novelists were selected from the candidate's own reading experience and works discussed by Wyile in *Speculative Fictions*. The order of presentation is alphabetical and does not signify any hierarchy of authorial significance. Their novels of the Australian and Canadian authors listed above, and of other contemporary novelists from the two countries, demonstrate a postmodern renegotiation of history; they pose a challenge to the stereotypes of explorers and settlers, swagman and billabongs, fur traders and lumberjacks: nostalgic symbols that have long dominated traditional, Eurocentric retellings of the two nations' respective histories. Referring to the new wave of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, Herb Wyile writes: "...the last few decades have seen a proliferation of revisionist historical fiction about previously neglected or marginalized histories, underlining that what is historically significant has been narrowly defined and ideologically overdetermined..." (*Speculative Fictions* 6).

Both Australia and Canada are geographically vast, and in many regions, inhospitable; both nations were hosts to invader-settler cultures; both have tarnished records for their treatment of first peoples; and both have wrestled with questions about their own national identities. Australia and Canada alike have been engaged in fractious debates about the writing and

teaching of history. At one extreme there are the traditionalists and nationalists who insist that the people need nationalistic, unitary narratives about their nation's past; at the other extreme, there are the sceptics and apologists who argue the need for a plurality of narratives. From these 'history wars' (a term coined in Australia *and* Canada at various times) no clear victors have emerged; but sporadic re-engagements have continued to break out. To set a context for the following comparative analysis of four historical novels by Australian and Canadian authors, it may be useful to briefly compare some of the most salient landmarks in the two nations' respective histories.

Although Australia and Canada are widely separated geographically, their pasts – pre and post European contact – share a number of parallel trajectories. The first inhabitants of both nations settled during prehistoric times, their migration patterns dictated by the ebbs and flows of the ice ages. Australia's first *homo sapiens* inhabitants are estimated to have arrived on the mainland somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 years ago, although they did not reach Tasmania until much later. These early peoples were initially barred from the island continent's south-eastern regions by an ice shield, until climate change melted the ice and allowed them access south and eastward to the Bass Strait and Tasmania. The limited clues left behind of their culture depict a way of life that remained unchanged for centuries. Not only did the first Australians have no need for defence, but their environment offered neither animal species useful for domestication nor seed-bearing edible plants suitable for cultivation (Clarke, Kindle location 132). On the other hand, the first inhabitants of Canada, who settled far more recently than did the first Australians, needed to adapt to a more challenging climate, where survival itself required the development of tools such as snowshoes, Arctic clothing, kayaks and igloos. Canada's first nations arrived between 12,000 and 20,000 years ago when groups of *homo sapiens* migrated across the Bering land bridge from Siberia. DNA testing of contemporary native Canadians has shown an ancestral link to peoples in Manchuria and Mongolia. As the Laurentine Ice Sheet melted, the people were able to progressively penetrate southward and eastward into the lands that later became known as Canada. Like Australian Aboriginal people, native Canadians were nomadic; they

migrated according to seasons, or in the case of agricultural communities, when the soil became depleted. They also shared with Australian first peoples an intense, reverential relationship with nature. “Native beliefs found kindred spirits in the animals they hunted, and misfortune befell those who offended such spirits by killing cruelly or to excess” (Morton 15).

Both first populations, Australian and Canadian, were introduced to European contact within a century of each other. Jacques Cartier landed on the Gaspé Peninsula in 1534 and claimed the land for France. It was the Dutch nation that first sent explorers to skirt the far north of Australia in 1606, and only a few years later that Dirk Hartog stepped onto an island off Shark Bay on the west coast. The Dutch, who were looking for evidence of silver, gold, spices other resources of value, saw little potential in the barren coastal lands and turned their explorative efforts elsewhere. In 1688 the Englishman William Dampier arrived in Shark Bay and recorded his observations of the flora and fauna of the area, sparking Britain’s interest in the great brown land to the south, and eventually prompting the Admiralty to fund the voyages of Captain James Cook. It was in April 1770 that Cook planted the British flag on Possession Island, on the far more welcoming eastern side of the continent.

At the same time that the Dutch were making their exploratory and ultimately abandoned forays along the north and west of Australia, navigator and soldier Samuel de Champlain, operating from an *habitation* built on the St Lawrence River in 1608, was busy founding the territory of New France in the regions that would later be known as Quebec and Nova Scotia. Parallel to the establishment of New France, British and Scottish militia and settlers were occupying Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and the Thirteen Colonies to the south. By that time, in order to further colonial interests in the lucrative fur trade and land occupation, and then later fishing and whaling, fortuitous allegiances had been formed with the Algonquins and Hurons. As Champlain decreed: “Our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people” (Saul, Kindle Location 261). The technological capital of native Canadians critically influenced the nature of the emerging relations between first peoples and invaders; the Europeans needed the help of the natives, and the natives soon realised that they could also benefit from the technologies of

the new arrivals. Sadly, the intervention of missionaries intent on converting the natives to Catholicism brought the tragic *disbenefit* of disease and decimated native populations.

The European settlement of Canada was rocked by a series of colonial wars that raged on for several decades. In 1763 – seven years before James Cook’s historically claimed New South Wales for Britain – the French ceded to the English. Twenty years later, after the American Revolution, the border between the United States and Canada was officially demarcated. In 1812 the British, with men from First Nations tribes fighting alongside, repelled an American invasion that left Canada with a deep and lingering distrust of America.

Colonial Australia experienced no such turbulence or challenges to British rule. With the arrival of French expeditions along the south coast in 1803, the colonial officials took the pre-emptive step of occupying Port Phillip and establishing settlements along the Derwent River and north coast of Van Diemen’s Land. As it transpired, the French made no move to usurp the British hold on Australia. Rather, the colonial rulers had more to fear from the native Australians. Unlike the First Nations of Canada, who collaborated with the French and the British, the Aboriginal people of Australia resented and resisted the British invaders.

...when the Aborigine became convinced that the white man proposed to stay, and that the white man was driving him away from all the best food-gathering areas into more barren places and at the same time committing sacrilege against those trees and animals that had been sacrosanct for his people since time immemorial, he began the long, unequal struggle of fighting the white man (Clarke, Kindle Location 552).

This struggle became even more unequal as the first Australians were cut down by the debilitating effects of British civilisation, particularly drunkenness and disease. But the Aboriginal people did not succumb to British dominance without defiance; a number of uprisings, known as the Australian Frontier Wars, took place across the country from 1788 and continued for nearly a century and a half. Those wars were responsible for the deaths of thousands of Aboriginal men; however, disease was the cause of

much greater attrition, Between 1788 and 1938 the Indigenous population diminished from 300,000 to 50,000 (Stanner, Kindle location 2142). Venereal disease took a heavy toll on the Aboriginal women taken as sex slaves by white men, a practice that brought many despised and marginalised mixed-race children into the population and compromised the integrity of Aboriginal culture and family structures.

In Canada, despite the mutually beneficial alliances and treaties forged between the newcomers and the First Nations peoples, relations between the British and French colonialists and the native populations were not uniformly co-operative and harmonious. In fact, they may be described as being significantly one-sided. Many settlers, particularly minor colonial officials and trading post managers, did very well by ‘marrying up’ into First Nations families, to quote John Ralston Saul.

By marrying into the indigenous world, most of the newcomers were marrying up. They were improving their situations socially, politically and economically. They were improving their conditions of life – food, clothing, even the suitability of their housing – and thus their health, their power, their status, their mobility, their safety, their cleanliness, the odds that their teeth wouldn’t fall out (Kindle location 255).

However, the First Nations peoples did not always fare so well from the treaties they signed with the British and French. Colonial Canada was built on a triarchy of cultures – the British, the French and the First Nations – but as the intent of those treaties broke down, and diseases, particularly smallpox, decimated Aboriginal populations, the First Nations became increasingly marginalised and unimportant to the colonials. It is estimated that in the late fifteenth century Canada’s indigenous population numbered two million. By the end of the nineteenth century, only 100,000 remained, representing a depopulation of 95 per cent over three hundred years.

Even in this briefest of comparative histories of Australia and Canada, it would be remiss not to mention the impact of convictism on the development of the former. Between 1788 and 1852 some 165,000 convicts, around 24,000 of them women, were transported to Australia to supply labour for the development of farming and infrastructure. Although convict

transportation was principally a transaction between the United Kingdom and Australia, an interesting link with Canada occurred in 1840, when François-Maurice Lepailleur was transported with 57 others from Quebec in Lower Canada to a penal farm near Sydney. The Canadians were *patriotes* – political dissidents. While they waited to be transported to Van Diemen’s Land to serve as labourers on road works, Lepailleur observed the contemptuous treatment of convict women and recorded his thoughts in a clandestine diary.

Fast-forwarding this comparative history of two nations to the year 1867: with the proclamation of the *British North America Act*, Canada became a Dominion – a self-governing colony. Thirty-four years later, Australia also became an independent nation. Both nations’ constitutions were developed under similar principles underpinning responsible government in accordance with the democratic Westminster parliamentary model.

Contemporaneously with the periods of their respective confederations, both nations began to forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families. In Australia the practice ended in the 1970s but it was not until 1997 that the extent of impact of the so-called ‘Stolen Generations’ was formally acknowledged. On 13 February 2008 Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave his ‘sorry’ speech at Parliament House in Canberra.

In Canada between 1920 and 1996, some 100,000 children were housed in residential schools. Many tales of physical and sexual abuse, malnutrition, forcible family break-ups and alienation from culture emerged from this period. On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a long-awaited apology to Canada’s First Nations outside Parliament in Ottawa.

Although there are indeed obvious and important parallels to be drawn between the histories of Australia and Canada, diacritically, Canada’s long shared border with the United States and Australia’s convict past and have shaped the cultures and national psyches of the two nations in different ways. However, I will postulate that there have significant resonances and shared experiences in the two nations’ colonial and post-colonial pasts. In turn, because of these historical resonances, the divisive history debates that have taken place in Australia and Canada over the past several decades – engaging historians, historiographers, philosophers, anthropologists, even politicians –

have addressed similar issues about race, culture and national identity. The debaters have asked questions about how history is taught in schools, and about whether Canadians and Australians need a cohesive, prideful story of their pasts. They have challenged the veracity of what we have been told about our pasts and argued for a better way in which to write history. And I will also postulate that the novelists too – the writers of revisionist post-modern historical fiction, such as those mentioned in this thesis – are as much a part of this discourse as the historians, the historiographers, the philosophers and anthropologists and the politicians.

#### *4.2 History debates in Australia and Canada – 1960s to the present*

In the last half century the so-called ‘history wars’ have been waged in Australia. Anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner fired the early salvos in this debate. He began his 1938 essay entitled *The Aborigines*, with these words:

A tragedy underlies the rise of Australia from convict colony to dominion status. Often shamefully, and always miserably, the black tribes have died out wherever the whites have overrun the continent. The process of extinction still goes on in the remoter parts of the outback. Out of sight of the white urban population, and out of mind. (Kindle location 2137).

In his Boyer Lectures of 1968 themed with the title, “After the Dreaming”, Stanner coined the term ‘the Great Australian Silence’, referring to a void in the writing of Australian history – that void being a widespread omission by historians to tell the stories about Aboriginal peoples, in particular the many acts of genocide reported against those peoples. Stanner’s comments triggered a shift in thinking about Australian historiography and gave rise to the so-called ‘black armband debate’; a term coined by Geoffrey Blainey in his article, “Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of Our History”, in which he opined that the pendulum had swung too far toward a negative and guilt-ridden view of the nation’s history. Once Blainey had drawn the battle lines, numerous combatants entered the fray, including historians Keith Windschuttle and Robert Manne, who publicly debated the scale of the depopulation of Aborigines in Tasmania. Henry Reynolds, then an historian at James Cook University, dedicated years of research and ten books to

investigating the conflicts between whites and Aborigines. He concluded that the degree of violence and magnitude of Aboriginal deaths could not be unequivocally determined. In his book, *Forgotten War*, he articulated some of the most vexing problems that lay at the heart of the history wars – problems pertaining not only to the Aboriginal questions, but to the national view of Australian history in the wider sense – the myths and icons, institutions and heritage, culture and values that define Australian's sense of past and national identity.

Should historians take responsibility for the impact of their work or should they pursue the truth wherever it led? Should they consider the impact of scholarship that called into question the moral legitimacy of the state? Should they undermine useful legends that placed society in a favourable light? (Reynolds, Kindle location 388).

Former Prime Minister John Howard had resisted all pressures to issue a formal statement of apology to the Stolen Generations. During his Australia Day speech of 2006 he weighed into the history debate, calling for a single, authoritative record of Australian history and challenged the education system to revise the teaching of history in schools, asserting that:

Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated (Grattan).

Australian historian and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen argued against Howard's monolithic view of history, asserting that there is no single narrative in human affairs.

There is always one counter-story, and usually several, and in a democracy you will probably get to hear them ... now, except for the die-hards, there is (sometimes grudging) acceptance that yes, there is another story interwoven with our own, a story about what happened to the people who were here before the British came, and attention must be paid to that story, too (3).

Over the last half century in Canada, Indigenous issues have provided the major catalyst for revisioning the way Canadians think of their history. The advent of the Trudeau government's multiculturalism movement in the 1970s challenged the notion of a culturally homogeneous nation run by powerful white males. According to Daniel Francis, multiculturalism stimulated a positive shift in public attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples:

The past three decades have seen an explosive growth in interest in the history and traditional culture of Canada's Native population...there has been nothing short of a revolution in the thinking of non-Native Canadians about the Aboriginal 'question' (Kindle location 1055).

Francis regards this turning-point as a catalyst to the breaking down, or at least the questioning of Canadian myths such as the Mounties and the North. He views national myths as totalising forces; he likens the creation of a myth to the creation of unity, or the arrangement of history into a prosaic order. Myths, according to Francis, "vilify, or at least marginalize, anyone who seems to be frustrating the main cultural project" (Kindle location 85).

Over the last forty or so years, a prolific body of works of Canadian postmodern historical fiction has been revisioning historical events, breaking down the myths and proposing alternative stories of the nation's past. The result, according to Herb Wyile, is that "the unitary, authoritative, realistic voice of the historical novel in Canada has been fractured, mongrelized and in many cases subverted through a discursive interplay that challenges the authority of official history and brushes the form of history against the grain" (*Speculative Fictions* 139).

This literary movement has been the source of consternation amongst conservative historians, one of the most vocal being Emeritus Professor Jack Granatstein. In his book, *Who Killed Canadian History?* he argued (in terms not unlike those of Australia's John Howard), that Canadians needed a unitary vision of their history, a system of agreed facts and narratives that "celebrate our founders, establish new symbols and strengthen the terms of our citizenship" (148–149). His views are countered by Diana Brydon, who calls for a more pluralistic representation of Canadian history.

...there are more ways than one of experiencing the unhomeliness of the Canadian locale: from early anti-colonial, yet nevertheless anglo-white, statements of the inherent paradox of Canadian cultural and social space, to settler-invader figurations of the settler's ambivalent location in the New World, to aboriginal accounts of the disease/disease that was forced upon indigenous peoples as a result of European colonization, to diasporic accounts of various kinds of "in-betweenness", to immigrant experiences of disjunction and alienation, to articulations of the racist elements of the Canadian state and national imaginary (Brydon, xii).

I argue that in the above quotation from Brydon, the words, 'Canada' and 'Canadian' could be substituted for the words 'Australia' and 'Australian'. The themes that Brydon covers in her statement have emerged as dominant foci in the historical novels of many contemporary Canadian and Australian writers. Similarly, Nathanael O'Reilly, in his introduction to *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*, identifies similar discursive themes that prevail in contemporary Australian historical fiction:

...hybridity, first contact, resistance, appropriation, race relations, language usage, indigeneity, immigration/invasion, land rights and ownership, national identity, marginalization, mapping, naming, mimicry, the role of historical narratives, settler guilt and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging (2)

Four exemplary novels – two from Australia and two from Canada – are reviewed in detail over the following sections. It should be emphasised that these are only a handful of many historical novels from Canada and Australia that, in the words of Herb Wyile, "disturb the customary illusion of holding up a mirror to history" (*Speculative Fictions* 4).

#### 4.3 Richard Flanagan's 'Wanting'

Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, like the other three novels I have chosen to review, is set in the nineteenth century and like the second novel to be reviewed in this chapter, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, *Wanting* portrays an episode of expropriation by British settlers over Aboriginal lands in

colonial Australia and the deleterious effects of white settlement. Also like *The Secret River*, the setting spans the new world and the old, but in Flanagan's novel, the cross-continental narrative proceeds in a non-linear manner; the transitions between the two worlds occur contrapuntally, seemingly incongruously, or at least from the opening chapters as the setting alternates between the Van Diemen's Land settlement of Wybalenna and London, England. The great British novelist Charles Dickens provides what initially appears to be an unlikely and tenuous link between the two narratives, until his meeting with Lady Jane Franklin twenty years on from the opening pages. That meeting, and Dickens' subsequent commission to help Lady Jane rescue the tarnished reputation of her husband Sir John Franklin, intertwines the two narratives and foregrounds the 'wanting' of the two male protagonists, both of them celebrated white males who harbour illicit obsessions for much younger females. In Sir John Franklin's case, the object of desire is Mathinna, an Aboriginal girl who he adopted while he served as Governor of Tasmania and then abandoned when he was recalled back to England. Mathinna lived with the Franklins for two years, from six to eight years of age.

He was enchanted and like all those enchanted, he wanted proximity to his enchantress, and he manoeuvred and manipulated to make sure he got it. If he thought there was a wrongness, even a perversity, in his growing infatuation, he gave no sign of it. Rather he advanced into it, had the whole of Government House enthuse about this marvellous experiment being conducted with such vigorous joy ... (140).

Dickens, too, struggles with his own form of wanting; he is lovesick for the young actress Ellen Ternan. The anguish of his desire spills onto a London stage during a performance of the Richard Wardour role in *The Frozen Deep*, an allegorical representation of the doomed Franklin expedition to the Arctic. In a scene with Ellen Ternan, Dickens begins to deliver his lines according to Wilkie's original script but overcome by his passion for the actress, he improvises:

“What is it?” asked Dickens, with words Ellen Ternan had never heard before, unscripted words. She looked at him in shock, not knowing what was happening.

“The way we are denied love,” he continued, and she, along with the audience, could hear how hard it was for him to say these words.

“And the way we suddenly discover it being offered us, in all its pain, and infinite heartbreak. The way we say no to love” (139).

Richard Flanagan has related how he first knew of the Aboriginal girl Mathinna when, at the age of 20, he viewed a painting of her in the warehouse of a Hobart gallery. The curator removed the frame to show Flanagan that the child’s feet were bare under her luxurious European dress. Flanagan describes his reaction to the painting as “this odd combination of the dress of the Age of Reason over an Aboriginal child at the end of what I knew had been this terrible war of extermination. Really, it’s the bare feet chopped off by the wooden frame” (Steger).

In his author’s note, Flanagan states that this novel is “not a history, nor should it be read as one” (256). In asserting that *Wanting* is not a history, Flanagan does not go on to say, in this same author’s note, precisely what he *considers* history to be; although in a later interview with Justin Steger, he likens history to journalism. “History, like journalism, is ever a journey outwards and you must report back what you find and no more. But a novel is a journey into your own soul and you seek there to discover those things that you share with all others” (Steger).

In one brief sentence, Flanagan not only defines what he considers history to be, but he also likens the discipline of history to journalism. His phrase, “report back what you find and no more” carries echoes of the nineteenth century German positivist historian, Leopold von Ranke, who famously stated that the work of the historian was to simply write “how things actually were (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)” (qtd in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 8). Was Flanagan’s act of declaring the genre of his book (or rather, declaring what the genre is not – that is, a history), a gesture of ethical responsibility so as not mislead his readers or misrepresent historical characters and events in

his book as historical truth? Or was it a disclaimer intended to deflect potential accusations by traditional historians that the book, with its fusion of fact and fiction, was a sham?

In his author's note he goes on to further reinforce the non-historicity of *Wanting*, stating that his book is based on thin, and often speculative, information. For those readers who seek "the historical truth" (256) about the characters and the sources from which he has drawn, Flanagan refers to a list of references and biographical notes on the character, and directs readers to a website (which in fact is that of the publisher, Random House). On the page that promotes *Wanting* is a downloadable document containing brief character profiles and a paragraph listing Flanagan's nine bibliographic sources. The list is prefaced by Flanagan's statement that:

Perhaps because I am drawn to questions which history cannot answer, and because these characters and events thus become the motley thrown over the concerns that are the true subject of this novel, I am disinclined to research" (Random House).

As quoted above, in his Steger interview, Flanagan defines a novel as "a journey into your own soul and you seek there to discover those things that you share with all others" (Steger). In his *Wanting* notes on the Random House website, Flanagan refers to "concerns that are the true subject of this novel" (Random House). Is there a congruency between these two statements? If so, is it that the "true subject" of *Wanting* is Flanagan's own journey into his soul? In her essay, *Intertextuality as Discord: Richard Flanagan's Wanting*, Gay Lynch dryly comments: "Perhaps Flanagan unwittingly becomes the subject of his own novel" (237). Flanagan provides some validation to Lynch's remark in an ABC radio interview with Ramona Koval:

... this isn't a historical novel, and so much of it is imagined, and I also see it...it was really a book I wanted to write about passion and desire, and these stories which happened to come from the 19th century, or the skeleton of these stories because everything else is made up, is really just the motley I threw over these emotions that I was trying to, in a vague way, encompass myself (Koval).

Lynch's article provides a psychoanalytical reading of Flanagan's novel, and an analysis of the intertextual devices used to "juxtapose the underlying savagery of ageing men against the outwardly civilised, patriarchal societies that they represented" (237). Lynch labels Flanagan an "ageing man" (237) who was driven to write the story of Mathinna out of a "complex blend of social activism, sympathy and desire for the shoeless girl already objectified on canvas" (243). She continues on in this vein, offering a highly personal and presumptuous analysis of Flanagan, the man, in which she makes the following pronouncement: "While we must bear in mind that narrators are merely their creators in disguise, Flanagan's authorial presence brings him uncomfortably close..." (240).

Since *Wanting* has multiple narrators, Flanagan's authorial presence (if we are to accept Lynch's reading of the novel) is channelled through several characters, principally Charles Dickens, Sir John and Lady Franklin and Mathinna. By extension if – to paraphrase Flanagan – the act of writing the novel was a journey into his soul, then his personal journey has presumably been mediated through those characters. Indeed, he focalises the narrative through free indirect speech, transitioning from the voice of one character to another in a precipitous, and at times disorienting way and sometimes abruptly interjects the narrative with passages in the third person omniscient voice. "He takes up nineteenth and twentieth century themes to create sudden riffs, his intent being discord and perhaps *jouissance*, rather than re-inscription" (Lynch, 237).

The principal characters of *Wanting* have been modelled on real figures from the past. While the lives of Dickens, the Franklins and others are well documented, the figure of Mathinna is not. In his character notes, Flanagan flags the epistemological problems of portraying the Aboriginal girl. "There is little accurate information about Mathinna – as though, in being taken from her people on Fraser Island, she was already passing into myth" (Random House). In Flanagan's focalisation of Mathinna, the child's dialogue becomes a medley of tones and styles, from Pidgin to formal drawing-room English. In the scenes with Mathinna, the novel's intertextual devices are at their most convoluted; the figurative allusions to a swan connect two myths, the classical Greek myth of Zeus turning into a swan in order to defile his

victim, Leda; and a dreaming story from the Lowreenne people about Rowra, a devil who disguises as a black swan. Sir John Franklin, dressed as a swan, watches Mathinna dance at a ball, her performance rendering his desire irresistible. When Flanagan narrates the brutal decline of Mathinna following her implied rape by Franklin, he does so in third person omniscient voice. In a parodic representation of racial stereotyping of Aboriginal people by whites, the narrator spits toxic words such as “scabby”, “pox-ridden” and “debauched”. This confronting language invokes what Marcia Langton calls icons of ‘Aboriginality’ produced by Anglo-Australians, not in dialogue with Aboriginal people but from other representations such as the ‘stone age savage’.... They are inherited, imagined representations. ‘All Aborigines are dirty, drunk, and useless and they’re going to die out anyway’ (Langton 34).

In Flanagan’s ‘journey into his own soul’ or his ‘encompassing of his own self’ (as he has variously described his novel) he encounters the depths of his outrage for Mathinna, the object of his obsession first viewed in a painting several decades ago. To exact revenge for her destruction, he portrays a rape of Mathinna by Sir John Franklin – an event that has no evidence in historical documents. Questioned by Ramona Koval about the ethics of this depiction of Franklin, Flanagan offers this rationalisation:

Firstly, Franklin has been written about in fiction for many years with all sorts of variations of his life, from the time of his disappearance...But what I find odd is that really writers have been doing this since the Old Testament, reinventing stories about historical characters and using them to discuss the here and now (Koval).

In his character notes located on the Random House website, Flanagan states that “I have seen no record of Sir John Franklin’s attitude towards Mathinna” (Random House ). This comment could be read as an admission that Flanagan invented Franklin’s rape of Mathinna, so readers should not believe that it actually occurred. However, by locating this crucial disclaimer on a website that many readers would never visit – rather than within the covers of the book – Flanagan is hanging Franklin out to dry. The ethics of his treatment of Sir John Franklin have been questioned by analysts of *Wanting*.

If he'd left us to draw our own conclusions about the Franklins' adoption of Mathinna, we might have been forced to confront some unpleasant historical ironies. But Flanagan shuts down our inner dialogue in the most gross way, by inventing a scene in which Sir John rapes the girl. At this point our inner debate fixes on a new topic: how ethical is it to turn a real historical figure into a paedophile for dramatic effect? (Free, *What's Wrong with Australian Fiction?*)

#### 4.4 Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

While Richard Flanagan's obsession to 'write Mathinna' started with an image on canvas of an Aboriginal girl, Kate Grenville's journey to discover her ancestor Solomon Wiseman began on the Sydney Harbour Bridge, when she met the gaze of an Aboriginal woman during a Reconciliation Walk. Just as the portrait of Mathinna had struck Flanagan as being "this odd combination of the dress of the Age of Reason over an Aboriginal child at the end of what I knew had been this terrible war of extermination" (Steger); so Grenville's brief encounter with the Aboriginal woman had reminded her of the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and appropriation of their land by English settlers a century and a half earlier. Grenville and the woman exchanged smiles and the slightest hint of a wave, and then abruptly Grenville began to feel uneasy. "...it sent a sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow" (*Searching* 12). Her discomfort arose from an unexpected, inconvenient and discordant thought of Solomon Wiseman, who had come ashore near the bridge, some twenty years after the arrival of the First Fleet, and went on against odds to become a successful dispossessor of Aboriginal people and appropriator of Aboriginal lands. Would Aboriginal people have waved to him as he stepped on to dry land, Grenville wondered? How would Wiseman have behaved when he first encountered Aboriginal inhabitants? At that moment, standing on the bridge among thousands of others treading the Reconciliation Walk, Grenville realised that she needed to look for the "deep water of our history" (*Searching* 13). That moment on the bridge marked the inception of Grenville's novel, *The Secret River*.

The novel is based on the life of Grenville's great-great-great-grandfather who was deported from England to Australia in 1806 for stealing a load of timber. Arriving in Sydney as a convict labourer, Solomon Wiseman was given his ticket-of-leave and proceeded to carve out a life for his family on the Hawkesbury River. *The Secret River* does not have an author's note, but in a brief acknowledgement Grenville declares the book to be a work of fiction. She then tells readers that she has consulted "countless documents, published and unpublished, and adapted for my imaginative purposes" (*The Secret River*, Acknowledgements). In making this declaration, Grenville fundamentally differentiates her approach from Richard Flanagan's. Like *Wanting*, her book is a work of fiction, inspired by real events and characters but constructed upon imagination. Unlike Flanagan, however, Grenville does not harbour a disinclination to undertake research – quite the contrary. In her novel's companion volume, a memoir entitled *Searching for the Secret River*, she chronicles her arduous process of delving into the past by undertaking archival investigations over a period of two years. Starting from Wiseman's origins in Thameside London, Grenville had very little to go on – a date and place of birth, the transcript from his trial, the date he sailed to Australia and the name of the ship. Her investigations led her to such archival sources such as Old Bailey transcripts and Governor's dispatches from New South Wales.

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville reveals that she had initially intended the work to be non-fiction. It was to be called *The Wiseman Book*, a story about her ancestor's life, with "some elements of memoir" about her experience in reconstructing Wiseman's past. (*Searching* 147). Piece by piece, as she compiled the elements of the story (the historical field' to use Hayden White's terminology) the materials evolved into a series of lists – but Grenville found those lists to be boring.

I was determined to write a book of non-fiction, but the only parts of this 'assembly' that were interesting were the 'flights of fancy' where I'd created the flesh to put on the bones of research. Where, in a word, I'd written fiction... What was wrong with this book wasn't the order of the pieces. It was the writing itself. I could either write a truthful book that would be

so dull as to be unreadable, or I could write a made-up book that might be read but not believed (*Searching* 154).

It was the Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje who helped Grenville navigate her way out of her dilemma. In October 2001 she was reading Ondaatje's then recently published novel *Anil's Ghost*, a story based on historical events, but with an invented main character.

The 'I' character in *The Wiseman Book*, the 'quester', was myself – but it didn't have to be. I could try the sleight of hand that Ondaatje had pulled off: to fictionalise the quester, but not the quest. I could step out of the limelight, leaving the search for Wiseman and his dealings with Aboriginal people centre stage" (*Searching* 156).

Grenville began her first draft in a blend of first and third person, always narrated from the point of view of Solomon Wiseman; but when writing in the first person, she struggled to find the coarse, uneducated voice of a Thames lighterman. She wanted Wiseman to say things about the Aboriginal culture that he could not have known – or at least not immediately after his arrival in the colony. To suit her purposes, Grenville switched to the third person subjective, writing from the point of view of Wiseman, but not always in his voice. When she finally transcribed her first draft from handwritten exercise books, the nature of the text she was developing became clearer. "There were no 'elements of memoir' in here at all. The fictional quester had never so much as put in an appearance. In spite of all my certainty that this book shouldn't be a novel, I'd written just that" (*Searching* 164).

With a change of genre came a change of name. Wanting to distance herself from her ancestor, Grenville changed the name of Solomon Wiseman to William Thornhill, a name she had found in the convict register. "My great-great-great grandfather had stepped out of the book now, taking his name with him. He had a story, the one I'd found in the archives, but it wasn't the one I was telling" (*Searching* 188). Grenville began to create a composite character, a man with some traits of the Solomon Wiseman who she met in the convict register but also with other, softer qualities that would make Thornhill more complex, more mutable, permitting Grenville the freedom to imagine and redefine the character and realise the subtle changes in his

character as he experiences contact with Aboriginal people, confronts the Australian frontier and makes choices that place him in the centre of a bloody conflict between settlers and natives.

Grenville's strategy of changing character names and attributes (and she does this not only with Thornhill but also with the other main characters in the novel) has also distanced her from the type of ethical debate that followed Richard Flanagan when he portrayed Sir John Franklin as a rapist and paedophile. Given that Grenville declared her novel to be a work of fiction, and changed the names and characteristics of the real figures who inspired the story, the ethics of her representation of characters has attracted less controversy than her declared reliance on the use of empathy to construct her own version of the past. In comments made in *Searching for the Secret River* and in broadcast interviews following the release of novel, she spoke of coming to know the past experientially and empathetically – notions that incensed traditional historians. She described a serendipitous moment that took place while conducting archival research in the Public Records Office in Kew, London. Grenville came across a letter from a William Boon, a condemned man of Wiseman's era, in which he conveyed his last words to his wife. The poignancy of the letter left Grenville with the sensation that Boon was palpably present beside her. This moment was a turning point: "I didn't have to approach the past in a forensic frame of mind. I could *experience* the past – as if it were happening here and now" (47).

Grenville embarked on a peripatetic habit of experiential research, haunting the streets of London and Sydney that Wiseman frequented, bushwalking through the country along the Hawkesbury where he took up land, camping out at night, making a 'slush lamp' from lamb fat and a fire from two sticks. She referred to her research methodology and of coming to 'know' the past through 'empathising'.

The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me" (Koval).

In her essay, *Who Owns the Past?* Australian historian and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen attacked Grenville's approach:

So here we have it: Grenville's secret method for penetrating British minds – although not Aboriginal ones, which must remain forever closed to us – is Applied Empathy: the peculiar talent of the novelist to penetrate other minds through exercising her imagination upon fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence. Grenville's claim to "know" *with equal certainty* both what is intimated within the records, and what is beyond it, exposes the gulf between "doing history" and "doing fiction" (20).

Clendinnen exemplifies the inadequacy of Grenville's brand of empathy when she compares Grenville's account of boarding a ferry from Sydney Harbour to Broken Bay (in order to empathise with William Thornhill's experience of sailing a similar route aboard his boat in rough weather) to a quote from 1790 diary entry by a marine lieutenant, Ralph Clark. In her memoir, Grenville describes her sense of "terror", the taste of salt spray she experiences while standing at the ferry's gunwale taking notes. Over 200 years earlier, Clark was writing about his own rough passage aboard the *Sirius* between North Head and South Head, a voyage that nearly drove the ship onto the rocks. Clark tasted not only salt water, but vomit (25). As Clendinnen correctly points out, Grenville's experience on a modern, stabilised ferry would not have been a patch on Clark's deadly voyage.

Two hundred years ago people were more familiar with death than we are. Death, pain and violence were always at their elbow... That alone makes me unwilling to impose our conveniently simplified alphabet of emotions – 'fear', 'pity', 'anger' – on them.... That massive change in circumstance alone renders the hope of 'empathy' a fiction" (26).

Clendinnen is not the only historian who has asserted that *The Secret River* lacks historical integrity. Other prominent historians, including Mark McKenna and John Hirst, lent their voices to a public conversation that came to be known as the "History-Fiction Debate".

The appearance of *The Secret River* and, more so, the claims that Grenville made for it, inspired a dramatically divisive response that the novel, by virtue of its conventionality — the ordinariness of both its form and content — did not seem to warrant. Some of the well-known arguments made by historians Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna (“Comfort History”) argued passionately about the limitations of *The Secret River* and Grenville’s ambitions, and were particularly concerned about the novel’s assumption that experience of other times can be accessed through the acquisition of historical knowledge. Even more significantly, they demonstrated information about their own position as historians’ in this particular socio-historical context. As Clendinnen and McKenna were writing from an intensely pressured position during the heat and rancour of the History Wars, and the intense conservatism of the Howard government at the height of its cultural and electoral power, it is not surprising that there was a besieged defensiveness in response to claims for any kind of authority for historical fiction (Jones, 70).

Presenting a paper about *The Secret River* at the Australian Historical Conference in 2006, Sarah Pinto described the tendency of some historians to criticize the authors of historical novels and their methods, and to overlook the works on their own merit.

It is little wonder, then, that when historians turn their attention towards a novel like *The secret river*, they are often pulled into analysis of authors, methods and ‘problems’. This preoccupation with problems and form, however, is itself a problem: the novels themselves, and their historical projects, are left un-analysed.<sup>8</sup> Interrogations of historical novels on the basis of their historical inadequacies – and premised on the idea that historical novels are not ‘proper’ history and cannot be treated as such – offer little insight into the ways in which these texts are representing their pasts, of what is happening to the

past in historical novel. This is precisely what has happened to *The secret river* (192).

Grenville's novel has been enthusiastically received by the general population and is a commonly set text in high school English curricula in Australia. Tony Birch, formerly an academic historian and now a creative writer, provides insights into the pedagogical values of Grenville's novel, declaring that "fiction can be an empowering way of understanding the past" (185).

I do not believe that the students I have worked with regard *Secret River* as an authoritative source of history, in that it simply does that same work that a history text does. It could also be speculated, with some certainty, that fictional works such as *Secret River* provide a valuable entry point into discussing colonial history in Australia, producing a foundation to be built upon, both within and outside tertiary institutions (183).

Birch believes that historians reacted negatively to *The Secret River* because they were concerned the book would have an "undue influence" (183) on readers' perceptions of early engagement between colonialists and Aboriginal people. He emphasizes his respect for alternative forms of knowledge, regarding poetry and fiction to be as legitimate as archival history for sourcing stories and information about Australia's first inhabitants (185).

#### 4.5 Margaret Atwood's 'Alias Grace'

*Alias Grace* (1996) also concerns a crime attributed to a marginalised immigrant; although in Atwood's book, the crime is committed not in the old country, but in the new frontier. Grace Marks was a young Irish girl who migrated to Canada and went into domestic service. In 1843 at the age of sixteen she was convicted of being an accomplice in the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. The crime occurred at the wealthy Kinnear's home in the hamlet of Richmond Hill, north of Toronto. Grace's co-convicted James McDermott (also an Irish immigrant) was hanged for his crime. Atwood distrusted the ideological paradigms of nineteenth century raconteurs of this tale, such as the English-

born Susannah Moodie, whose well-meaning guides for Upper Canada settlers, *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853), exposed her antipathy toward the Irish.

Atwood's interest in the tale of Grace Marks originated in the 1960s, when she wrote a collection of poems entitled *The Journals of Susannah Moodie*. She has stated that she adopted this project "for reasons that cannot be rationally explained" (*In Search of Alias Grace* 28). In the 1970s Atwood was invited to write a television script based on Grace Marks, and then a theatrical play. She is dismissive to the point of ridicule about these dramatisation efforts, but nonetheless the tale continued to pursue her. Like Richard Flanagan and Kate Grenville, Atwood describes being ineluctably drawn to a story by a small moment of revelation. "I think novelists begin with hints and images and scenes and voices rather than with theories and grand schemes" (*In Search of* 28).

Launching into her archival research into the murders of Kinnear and Montgomery, Atwood investigated not only the newspaper articles, but the newspapers themselves, finding that back in the mid-1800s, as is the case now, newspapers had their own political agendas. The conservative journals vilified Grace Marks (the murder victim was a Tory), while the Reform newspapers were more sympathetic to Grace. Atwood equitably set out to represent all points of view. She also devised a set of guidelines: where a solid fact was known, she would retain it intact. Every major element of the book must have been inspired by some historical record of the day. Where records disagreed, Atwood used her powers of deduction to decide which one to believe. She also allowed herself licence to invent in the 'gaps' – those parts of the story not explained. Inga Clendinnen lauded Atwood's methods. In the same essay in which she censured Kate Grenville, Clendinnen described Atwood's approach to writing history as 'sure-footed' (Clendinnen 31), approved of the Canadian novelist's commitment to researching everything she could about the social contexts of the era and applauded Atwood's frank admission that: "We don't know anything about what happened to Grace after she was sentenced, so from now on I'm going to make it up" (32).

Atwood's *modus operandi* aligns to the so-called 'deficit' model of history, which Camilla Nelson considers a 'naturalised' construct, one that consigns traditional historians to the dusty archives to fossick for empirical clues about the past and assemble them into reputable histories; while the writer of fictional novels embellishes and window-dresses the historical record to make it more complete (Nelson). Just as Kate Grenville basked in the ambient light of slush lamps fueled with lamb fat, so Atwood acquainted herself with "how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt-pattern names, and how to store parsnips" (Atwood, *In Search of* 32). Such details were the trivia of nineteenth century Upper Canadian life – banal threads woven into the grander narratives of the era, but nonetheless essential to the fabric of Atwood's *Alias Grace*: "Individual characters interacting with, and acted upon by, the world that surrounds them are what interests the novel; the details, not the large pattern, although a large pattern does then emerge" (Atwood, *In Search of* 28).

Nelson's problem with this binary of the historian as 'truth-teller' and the novelist as 'gap-filler' (or to use Atwood's analogy, 'pattern-maker') is that much of the postmodern historiographical discourse rejects the notion that absolute historical truth is attainable. She argues that fictional histories have their own hermeneutic power: "...the way in which stories explain events in the world by endowing them with a special kind of coherence" (Nelson). The central event in *Alias Grace* – the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery – resists any satisfactory explanation. The novel subverts the conventions of the murder mystery, offering, not a neat solution to the crime, but a pastiche of narratives and texts that serve to obfuscate the problem of Grace Marks' culpability. Chapter epigraphs include passages from Susannah Moodie's journals, excerpts from newspaper articles and the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book, a grisly ballad composed by Atwood, poems by Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson. In a number of ways, the juxtaposition of incongruent texts places the reader off-guard. For example, in one of Susannah Moodie's journal entries, the imprisoned Grace is described as "...no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiendish merriment" (*Alias Grace* 51). Below this extract are two stanzas from Emily Dickinson's poem, *One Need Not Be a*

*Chamber*, a work that suggests the interiority of a fearful mind is more disturbingly powerful than any external manifestations of evil.

Ourself behind ourself concealed –  
 Should startle most –  
 Assassin hid in our Apartment  
 Be Horror's least... (*Alias Grace* 52).

*Alias Grace* is a notable exemplar of the genre of historiographic metafiction; to quote Linda Hutcheon, it “asks both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of that past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?” (*Poetics* 50). At the beginning of each chapter is a graphic image, a detail of a patch of quilt, and every chapter is named after the pattern of the quilt: names such as ‘Snake Fence’, ‘Broken Dishes’, ‘Secret Drawer’ and ‘Pandora’s Box’ codify the tribulations of Grace Marks, the beguilement and duplicity of the murderous tale that has not been solved to this day. Grace herself is elusive; her furtive internal dialogue is interrupted by disturbing intertexts of lurid recollections that could be dreams, or hallucinations, or they could have some verisimilitude to what actually happened – we will never know.

The novel switches back and forth in time; its earliest point being Grace’s passage on the ship from Ireland; the latest occurring many years later when she is finally released from prison. The tale is narrated from various points of view: some chapters are written in the first person from Grace’s point of view, while the subplot of Dr Simon Jordan, Grace’s psychoanalyst, is told in the third person subjective. Dr Jordan is a fictional character invented by Atwood to fulfil a detective role; in his interviews with Grace the topic of quilts and quilt-making recur and serve as a metaphor for Grace’s disjointed, scattered memories – or perhaps her deliberately vacillating accounts of the murder.

And he says, if you could make a quilt all for yourself,  
 which pattern would you make?

Well there is no doubt about that. I know the answer. It  
 would be a Tree of Paradise like the one in the quilt chest at  
 Mrs Alderson Parkinson’s. I used to get it out on the pretence

of seeing if it needed mending, just to admire it, it was a lovely thing...

...But what I say to him is different. I say, I don't know, Sir. Perhaps it would be a Job's Tears, or a Tree of Paradise, or a Snake Fence; or else an Old Maid's Puzzle, because I am an old maid, wouldn't you say, Sir, and I have certainly been very puzzled (*Alias Grace* 113).

Dr Simon Jordan is a construct of Atwood's research into emerging theories of mental illness of the nineteenth century. Physicians and laymen alike were experimenting with the practises of spiritualism, mesmerism, memory, hysteria and the interpretation of dreams. Atwood contextualised Dr Jordan's examination of Grace within the trends and practices of the era and locale. His meetings with Grace are intended to elicit the truth about the murders and her role in them; but due to the complex exigencies of his own psyche – his submissive relationship with his mother, his sexual desire for Grace, his privileged past in which he had ready access to servant girls, causing him to conflate the obsessions of power and sex – it is Jordan who falls under Grace's power. Watching her sew as they talk, he is seduced by her needlework skills; he offers her pieces of fruit, like inducements to a child or a pet, and it is soon Grace who has the upper hand in the exchange.

Margaret Atwood, like Richard Flanagan in *Wanting* and Kate Grenville in *The Secret River*, declares the genre of her work within the paratext of the novel. In the author's afterword to *Alias Grace* she writes: "*Alias Grace* is a work of fiction, although it is based on reality" (537). She summarises the extensive body of source material she consulted, in order to write the story of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders and authentically represent the life and customs of mid-nineteenth-century Upper Canada. In this regard, her research methodology compares to that of Kate Grenville, also an assiduous archival researcher. Atwood, unlike Grenville, has not reported moments of experiencing the past in the present, nor finding insights through empathy and discarding her forensic frame of mind. Atwood has always maintained a forensic approach, earning her the public approbation of Inga Clendinnen. After weighing up the body of contradictory evidence and

mitigating circumstances, she has never drawn a conclusion about the innocence or guilt of Grace Marks.

Whether she was indeed the co-murderer of Nancy Montgomery and the lover of James McDermott is far from clear; nor whether she was ever genuinely ‘insane’, or only acting that way – as many did – to secure better conditions for herself. The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma (*Alias Grace* 539).

Atwood tells readers that she has kept known facts intact, and only exercised her freedom to invent where facts or contradictions existed in the historical record. She has not invented any heinous crimes and attributed them to real historical figures; nor has she whitewashed any of the figures associated with the murders. She has, however, settled a score on behalf of Grace Marks by exposing Susannah Moodie’s unreliability as a witness and chronicler of these events and Moodie’s vitriolic racist bias against Irish – both factors that may have influenced the judicial process. Her revisionist retelling of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders exerts an anti-totalising effect on the centrist account of these events that has prevailed for generations – an account that Atwood has parodically précised in the ballad near the opening of the novel. *Alias Grace* epitomises what Linda Hutcheon describes as “the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous narratives that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 63).

#### 4.6 Guy Vanderhaeghe’s ‘*The Englishman’s Boy*’

Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996) is an historical novel about the Cypress Hills Massacre – an event that took place on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border in 1873. This novel dismantles the archetype of the noble hero of the North American Western literary genre by exposing the brutal racism and greed that precipitated this large-scale but little-known atrocity. This massacre of Assiniboine people was an act of retribution by wolfers from Montana, who crossed the US-Canadian border to recover horses stolen by the Indians. Unlike the authors of the other three novels reviewed above, Vanderhaeghe makes no statement of genre in the book; he offers no disclaimer about its foundation in historical fact, or otherwise; he

does not tell the reader which characters, if any, are based on real people. Formerly a student of history, then a writer of contemporary fiction before he turned to writing about the past, Vanderhaege has said that he “had to make a decision about how to approach the historical novel, should the emphasis lie on the adjective or the noun?” (Gordon and Tyler). He chose the noun – that is, he rejected the nomenclature of ‘historical novel’ (as he did other modifiers of the word ‘novel’, such as ‘fantasy’ or ‘realist’. “...I always want people to know that they’re not reading history, and I always say that in interviews” (Mouat).

Vanderhaege admits to being uneasy with postmodern ideas of historiography.

What I sometimes have difficulty with is the claim that history is just a narrative no different than a novel, which is sometimes posited to a certain degree. Both are subjective, both are creative acts of the imagination. But it seems to me that history is something in which you make an appeal to evidence and the record. That’s kind of the foundation upon which all sorts of arguments can be postulated. But I know all kinds of novelists who claim that a novel is every bit...as true as a historical narrative, and maybe more true. It seems to me that it’s confusing things. I want to say that these are novels.

Somebody else calls them historical novels... (Mouat)

Vanderhaege’s ‘appeal to evidence’ is not totally *in absentia* (the Cypress Hills Massacre was an actual event) but of the four novels reviewed in this section, *The Englishman’s Boy* is the most fictionalised. His central characters are completely of his own invention, distinguishing his novel from *Wanting*, *The Secret River* and *Alias Grace*, which all featured, in various forms and guises, real figures from the past. In this regard, Vanderhaege has to some degree sequestered himself from the ethical questions concerning the representation of real and recognisable human subjects from the past.

Vanderhaege, who grew up in Saskatchewan, developed an interest in the Cypress Hills Massacre after reading a 1955 novel by Paul Sharp called *Whoop-up Country*. As Sharp writes, reductionist accounts of the massacre

depict the incident as significant for the threats it posed to American security and Canadian sovereignty.

To the south, American historians pieced together a story of valiant frontiers men bravely fighting for their lives against fearful odds as savages sought to ‘wipe them out’. To the north, Canadian historians painted a picture of American border ruffians, drunk with whisky and greed, brutally slaughtering innocent and defenseless Indians without purpose or justification. And neither does credit to the objectivity or scholarship by those who, by reason of inadequate research or national bias, have perpetuated legend as history or myth as truth (55).

Vanderhaege has stated that the Cypress Hills Massacre is an elusive event in history. Little is known about it, and the few available facts are contradictory. As such, he finds the event to be ideal material, a ‘departure point’ from which to revision a story and challenge pre-existing constructs of a story that has been ‘highly charged politically’ (Mouat ). Vanderhaege focalises the event through two invented characters, the cowboy Shorty McAdoo (the Englishman’s boy) and aspiring Hollywood screenwriter Harry Vincent. The story unfolds contrapuntally over two time periods: the 1870s when McAdoo, as a young man, is caught up in the events of the massacre, and the 1920s when Vincent is assigned to write a screenplay about the incident and pursues the then ageing McAdoo for material to help him write it. At the start and finish of the novel, the two narratives are framed by sequences depicting Fine Man and Broken Horn, who were real figures in the Cypress Hills event, initially stealing the wolfers’ horses and then finally returning to reclaim their camp.

Vincent is morally torn by the murderous reality of the incident and the demands of the studio chief Ira Chance, who orders him to deliver a heroic, quintessential American Western epic in which white men wear white hats and occupy the high moral ground. The chapters alternate between the past narrative of the massacre told in the third person, and modern Hollywood in the early days of the ‘talkies’ told in the first person from Harry’s point of view. Each narrative moves forward chronologically within its own

immediate present; as Harry interviews the inscrutable McAdoo in 1920, the events of 1873 are still unfolding incrementally in the alternative world of the young Shorty. As Harry struggles to find out ‘the truth’ about the Cypress Hills Massacre, he discovers how nebulous and unattainable the truth can be.

We finish about dawn. He asks me to read aloud the part about the girl. I do and he listens closely, his head cocked to catch every word. Then he asks me to read it again and listens as closely as he did the first time.

“Put her down for fifteen,” he says, judge rendering a decree. “She mightn’t have been fourteen like I said first. I’m more comfortable going high than low.”

“All right.” McAdoo gets up and stands at my shoulder watching me make the change.

“What did I say?” he asks me.

“What did you say?” I am tired and don’t grasp what he means.

“I said the truth wouldn’t pleasure your boss. Am I wrong?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” I really don’t. (105)

While *The Englishman’s Boy* endeavours to subvert the white imperialist treatment of the story of the Cypress Hills Massacre and the wider paradigms of the traditional Western genre, Herb Wyile points out a number of incongruencies between the ideological intent of the novel and its form and execution. “...despite the novel’s attempt to provide a less Eurocentric and even postcolonial Western, and despite its critique of white imperialism, Vanderhaege makes whites (Vincent and McAdoo) the heroes of the novel and relegates natives to the margins” (*Speculative Fictions* 60). Wyile also questions the “ontological status” (61) of the three narrative threads – the framing chapters with Fine Man and Broken Horn, the third person narrative of the massacre and events leading up to it, and the events in Hollywood a half a century later focalised through Harry Vincent. According to Wyile, the sequences set in 1873 are “fairly unselfconscious and monoglossic” (63) compared to the self-reflexive approaches commonly found in works of historiographic metafiction. In the Hollywood sequences, Shorty’s version of

events as told to Harry Vincent is consistent with many of the facts of consensus about the massacre; but it also incorporates some details that have been long contested, including a confronting scene in which Little Soldier is decapitated and his head displayed on a stake – a fact that is disputed in the historical records. In an interview with Vanderhaege, Wylie raises the point about the disputed versions of that incident and Vanderhaege replies:

...as a novelist, I will pick and choose the account that for me is more novelistically satisfying. So, for instance, if they say that Little Soldier's head was paraded around on a pole, and other people say it was somebody else, or it never happened or whatever, but there's some sort of account, well right at that point I'm not capable nor do I want to sift with a toothbrush through all that evidence... (*Speaking in the Past Tense*, Kindle location 823).

His comments are uttered in the spontaneous setting of an oral interview and they may have been facetious – but perpetuated in print, they convey an impression of slipshodness on the part of Vanderhaege. His words suggest a careless approach, as if he did not wish to trouble himself to research the incident in depth. They also resonate with his assertion that he writes novels, not history, and the difference between the two is history's “appeal to evidence and the record” (Mouat).

Vanderhaege goes on in this interview with Wylie to say that some of his choices are made for ‘effect’. He refers to the scene in which an Assiniboine girl is raped; some historical records state that two or four women were raped: Vanderhaege writes only one girl into this scene.

...making it just one has a kind of political and aesthetic resonance...and that seems to be a very compelling example of putting to the test that difference between the spirit of the interpretation and sticking correctly to the details” (*Speaking*, Kindle location 845).

His comments – which are consistent with his often-stated declaration that he is above all a story-teller, not an historian, not even an historical novelist – resonate with the words of his character Ira Chance, the Hollywood movie producer. This passage of dialogue ensues after Chance orders Harry

Vincent to change McAdoo's story, and in the screenplay make the Indian girl set fire to the trading post:

“But the girl didn't set fire to the post,” I say stubbornly, clinging to the irrefutability of fact.

Chance's mouth twists with impatience. “Don't be willfully obtuse,” he says angrily. “I have explained to you. This picture is about psychological truth, poetic truth. Poetic truth is not journalism.” (252).

Chance's insistence that his film project is a work of “poetic truth”, not a form of journalism, resonates with Hayden White's assertion that “the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain ‘what was *really* happening’ in it” (*Metahistory*, x).

## 5.0 Historical Research into the Wreck of the *Georgette*

My research into the *Georgette* story began quite by accident, and without any awareness or on my part that I was about to embark on a long journey of investigation into the veracity, or otherwise, of a much-loved Western Australian story. On one of my many annual holidays in the South West of Western Australia, I visited the history museum at Augusta, a small resort town near Cape Leeuwin at the state's southernmost tip at the confluence of the Indian and Southern oceans. In the museum, amongst antique farm tools, old apothecary vessels and a replica of a giant dinosaur egg, was a painting of the *Georgette* shipwreck rescue. The painting depicted terrified passengers floundering in the surf, the beached *Georgette* in the background, Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs in the foreground. The operation of rescuing passengers from the *Georgette* was in full flight. Or at least, Grace Bussell was in full flight – she, riding the spirited steed Shiner, was well out into the breakers, stretching her hand out to a hapless survivor. Sam Isaacs to Grace's right in the picture, is in comparative repose, looking on with admiration.

This painting and the interpretive sign displayed next to it told a stirring tale of a young girl's valour. Compelled to know more about the

rescue, I went to nearby Redgate Beach, one of a string of popular beaches along the Indian Ocean side of the Leeuwin ridge. High above the beach is a lookout, and at the centre of the lookout is a heritage plaque bearing a description of the daring rescue. I stared down into the churning surf and imagined I could see glimpses of the *Georgette's* shadow during intervals between the breakers. The more I studied the scene, the more I wondered how a diminutive young girl could pull some 50 people from such a moil of water – and whether Sam's role in the rescue had been underplayed in the histories.

### 5.1 Bibliographic research

My bibliographic research began, traditionally enough, at the Battye Library of Western Australian history and in the local history sections of public libraries at Fremantle, Margaret River and Busselton. In the early days of my enquiry, the single most comprehensive information source I was able to find was A.F. Stewart's *Australia's Grace Darling*. Written in a fictional history style, this 32-page book credited Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs with a large hand in the rescue: "...the two riders repeatedly entered the sea and provided support for those who could not swim or who had not the strength or courage to brave the breaking seas unaided" (29). While other, much briefer accounts focused almost exclusively on the dénouement of this shipwreck event at Redgate Beach, Ferguson Stewart devoted a considerable section of his book to the earlier rescue at Injidup of 14 people cast out in the Captain's gig, and the heroic actions of the Dempster brothers and William Dundee. Through this book, I first became aware of this lesser-known tranche of the *Georgette* tale, and in my quest to know more about it, I found an astonishing letter from George Leake in the Battye Library. In his letter to Henry Clay, a public servant in the Colonial Secretary's office, Leake wrote that

No doubt more lives would have been lost had it not been for the timely assistance rendered and the presence of mind displayed by the Dempsters, Dewar and Nunan, and taking into consideration the fact that the two Dempsters having suffered from sea sickness, the distance of the vessel from land at the time of the accident and altogether the risk they ran of their lives. I think their conduct cannot be too highly spoken of. I do

not think that either of the riders were in any great danger at all for they did not get amongst the breakers as has been said in fact it would have been impossible either for a horse to keep its legs or a rider his seat in such a surf as there was running. I hope it will not be thought that there is any attempt to detract anything from the praise due to Miss Bussell: indeed I consider she behaved admirably and had there been any necessity to go out further than she did, *she would have attempted* it without a moment's hesitation –

In my opinion, the assistance rendered by the Dempsters, Dewar and Nunan and the risk they ran cannot fairly be compared with Miss Bussell's pluck and readiness when the assistance they rendered and the risk they ran were so much the greater. Of course the fact of Miss Grace Bussell being *a young girl* adds very much to the luster of what she did – (Leake).

That letter, and another written by George Leake to his sister Mary a few weeks after the incident, cast a different light on the popular tale of heroes on horseback at Redgate Beach. Leake's account, unlike all the others I had read, described Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs as mere *helpers* at the scene, not *rescuers*. "The vessel was seeing going ashore by one of Mr Bussells stockman and he and one of the Miss Bussells (Grace) came down to us on the beach; it was a great relief to see them for we knew that help was near" (Leake).

The discovery of those letters was a turning point in my research. My vague doubts as to the veracity of the rescue story were now supported by a small piece of evidence – and evidence from an eyewitness at that. It was Leake who provided the details of the method used to evacuate people from the foundering ship in the surf at Calgardup Bay.

As soon as the vessel preparations were made for the landing those remaining on board about 50 and although we had a boat it was at once seen that there would be great difficulty in getting ashore, through the surf although only about 50 yards or less perhaps, however the boat was launched and five of the crew got into her taking with them a line and made for shore

but the first breaker that caught them capsized the boat and they with difficulty landed after a great deal of difficulty another line was passed ashore and the boat hauled back again to the ship (Leake).

Leake is describing an operation known in nautical terms as a ‘breeches buoy’. With each successive shuttle between the ship and the store, using two ropes to haul the pinnace to and fro, more hands were landed onto the beach. With additional hands to haul the boat closer to shore, most of the evacuees were able to simply slide out of the boat and walk to dry land. In his letter to Henry Clay, Leake’s letter takes on a tone of frustration: “I quite agree with you in thinking that these absurd reports should not go abroad without contradiction and in consequence you are at liberty to make what use you like of this information” (Leake).

I scoured the archives for other eyewitness reports of the Calgardup Bay landing and found only two others, also written in response to the petition for medals. James Lambe, another passenger, recalled that

I consider that the risk to herself incurred by Miss Grace Bussell was mainly owing to the force of the sea and the consequent danger of being swept from her saddle. The greatest depth to which she rode I should judge at about four feet. I did not see Miss Bussell plunge into the surf a second time, and to the best of my knowledge the woman and child were the only persons rescued by Miss Bussell. As I have before stated, all the others reached ashore without assistance except the man who was left struggling in the surf, apparently almost exhausted when the native servant ‘Sam’ referred to, plunged in almost instantaneously with Miss Grace Bussell and assisted the man ashore (Lambe).

Lambe’s report has the riders playing an equal role in assisting one man out of the surf. His estimate that they rode in to a depth of about four feet is consistent with Leake’s statement that “they did not get amongst the breakers...” (Leake). Thomas Connor’s testimonial, on the other hand, was sycophantic about the conduct of Grace Bussell.

I hereby certify that I saw Miss Grace Bussell riding down a very precipitous hill at full speed, rush into the surf where the boat was capsized... and assisted twenty persons to reach the shore. During the time she was in the surf, her life was in great danger. Being on the steamer at the time I saw the full danger, and felt certain that both herself and horse would be drowned. The native servant who accompanied her ran the same risk (Connor).

This is a marked discrepancy between Connor's report and those of Leake and Lambe. This is one disparity in the rescue story that I have analysed at length, and the rationale for my eventual adjudication on this point of fact is discussed in Chapter 7. f

Of the many archival sources I consulted for my research, another significant one was the transcript of the *Inquiry into the Wreck of the Georgette*. That document, numbering 173 handwritten pages, was principally concerned with the earlier events out at sea, in which the *Georgette's* lifeboat was launched and capsized, resulting in eight drownings. Recorded in the transcript are the responses given by deponents (the crew, some passengers, constabulary and maritime engineers) but oddly, the questions asked by the committee are missing from the record. The absence of the questions has been a cognitive barrier to understanding the points raised in cross-examination, but in the main body of the depositions the meaning is conveyed more or less integrally. In the deposition are two brief allusions to the final landing at Calgardup Bay. One of them was in the words of passenger Walter Geddes:

I remained in the *Georgette* till she grounded at 3.10.PM. on 1<sup>st</sup>. Dec<sup>r</sup>. – The landing of the people from the Ship was effected with difficulty, but without loss of life – we were landed with the Pinnace – There were no orders given when the ship was two miles off the land for the baling to cease. – It went on until she grounded – and one of the stokers complained at having been kept baling till after she grounded – (Geddes).

The other reference was a single statement by Captain John Godfrey. "After daylight I did put in at Calgardup Bay in the Pinnace" (CSR Vol 824/47). As that portion of the voyage resulted in no "loss of life", to quote

Mr Geddes, it is reasonable to assume that the Committee did not press for further testimony, and therefore no further mention is made of the Calgardup Bay landing in the transcript.

Of all the primary sources consulted, the most poignant and harrowing were the letters of Annie Simpson, a young mother who had travelled steerage class aboard the *Georgette*. Over a period of many years after the mishap, she continued to correspond with the family of Daniel McGregor, a settler in the locality of Quindalup near the place where the gig was landed. The McGregors cared for Simpson and her baby for a number of weeks until she was able to continue her voyage to reunite with her husband in Adelaide. Simpson's letters provide a graphic account of the clash of the lifeboat against the ship's side, the chaos and carnage that resulted, and her own improbable survival thanks to the efforts of the Dempsters and crew.

Just then another big wave struck the lifeboat and threw it against the ship's side. It broke clean in half from end to end, and I shall never forget the awful screams that went up. All in a few seconds we were struggling in the water, and it was then that most of the lives were lost. I floated out on my back, saw the broken boat turn over and float away, and saw the *Georgette* for the last time (Simpson, Letters).

Not only do the Simpson letters bring the extraordinary events of the gig's voyage to light – they also serve to codify the marginalisation of women, particularly poor and humble women of the era. Annie Simpson's articulate, non-self-pitying letters exemplified what Linda Hutcheon described as a distinguishing feature of historical fiction – a focus on "...the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men" (*Politics* 63).

### *5.2 Personal interviews*

For my research into the *Georgette*, I had planned to interview a number of descendents of the key figures in the story. I hoped that these descendents would possess additional primary source material that had not been previously released into the public domain. If not, I accepted that any

received oral history would be based on accounts handed down over the generations— four or five generations in fact. And by and large, it became evident that most primary documentary evidence was already captured in the public repositories of record.

Several of the interview subjects offered their own versions of the rescue. The prevailing view was that Sam Isaacs had played a greater role in the rescue than Grace Bussell. This made sense – after all, Sam was a 30-year-old man, an accomplished horseman and stockman, strong and fit. Less plausible were suggestions by descendents of Sam Isaacs that he and Grace Bussell were lovers, and that Grace’s horse had delivered a fatal kick to the head of one of the floundering passengers. The former allegation seems unlikely (Sam Isaacs was married and his wife, Lucy, lived with him at Wallcliffe with their growing brood of children) and certainly a liaison between Grace and Sam is not documented in any sources consulted. As for the notion that a passenger was killed by the horse, there are no police records or eyewitness account of a fatality at Redgate Beach – all of the recorded deaths occurred at sea when the lifeboat capsized.

Those viewpoints were based on accounts passed down by family members over the generations. The willingness of descendents and amateur genealogists to offer information was pleasing, but much of that information lacked empirical substance. Nonetheless, the process of evaluating that evidence was an important aspect of the practice-based research that was central to my thesis and to the task of answering the central research question: “How does a writer of historical fiction ethically negotiate the divide between fact and imagination?” I came to realise that I was negotiating not only the divide between fact and my *own* imagination, but also, perhaps, the imagination of *others*. The lack of evidence-based substantiation for some of the interviewees’ beliefs did not render their statements worthless, but rather highlighted the need for people in the present to maintain a sense of belonging to, and pride in the past. I learned a salutary lesson – that is, that I must respect alternative forms of truth, even if I would ultimately conclude that those versions would not serve the intellectual or creative purpose of my thesis.

My core line of enquiry – the fundamental problem underlying the central research question – concerned the veracity, or otherwise, of the rescue at Calgardup Bay. The notion that a liaison had occurred between Grace and Sam – though it would certainly furnish the basis of an intriguing sub-plot to the story – would be tangential to the main focus of the thesis. It would also present an ethical problem; that is, I would be depicting Sam Isaacs as a philanderer. I reflected on the treatment of Sir John Franklin as a rapist in Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, and decided that without any documentary evidence, I would not pursue that particular narrative thread in my account of the *Georgette* incident.

One descendent interviewed, Matt McGregor (a man I contacted on a genealogy website) did come forward with a number of primary sources I had not previously accessed. The sources included family letters and a daybook of Gaven McGregor, son of Daniel. He also pointed me to information sources about the McGregors and the related Scotts (including letters from Annie Simpson to the McGregor sisters). Thanks to his help, I began to appreciate the significance of the other rescue, and the roles of families such as the Scotts and McGregors, the Harwoods, the Yelvertons and the Abbeys. Disappointingly, or perhaps intriguingly, no entries were made in Gaven McGregor's daybook (normally updated on a daily basis) during the period of Annie Simpson's recorded stay at the house called Comet Vale, the McGregor homestead. The entries ceased around the time of the shipwreck and resumed later in January 1877, after Annie Simpson's departure for Adelaide.

I only discovered much later on – after completing the drafting of the novel for this thesis – that Matt McGregor identifies as an Aboriginal person. Upon learning of this, I more fully appreciated the importance of obtaining, and maintaining, human research ethics approval to interview Aboriginal subjects – a requirement of Curtin University in accordance with Chapter 4.7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. Earlier along in the research, when I had *knowingly* interviewed Aboriginal people, I had advised the subjects of my ethics clearance and shown them with the required documentation. Later when I discovered that I had *unknowingly* interviewed an Aboriginal subject,

I came to appreciate that as a researcher and writer, I could not make assumptions about the cultural identity of subjects. I understood how important it was to verify the cultural and racial status of people before undertaking human research.

Other personal interviews I conducted were not of a genealogical nature. I met with Dr Michael ‘Mac’ McCarthy, curator of maritime archeology at the Western Australian Museum. This was a most fruitful interview, and it led to referrals to the Maritime Heritage Association of WA and several of the association’s members, who were generous with their knowledge of the *Georgette* and the state’s maritime history during the late 1800s. Maritime historian and artist Ross Shardlow and Jill and Peter Worsley, authors of a series of maritime history books published by the WA Museum, were especially generous with their time. Ross Shardlow reviewed the shipboard details of my novel in progress for technical accuracy, and the Worsleys provided invaluable references that assisted me in tracing the *Georgette*’s history and final voyage.

### 5.3 Field and experiential research

I had read Kate Grenville’s *Searching for the Secret River* in the early stages of researching the *Georgette* story. I was intrigued by Grenville’s story about camping out at night and reading by the light of a slush lamp filled with lamb fat. I decided that I should similarly undertake experiential research and dabble in nineteenth century practices so that I, too, could transport myself back in time. In the diary of a more mature Grace Bussell I found a recipe for face cream made from pig’s fat. I made a note in my research methodology: “make Grace’s face cream”. I thought that such an experiment would make me feel closer to Grace. I also decided that I should snorkel over the wreck of the *Georgette*; what a wondrous experience it would be I thought, to see the ship herself, just metres below me on the seabed. I signaled both of these plans in my application for candidacy, but the snorkeling experience never materialised, as the surf was always too dangerous when I went to Redgate Beach. I abandoned the face cream idea when I decided that this novel was not going to be Grace Bussell’s story; it would partially be Ellen Bussell’s story. Ellen would almost certainly have passed down the face cream recipe

to her daughters, but as the shape of the novel evolved, I found no place for face cream in Ellen's chapters.

As I learned more about the *Georgette* shipwreck, I found no need for contrived experimentation in order to gain insights into the past. Rather, I realised I must develop a sense of place for those locations in which the story unfolded. I could not go back into the past to witness the events or their agents, but I *could* go back to the places where they occurred; and in many instances, those places had changed little since the events of 1876. I made many circuits of the streets of Fremantle's heritage-protected west end where George Leake, the Dempsters and Annie Simpson would have passed time waiting for the ship to sail. I visited Quindalup and Busselton and coastal areas near Margaret River, walking parts of the Cape to Cape trail, looking out to sea where the *Georgette* would have passed. I located the crescent-shaped beach at Injidup where the crew and Dempsters had brought in the gig. I visited Ellenbrook Homestead, the Bussells' home prior to Wallcliffe, and walked the trail along the banks of a little brook to Meekadarabee Falls, my setting for the first encounter between Ellen Bussell and Sam Isaacs. With the kind cooperation of the owners of Wallcliffe House, I visited the old homestead and toured the house and grounds at Easter 2011. A mulberry tree and sprawling aloe plant were prominent in the garden at that time, and they both found their way into the novel. Tragically, in the latter part of that year, Wallcliffe was destroyed by fire.



*Injidup Beach*

The cost of chartering a boat to replicate the *Georgette's* sea voyage from Fremantle was prohibitive, so I used the technology of Google Earth to

view the Western Australian coastline from the perspective of the coastal steamer. By studying the Google Earth images, I was able to portray prominent landforms such as Leeuwin Sandpatch and distinctive rocks in my setting descriptions.

My field research also took me to South Australia, where I boarded and inspected the *Nelcebee* in Port Adelaide. This sail and steamship, owned by the South Australian Museum, is the only surviving vessel in the Southern Hemisphere of a similar type to the *Georgette*. I also travelled to Sydney to board a harbour cruise aboard the nineteenth century steamship *Waratah*. The volunteer engineers from the Sydney Heritage Fleet welcomed me into the engine room and stokehole and I experienced first-hand the sights, sounds and smells of a working steam engine similar to the *Georgette*'s.



The *Nelcebee*

I took photographs of the places I visited, and when I later went on to write the novel, I used those images as reference points. I cannot say that my field visits ‘transported’ me back to the past, but some of the smallest details from my observations helped to fuel my imagination later on. For instance, I visited the tiny courtroom at Busselton, now a museum, on a hot summer’s day. I imagined the oppressive conditions endured by the deponents and judiciary alike, and wrote into the scene – whether accurately or not – the window filled with the curious faces of onlookers who were obliged to watch the proceedings from the street outside.



*Busselton Museum*

I went to the Fremantle Arts Centre (formerly the Lunatic Asylum) on a wet, blustery winter's day when a nor'westerly gale was blasting the port city, and imagined poor Annie Simpson making her way up the hill to her job in the laundry, skirts and cloak flying wildly around her, hands tightly gripping the ties of her bonnet under her chin. One wet evening, as I drove my car out of the Fremantle Railway Station carpark, a white shape fluttered in front of the car's wheels on the gleaming bitumen – for an instant, to my tired eyes, it was nothing more than a crumple of fish-and-chip wrap. Then it flew up and bellowed a strident “caw-caw” into the driving torrent of rain. That vision of the transformative seagull became Captain Godfrey's hallucination on his way back from the pub in Bunbury.

## 6.0 Reflexive Practice

The exegesis and novel, of which this thesis is comprised, both address the central research question: “How can a writer of historical fiction ethically negotiate the divide between fact and imagination?” For the purposes of addressing this question, I have used the following definition of ‘ethical’ from the Macquarie Dictionary: “in accordance with the rules or standards for right conduct or practice, especially the standards of a profession: *it is not considered ethical for doctors to advertise.*” (Macquarie Dictionary Online) In applying this definition to the research question, I am able to further enunciate the problem in this manner: “What rules or standards of conduct or practice should I adopt to guide me through the uncertainties and responsibilities of making authorial decisions based on absent or conflicting information about the past?”

I have segmented these authorial decisions into two areas of literary representation: 1) representation of events and 2) representation of people. In this chapter I will analyse how my decisions were influenced by my readings into historiographical theory, my review of contemporary Australian and Canadian historical fiction, and my bibliographic, primary and field research into the events surrounding the wreck of the *Georgette*.

### 6.1 Representation of events in the novel

On hearing about my project to write an historical novel about the *Georgette*, several people asked me why I did not simply write a factual history. They suggested that a factual history would be more credible and authoritative than a novel. I wondered briefly about this myself, and thought that a scholarly book about the event would be a splendid idea, and it would be a book that I would very much like to read. I believed that an academic historian, particularly one with a special interest in maritime heritage, could write a fascinating analytical history about this event. If an historian were to take on this project, he or she may well arrive at different conclusions than mine. But I never wavered from my original idea of writing a fictional history. The *Georgette* was my ‘Ancient Mariner’ story (Atwood, *In Search of Alias Grace* 38). The tale, as I first heard of it, was enthralling; and even as the mythic part of the tale began to disintegrate upon my scrutiny, alternative

accounts – equally enthralling but more plausibly so – began to appear in the historical field. The more clues I uncovered about the shipwreck, the more I understood that my project was not about a ship taking on water and sinking, but about the making of myths and why human beings are compelled to do so. Elaborating on what she calls ‘Ancient Mariner’ stories, Margaret Atwood says that such tales are not

about his or that slice of the past, or this or that political or social event, or this or that city or country or nationality, although, of course, these may enter into it, and often do. They are about human nature, which usually means they are about pride, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, gluttony and anger. They are about truth and lies, and disguises and revelations; they are about crime and punishment; they are about love and forgiveness and long-suffering and charity, they are about sin and sometimes even redemption (*In Search of* 39).

Atwood’s words resonated with what I considered to be the underlying subtexts of the *Georgette* story: the ship’s parlous state was likely a result of sloth or avarice, or both. The aftermath of the disaster was a web of lies and distortion, scape goating and condemnation; and redemption came to the innocent and the culpable in various and sometimes unlikely guises.

While Atwood’s philosophy helped to validate my decision to write the story as an historical novel, so did my insights gained from the theories of Hayden White, summarised in Chapter 4. White challenges the traditional view that history is a forensic discipline. Representations of history, he asserts, are a product of language, and postmodern history writing employs similar tropes and literary devices used by fiction writers.

Viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of the novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of ‘reality’. The novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say

by figurative techniques, rather than directly, which is to say, by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extratextual domain of occurrence or happening, as the historian claims to do. But the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less ‘real’ than that referred to by the historian (*Fictions of Factual Representation* 122).

Hayden White has provided me with the philosophical and theoretical scaffolding to support my decision to tell the *Georgette* story in a fictional form. If there is, as White avers, a growing *rapprochement* between factual and fictional history, then as an historical novelist I can play a role in revisioning the past. In order to do so, I have addressed a number of difficult questions: Have the purportedly heroic actions of a beautiful white girl of privileged class been embroidered by colonial attitudes toward class, gender, race and ethnicity? On what basis should I adjudicate between differing versions of events? Would I cause damage in proposing an alternative account of the *Georgette* rescue? The thought of potentially discrediting one of Western Australia’s most enduring legends (and perhaps exposing unsung heroes and villains along the way) has carried a burden of responsibility.

The mythical part of the *Georgette* event – the aspect of the tale that, in the public mind, seems to have eclipsed all other dimensions – is the horseback rescue on Redgate Beach. As I discovered evidence to support an alternative version of the rescue, I made a number of fundamental decisions about how I would represent this event. While in *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood never made an unequivocal representation about Grace Marks’s innocence or guilt (the available evidence was never conclusive either way) I decided that for my story, I *could* justify a firm stance. I chose, as Atwood would have done, to accept the most believable version.

...the witnesses – even the eye-witnesses, even at the trial itself – could not agree; but then, how is this different from most trials? For instance, one says the Kinnear house was left in great disarray by the criminals, another says it was tidy and it was not realized at first that anything had been taken.

Confronted with such discrepancies, I tried to deduce which account was the most plausible (*In Search of 33*).

I have deduced that the accounts of George Leake and James Lambe are the most plausible; not only because each observer concurs with the other, but because both were eyewitnesses from the same vantage point and above all, because George Leake's first testimony of the landing of passengers from the *Georgette* was written soon after the event, and unselfconsciously, as part of a rambling missive to his sister, making only a passing reference to the appearance of Grace Bussell on the beach. The following August, in a letter to the Colonial Secretary, his tone was peevish; he was irritated by the hyperbole about Grace's role in the rescue. However, Leake's willingness to note Grace's "pluck and readiness" (Leake) in his latter to Clay does seem inconsistent with any bonding patriarchal bias against acknowledging a female rescuer. From my investigations, Leake had no apparent reason to undermine the reputation of Grace Bussell – quite the contrary, as the Leakes and the Bussells were ostensibly on cordial terms in the colony – so I have concluded that he, an apparently rational, intelligent and observant young law student, should be a reliable witness. The testimony of the third eyewitness, Thomas Connor, contradicted that of Leake and Lambe, and in performing my deductions I perceived possible ulterior motives on Connor's part that may have induced him to provide a hagiographic account of Grace Bussell's actions. I will elaborate on my interpretation of Thomas Connor in the next section.

In the face of conflicting source material, I have drawn my own conclusions about a number of other aspects of the *Georgette* story – not only the Redgate Beach rescue, but also the matters of culpability (I believe, for example, that the vilified William Dundee was a scapegoat); and the timing of the suspected violent loading of timber at Bunbury (I believe it took place two weeks earlier than stated in the popular accounts). Some of my conclusions may prove to be controversial, but I have made it part of my ethical scaffolding to weigh up the evidence and take a stand based on my best judgement, advised in some instances by the learned maritime historians I have met along the way.

Like many works of historical fiction, this novel draws attention to the elusory nature of the past and the relativism of those materials that form our record of the past. However, in the case of the *Georgette* story, I have considered my evidence firm enough to allow me to draw conclusions, and I have substantiated my grounds for making those conclusions in an Author's Note that appears at the end of the novel. Where appropriate in that Author's Note, I quote directly from, or cite the sources on which I have relied in coming to those conclusions. In adopting an alternative representation of the *Georgette* incident, I have determined that some of the literary devices associated with the sub-genre of historiographic metafiction, summarised in 3.3, would serve the narrative well. One of these devices is the use of different character voices and viewpoints to tell a story. This device helps to counter the problems of partiality and unreliability in historical sources and "emphasizes rather than suppresses the multiplicity of viewpoints and the interpretive and narrative strategies involved in constructing a plausible story about historical events, rather than unilaterally conveying an authoritative historical account to be passively consumed" (Wylie, *Speaking*, Kindle location 458).

As discussed in 4.0, three of the four historical novels reviewed in this thesis – *Wanting*, *Alias Grace* and *The Englishman's Boy* – employ multiple narrative viewpoints and voices; although in contrast with "Cruel Capes", the contrapuntal focalisations of those novels generally transcend larger spans of time (and in the case of *Wanting*, a larger span of geographical distance, between Australia and England). The majority of narrative of "Cruel Capes", which is focalised through four characters, unfolds over several days in late November/early December 1876, with some analepses occurring in the sequences focalised through Ellen Bussell and Annie Simpson. The other two viewpoints are those of George Leake and Captain John Godfrey. In some small sections, where a scene takes place in the absence of any of the four narrators, I have changed the narrative to the third person omniscient voice. Using the free indirect style of narration, I have attempted to represent the characters through the lens of their social and economic status in the story; for example, George Leake (who later went on to become a lawyer, Attorney General and Premier of Western Australia) represents a privileged, centrist

viewpoint in the novel. Leake is a member of the Perth establishment; he is a reluctant cabin passenger, a rational eyewitness, a well-connected evacuee from the ship who is succoured by the Bussells ahead of the women and children. His voice carries a cool detachment – even in the most fraught of circumstances, maintaining ‘face’ is at the front of his mind.

Leake made an embarrassing stumble in the soft sand. As he struggled to get up from his knees, a small hand appeared in front of his face, the hand of the girl. Not wanting to be churlish, he accepted the hand; her grip was firm, the skin of her hand cold, the inside of her forefinger lined with a ridge of callous. Leake’s sense of deportment made him release the hand quickly. His voice came out in a fragmented crackle, was scattered by the onshore wind.

“Thank you Miss, it is very good of you to help us. How did you know we were in difficulty?”

“Sam was riding up on the cliffs and saw the ship coming in. He rode to the homestead to get help. We arrived as quickly as we could.”

“Which homestead?”

“Wallcliffe.”

“Ah. Mr Alfred Bussell’s property.”

“Yes, you know of us?”

“Of course. And which of the daughters are you?”

“Grace.” (“Cruel Capes” 191)

Ellen Bussell grew up in the primeval wilderness of the South West; a colonial native, she is one of the first children of landed settlers to be born in the colony. She has married into a gentrified settler family, but is most at home among the simplicity of the bush. Several times bereaved by the deaths of her infants, Ellen frets about the surviving members of her family. She dies about six weeks after the *Georgette* disaster; some reports attributing her fatal illness to the stress of looking after the survivors at Wallcliffe. Ellen Bussell is one of the ‘unsung many’ (Hutcheon, *Politics* 63) of this tale.

Darkness cloaked the room. The pain went blessedly blunt, the room blessedly quiet. Ellen dreamed chaotically, dreamed

of strangers in her house, cows going unmilked, the baby fretting in the arms of Lucy, trying to escape, straining toward her mother who had no strength to hold her any more. Several more times Ellen felt the clanking of cold metal inside her mouth followed by a bitter taste. When that was gone she felt a warm syrupy glow flowing through her body, like liquid butterscotch.

When the early light brought the room back into view, the first thing Ellen saw was a little pointed, anxious-eyed, red face peering down at her. A small hand cupped her own. Ellen could feel the roughness of a callous along the inside of its finger. A rider's finger.

She said to Grace, 'Your face looks very flushed, my child'. And that was all she could say before her eyelids dropped. Then she slipped back into her dreaming. She saw her darling Grace galloping Shiner along the clifftop toward Wallcliffe. Thank heaven, Grace was almost home. It was time to stop worrying. ("Cruel Capes" 267).

In the above excerpt, I have incorporated a direct quote: "Your face looks very flushed, my child" (Bussell Family Papers) from the diary of Fanny Bussell, Ellen's daughter. Fanny kept a bedside vigil and recorded her mother's final anguished hours on 16 January 1877. Those words were reported by Fanny as being Ellen's last before she died. They speak to the persona of Ellen that I had assembled into my notes, a portrait of a plain-speaking, unpretentious woman compiled from clues found in Bussell family biographies, diaries and correspondence. I found, as Penny Russell reported, that the practice of writing Ellen's character from fragments helped to release my "historical intuition" (113). The fragments began to combine into the persona of a woman who I could imagine, to her dying breath, fretting about her children and finding peace only when they were safe at home. The placement of this piece of 'authentic' dialogue "Your face looks very flushed, my child", is a metafictional device that underscores the 'factuality and historicity' (*Hutcheon*, *Politics* 82) of the narrative.

Annie Simpson represents the poor and marginalised; she is a young mother travelling alone on a voyage to start a new life that promises to be as grim as the one she has left. An endearing quality of Annie Simpson is her humour and indefatigable spirit under the most harrowing of ordeals. As with Ellen Bussell, I have juxtaposed small fragments of Annie's own words, sourced from her letters, amongst invented narrative. For example, in the following passage, a sentence from one of Annie's letters is placed verbatim in the scene in which she meets Gaven McGregor, forming part of her internal dialogue: "*I must look like one of those witches one reads about*" (Simpson). Also in this diary passage is a reference to her sticking her tongue out at Gaven McGregor after he hoists her onto a horse. Her letter expresses embarrassment for her disheveled state in front of a strange gentleman, and the tongue gesture is Annie's way of deflecting the embarrassment and saving her dignity.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Annie was hoisted onto a horse by a Mr McGregor of Quindalup, and for the second time she felt self-conscious about her appearance. *I must look like one of those witches one reads about*, she told herself. *And Henry – what a grubby little urchin he is, still in the same dress he was wearing when we were wrecked.*

Her shoeless, stockingless limbs dangled down the side of the horse, in full view of Gaven McGregor. Annie tried to tug her dress downward to cover her legs, but the brittle, salt-stiffened material tore away, leaving her holding a ragged scrap of the dress in her hand. Mr McGregor's eyes crinkled at the corners, just as his father's had done the day before. There was no way to keep her dignity, nothing to do but make a joke of it. She made a face at him – a mock-stern face, she hoped, as if to say, *Do not laugh at me. I am a poor survivor of a shipwreck.*

Gaven McGregor laughed, and Annie stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed even harder. And then Annie laughed. There was no reason not to. Life was sweet again ("Cruel Capes" 218).

Finally, Captain John Godfrey represents the middle class of the Swan River Colony. He is a disillusioned mariner from England who has accepted a 'poisoned chalice' to become the skipper of a poorly-maintained ship that no longer meets the requirements of the fast-growing colony. Godfrey becomes the vortex of a maelstrom of accusations, lies and cover-ups; he is at once an accused and an accuser:

Godfrey looked with contempt at the co-convicted Dundee. To think that this ineffectual mariner, only new to his ship the day before it was wrecked, could bring him down, cost him his ship, his career, the respect of his family, the patronage of his wife's mother. He wished he'd never laid eyes on the man, never let him on his ship. What was that running down Dundee's pudgy pink face? Tears? He would have more reason to blubber if Godfrey ever encountered him in a dark laneway.

With the inquiry concluded, the court resumed its usual business, hearing cases of stealing, assault, breaches of tickets-of-leave, drunkenness, roguery and vagabondage. Godfrey languished in the bar of the Ship Inn while he waited for a vessel to take him back to Fremantle. He considered his options, what work he might find during the suspension of his certificate, and toyed with the thought of joining a windjammer out of Port Adelaide. The grain trade was always short of men, and masters of ships on the clipper route to Europe could not afford to be discerning about certificates. He would settle for mate, or even second, so long as the officers' rum ration was a pint a day and undiluted.

And then, when his certificate was returned, he would come back to the colony, chastened but not reviled, for he had heard undercurrents of public opinion, whispers in the streets of Busselton to say that he, John Godfrey, had been made a scapegoat for the shortcomings of the ship, the inefficiencies of the engineers; that any other competent skipper would have taken the same actions; that he had acted with valour under the most harrowing of circumstances. ("Cruel Capes" 263).

By focalising the narrative through four characters, I have striven to achieve a “dialogically heterogeneous” (*Speculative Fictions* 27) work that will “emerge not from insisting on an objective and unified discourse but by permitting – indeed stressing – the interplay between different perspectives, different voices, different genres, and different texts” (30). With the juxtaposition of these different perspectives in the novel, an intertextual mosaic of narrative voices is established, foregrounding the socioeconomic, political and gender paradigms of the late-nineteenth-century colonial Western Australia.

Within this mosaic I have placed intertexts and paratexts from the historical record as metafictional devices aimed at drawing attention to the historicity of the novel. The courtroom scenes contain intertextual traces from the transcript into the inquiry into the wreck of the ship. Even 150 years after the incident, John Dewar’s statement in support of Captain Godfrey, taken directly from the inquiry transcript, seems patently sycophantic: “No Captain could have done better. You did all you could do” (“Cruel Capes” 242). The statement is brief, but inscribed within these few words is the suggestion of collusion amongst the accused. In quoting Dewar directly from the transcript, I have self-reflexively drawn attention to the epistemological and ontological problems of interpreting archival texts that contain undercurrents of fear, blame, self-interest or deceit.

Linda Hutcheon articulates the history writer’s problem in making a determination of ‘fact’ when historical narratives are obscured by the passage of time and the ambivalent recollections of the narrators. “History’s meaning lies not in ‘what hurts’ so much as in ‘what we say once hurt’ – for we are both irremediably distanced by time and yet determined to grant meaning to that real pain of others (and ourselves)” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 278).

I have placed epigraphs from historical records at the head of certain chapters; direct quotes from the inquiry transcript, stating the charges laid and declarations of guilt and innocence, are a means to link the fictive elements of the work to the documentary evidence on which it is founded. The letters of Leake, Connor and Lambe are quoted verbatim in the same chapter in which Leake is responding to the Colonial Secretary’s request for his account of the rescue. This juxtaposition of these congruent and conflicting accounts elides

the subjectivity of observation and the potential for bias to subvert the veracity of eyewitness reports. In several instances I have invented texts on behalf of real, but passive characters from the novel: a letter to Alfred Bussell from Captain John Molloy, a hegemonic figure in Western Australian history, who reportedly had employed Sam Isaacs as a stockboy. The letter is not only an expedient device for conveying the backstory of the young Sam Isaacs; it is also an instrument for contextualising the social and racial paradigms of the colony. Molloy's homily to Bussell laments the deteriorating morals and lawlessness brought about by the freeing up of convicts, and the chaos of feuding tribes of Aborigines in the district.

I have also invented a eulogy for Annie Simpson, delivered by her son Henry at her funeral in 1934 in St Paul, Minnesota, where she spent most of her adult life after the failure of her marriage. The funeral scene, which takes place in the final chapter of the novel, carries the narrative forward more than half a century into the future. Of the four viewpoint characters, Annie's is the only one whose story continues beyond 1877; her life after the *Georgette* is focalised through the construct of the eulogy and the contextual third person narrative that precedes her son's address. The eulogy, in which Henry declares his mother a hero, is a discourse on the nature of heroism; it subverts the earlier and long-continuing veneration of Grace Bussell as a hero and proposes an alternative, humanistic view of heroism: in Annie Simpson's case, heroism was about a life lived with quiet courage, endurance and stoicism, without expectation of reward or recognition.

## 6.2 *Representation of characters in the novel*

In his lecture entitled "The Interpretation of Sources", R.G. Collingwood compared the cross-checking of historical sources to cross-examining a witness in court:

but it differs because in this case the witness, not being present before us, cannot be made to answer questions, and therefore we cannot test the coherence of his narrative in the most convincing of all possible ways. But we can do something similar. We can study our witness's character, situation, and attitude, and this enables us to establish a kind of personal

coefficient which gives at least a partial result when applied to his statements (*The Idea of History* 378).

In the previous section, I have explained why I have chosen to accept George Leake's account of the Redgate Beach rescue (and because it is congruent with Leake's, the account of James Lambe). I acknowledge that my decision is founded on the probability (but not the certainty) that Leake's reportage was accurate. I also acknowledge that Leake, who although on the face of things was a reliable and rational witness, may have "have fallen a victim to misinformation about his facts, misunderstanding of them, or a desire to suppress or distort what he knew or believed to be the truth" (261).

The opposing account of the rescue was supported by Thomas Connor, the only other eyewitness whose testimony I have found on the public record. My research into Connor's business affairs uncovered numerous incidents of petty litigiousness on his part – cases that were reported in the newspapers of the day. In the novel, I have made allusions to two of Connor's court cases. I have mediated those allusions through character dialogue in the early part of the voyage and the internal thoughts of George Leake in the penultimate chapter. Connor's legal disputes were vexatious; whether he was the plaintiff or the respondent, the resolution of the matter demanded adjudication between the conflicting testimonies of Connor and his opponent, and ultimately rested on the court's judgement of the litigants' honesty and character. There is a close parallel between the nature of judiciary's task in ruling on the Thomas Connor cases, and that of the writer of history, according to Collingwood: "It is absolutely necessary, when one comes across any piece of narrative which one is trying to use as historical material, to put the narrator in the witness box and to exert all one's ingenuity in order to shake his testimony" (378).

Placing Connor in the witness box, I have found an opportunistic man, an entrepreneur who, at the time of the *Georgette's* sinking, was under financial duress; his railway construction project in the north was failing and he had lost the colonial mail contract – his *raison d'être* for purchasing the *Georgette* and bringing her to Australia. He was prone to entering into spurious litigation to win relatively small amounts of money from associates – a clue that he was under financial pressure or an habitual usurer, or both.

Writing his sycophantic account of Grace Bussell's actions eight months after the wreck, he may have had reason to curry favour with the Bussell family – after all, John Bussell, brother of Alfred (Grace's father) was a member of the Legislative Assembly. The Assembly made major decisions about the colony's infrastructure and economic development. Connor was endeavouring to build up new enterprises in the colony and New Zealand. He had no reason to deny Grace Bussell her glory, and it may have been in his own commercial self-interest to validate the rumours and reports of her valorous conduct on Redgate Beach.

John Godfrey is a shadowy figure in history. The other three viewpoint characters have left behind textual traces in the form of letters and diaries. I have found no such records from Godfrey. The only enunciation of his voice comes from the pages of the inquiry transcript, in which, as an accused, he was questioned by the Board of Inquiry and also permitted to cross-examine other witnesses. Examining Godfrey's "character, situation, and attitude" (*The Idea of History* 378) I detected in the transcript an undercurrent of desperation and guilt in his tone. "If I have done anything wrong I hope the Court will look on it as an error of judgment and not through any negligence or fault" (CSR Vol 824/98). His sobriety while skippering the *Georgette* on her final voyage was twice called into question during the proceedings, including this part of the deposition by John Dewar: "At the time I was overhauling the Poop Pump with Capt. Godfrey – he was not, nor at any during the evening and night under the influence of Liquor – He had been first officer five or six months, and Master for about one month" (CSR Vol 824/116).

Of his character, it is clear from the inquiry transcript that Godfrey was trying to implicate William Dundee for having failed to slack the painter on time to avert the lifeboat's collision with the ship. Only John Dewar testified that there was sufficient time between Godfrey's calling the order to "slack the painter" and the collision to give Dundee enough time to obey the order. Other witnesses, and Dundee himself, stated that the order was given simultaneously with, or just a split second before, the collision. Offering his analysis of this fatal moment, Mr Ross Shardlow, a maritime heritage expert, viewed Godfrey's decision to place women and children into the lifeboat to

tow it behind the ship as a flawed one; and then, to haul the boat up to the ship in such heavy swells, to put two more women in while it was already overcrowded, was courting disaster. Moreover, the lifeboat became an unstoppable projectile so suddenly that no slacking of the rope would prevent it from crashing into the ship's side.

Of Godfrey's situation, I found little to go on, other than records of his family tree available on a genealogy website. He married Hannah Flynn, daughter of tailor John Flynn, who arrived in Fremantle in 1853. Godfrey died in 1882 after ostensibly "having jumped overboard in a fit of temporary insanity" (*The Inquirer & Commercial News*). A few months later, when his mother-in-law, Ellen Flynn, died, the Fremantle press published a fawning eulogy about her; it was evident that Mrs Flynn had been a wealthy and prominent matriarch in the port. From those small clues, I constructed a picture of a man who had married well, was newly promoted from first mate to Captain, was skippering the *Georgette* over a repetitive coastal route requiring two treacherous cape roundings each on the southward and northward routes, with a poorly-maintained ship and a constant turnover of crew. It would have been a tiresome occupation, not handsomely paid and with limited career prospects; and Godfrey had a growing family to support in Fremantle. I decided to portray him as an alcoholic, not only because of those innuendos and denials during the enquiry, but because drunkenness was rife in the colony and endemic on ships. His reported "fit of temporary insanity" that drove him to plunge from the deck of *The Laughing Wave* in the early hours of the morning is another clue that he may have battled with the bottle. The decision to portray Godfrey as a drunkard has caused me some ethical angst; as I had based this representation of Godfrey on inference and conjecture, I explained my reasons to readers in the Author's Note to the novel, while also acknowledging his composure and courage in the final hours of the voyage and evacuation of the ship at Redgate Beach.

A final note on the representation of Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs: early on in the planning of the novel I decided not to focalise the narrative through either of these characters. To have done so would have forced me to tell the tale through their eyes as the alleged agents of the heroic deed. In order to realise a novel that would hermeneutically revision the *Georgette*

legend, it was necessary to focalise the narrative through several divergent and discursively heterogeneous viewpoints; to de-heroicise and perhaps, re-heroicise this episode in Western Australian history.

## 7.0 Conclusions

For her reported role in the rescue of passengers from the shipwrecked *S.S. Georgette* on the first of December 1876, Grace Bussell has been regarded as Western Australia's first, and one of Australia's most celebrated heroines. She is also, vicariously, an international heroine by way of her induction into the honour roll of "Grace Darlings" – young female rescuers associated with various nineteenth century shipwrecks in waters off England, Australia and New Zealand. The myth of Grace Bussell is particularly stirring for its inclusion of horses in the rescue narrative, for its romantic image of a beautiful young woman riding her horse into treacherous surf to rescue drowning passengers from a stranded ship is inspirational material on which to base an historical novel.

When I first suspected that this popular Western Australian story may not be quite as it seemed, I knew that I had a dilemma on my hands. An exhaustive scholarly history of the events surrounding the *Georgette*'s demise had not been published. I would be the first writer, so far as I knew, to retell the story in a longer and more extensively researched format aimed at a more mature (not a juvenile) readership. Although the alternative eyewitness reports surrounding the Redgate Beach rescue – reports that contradicted or significantly underplayed Grace's actions – had long been in the public domain, no one had yet assembled the mismatching pieces into an integral narrative. I had found no detailed scholarly historical text that would set a precedent for an alternative version of the Grace Bussell legend. Moreover, I was intending to revision this story in the often contentious form of a fictional, not a factual, history.

Negotiating the ethical, epistemological and ontological problems of retelling the *Georgette* story, I have found guidance and validation from postmodern theories of historiography, in particular the theories of Hayden White who asserted that "the aim of the writer of the novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history" (*Fictions of Factual Representation* 122). It

is White's view that similar processes of invention and interpretation are common to the work of historians and novelists. Having explored the genre of historiographic metafiction and the philosophy of history embraced by its proponent Linda Hutcheon, I have deployed devices, such as intertextuality and multiple focalisations, for which this postmodern genre is renowned, in order to draw attention to the "unstable, contextual, relational and provisional" (*Politics* 64) qualities of historical texts and meanings, and to challenge what I believe are the dominant centrist and unitary representations of the events surrounding the *Georgette* incident. From R.G. Collingwood, I have embraced the idea of 'historical re-enactment': that is, the application of analytical, interpretive and inferential methods to shed light on the events and human subjects aligned to this famous historical episode.

From my review of four works of contemporary historical fiction: Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*, I have compared the ethical, epistemological and ontological approaches of those writers, and concluded that my own approach leans toward a more comprehensive level of historical research. Flanagan had declared himself "disinclined to research" (Random House); while Vanderhaeghe was careful to point out that his work was a novel and, as such, its creation did not entail "an appeal to evidence and the record" (Mouat). Grenville and Atwood, on the other hand, both completed extensive bibliographic and field research. Grenville's research methods extended to an empathetic approach, and she reported that this approach enabled her to "experience the past – as if it were happening here and now" (*Searching for the Secret River* 47). I have also adopted a thorough approach to historical research, but have not embraced the concept of applied empathy as part of my methodology.

In conclusion, I do not intend to portray my historical novel about the *Georgette* shipwreck as an 'authentic' account of what really happened on the 30<sup>th</sup> November and 1<sup>st</sup> December 1876. Nor do I pretend that my research was conducted with the rigorous analytical models applied by historians. However, I do hope that my novel will present an alternative perspective on this event and, along the way, will illuminate the deeds of a number of unsung

heroes and redress some omissions and anomalies perpetuated in previous retellings.

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