A HANDFUL OF HEROES... IMMIGRANTS TO QUEENSLAND IN THE 1850s AND 1860s

by Jennifer Harrison

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"Nation builders! They came to the everlasting glory of Queensland
A handful of workers seeking the start of a strong intent
A handful of heroes scattered to conquer a continent."

Following the 1848 voyage of the Artemisia, three vessels organized by Rev. John Dunmore Lang, the Fortitude, Chaseley, and Lima arrived in 1849. Whilst they came with the consent of the New South Wales government, they were considered a private venture and no accommodation was arranged on arrival nor was Lang subsidised in any way.

During this period four ships of 'exiles' — a euphemism for ticket-of-leave prisoners — terminated in Sydney and contributed to the northern population. The Hashemy arrived in Sydney in June 1849 and 49 passengers were redirected to Moreton Bay. Thirty-two exiles from the Havering came north and many were gaoled soon after their arrival. Thirty-seven from the Adelaide and 10 from the Randolph also settled around Moreton Bay.

The Mount Stuart Elphinstone arrived at Moreton Bay with 225 English and Irish convicts and guard. Although they received their tickets immediately, many rampaged through the streets of Brisbane and Ipswich. Drunkeness, brawling and assaults resulted in several appearances before the courts within the first four days. Finally in May 1850, the Bangalore carrying 292 male convicts (together with 104 free men, women and children) discharged the last group of convicts to be transported to Moreton Bay.

Police Magistrate, Captain John Wickham, considered the region could sustain three ships each year just to satisfy the demand for labour. The next vessel to arrive in Moreton Bay under official control was the Emigrant in 1850. This voyage did nothing to enhance Brisbane's reputation as a healthy destination. The ship's previous cargo had been guano and it was to this that the outbreak of typhus was attributed. The ship's surgeon, Dr Mitchell, offered care and consolation until he finally succumbed himself. At Moreton Bay, young Dr Ballow assumed responsibility for the passengers in isolation at Dunwich until the epidemic took his life as well.
The gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria resulted in the suspension of immigration into the southern ports. Lord Grey directed the Colonial Land and Emigration Office to despatch settlers to Moreton Bay, and the Maria, Argyle, Meridian and Rajahgopaul were despatched between 5 March and 5 May 1852. According to Moreton Bay Courier in September 1853, George Leslie and Louis Hope, both landowners in the Brisbane district, were in London in 1852, lobbying the British Land and Emigration Commissioners to increase the number of emigrant ships to Moreton Bay to one per month.

In reply to criticism that over 110 souls had remained in the Immigration Depot in Brisbane in November 1852 for lack of employment opportunities, Hope pointed out that about half of these were children under the age of ten. The Commissioners, he maintained, were not sending the right workers. The area required single men or young married couples. The passengers on the Agricola proved his point: out of 248 migrants, there were three single men and 110 children, all but 18 of whom were less than ten years old.

In addition to recruitment of immigrants from England, Scotland and Ireland, the New South Wales government had an agent in Europe who organized sailings from Hamburg and Bremen.

At the end of 1859, the colony of Queensland was proclaimed and was responsible for its own immigration policy. The first ship commissioned by the new government was the wooden vessel, the Montmorency, which sailed from Plymouth on 7 July 1860 and arrived in Moreton Bay on 16 October in 1860.

This was the beginning of a new era in immigration, most of the policy being enacted by Henry Jordan who on 9 October 1860 became Emigration Officer in London for the colony. According to Jordan, his job involved educating and informing the British as much as actual recruitment. "They did not know the name of the Colony." Jordan successfully negotiated an arrangement with Baines and Company to run a monthly service providing he guaranteed sufficient paying passengers by an ambitious lecture and publicity programme. Henry Jordan’s lecture circuit took him throughout England and Scotland. The Isle of Wight Times stated on 22 February 1865: “There is nothing like claptrap about Mr Jordan’s lectures: they are as solid as they are brilliant; they are eminently practical and deservedly popular”.

In a report to the Colonial Secretary, Jordan stated that between 9 January 1861 and 31 December 1866, he had delivered 192 lectures, addressed an estimated 161,200 people and despatched 85 ships carrying 35,725 persons. The mortality rate on the voyages was 2.3 per cent. Jordan’s career in London was marked by frustrations which were misunderstood by the government in Queensland. In 1863 he hastened home to explain his actions and faced an enquiry in which
he was exonerated. He returned to London in 1864 with a new Immigration Act as Queensland’s first Agent-General.6

One of Jordan’s most successful ventures was his work in association with several relief centres in Britain to assist with the immigration of distressed cotton operatives. The initiative came from a group in Brisbane in October 1862 who empowered Jordan to act as almoner of the charity. The Brisbane meeting had “heard with unfeigned sorrow of the distress now prevailing in the manufacturing districts of Great Britain consequent upon a deficiency in the supply of cotton and hereby desires to express and feeling of sympathy and condolence on the part of the colonists of Queensland with their suffering fellow countrymen at home.”7 Under the scheme organized by Jordan, 1376 adults were sent from Great Britain to Queensland with free or assisted passages provided by the Queensland government. They sailed on ships such as the Hannah More, Light Brigade, Young Australia, Fiery Star and Wansfell. All left England between 14 January and 19 September 1863 with eight of the sailings originating in Liverpool.

Henry Jordan was recalled in 1866 when the new Colony was experiencing a severe financial crisis and immigration was suspended until a new Agent-General was appointed in 1869. Thousands more immigrants followed countrymen in the 1870s and 1880s and Queensland became the destination for more immigrants than anywhere else in Australia. The New South Wales commissioners and Henry Jordan laid the foundations for the programme which distributed the population throughout the whole colony.

NOTES

1. Eulogy to the immigrants of the Fortitude, Brisbane Courier 9 August 1924.
3. Moreton Bay Courier, Sep 1852. (Actual date difficult to read.)
4. Henry Jordan: Minutes of evidence to Select Committee to inquire into the resignation and return of the Emigration Commissioner (27 May 1864), Queensland Votes and Proceedings, 1864, 988.
5. QSA Colonial Secretary’s Papers, COL/190, 1145.