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This dataset makes available online data for the years 1852-1867 from the book *Ships' deserters, 1852-1900 including stragglers, strays and absentees from H.M. ships* compiled by Jim Melton and published in Sydney by Library of Australian History in 1986.

The book includes extracts from notices alerting the public to deserters from ships in the port of Sydney between 1852 and 1900, published in the *New South Wales Government Gazette* and the *New South Wales Police Gazette* transcribed by Jim Melton from microfilm copies available in the 1980s. These publications are now available on the National Library of Australia's Trove website at this link:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

The data transcribed for 6,101 deserters for the years 1852-1867 derives from newspaper notices calling for information about crewmen who had deserted from ships in the port of Sydney, offering a reward in many instances. They usually record the name and rank of the crewman, the ship, and a description, usually the height, complexion, eye and hair colour and bodily marks, along with publication and date. Birthplace and ethnicity or nationality are sometimes mentioned. This period coincided with a series of gold rushes in eastern Australia which encouraged many seamen to desert in order to try their luck on the Australian goldfields. Many stayed on as permanent immigrants.

Transcript of introductory pages from *Ships' deserters, 1852-1900 including stragglers, strays and absentees from H.M. ships* by Jim Melton, published in Sydney by Library of Australian History, 1986:

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I would like to acknowledge three institutions for permitting me to utilise some of the wonderful resources they are committed to protecting. Firstly, the Michael Birt Library, University of Wollongong, where I was able to spend countless hours transcribing the material from the *New South Wales Government Gazette*, in

comfort and total independence. I thank the staff of the New South Wales Archives Office for meeting all my requests with their customary efficiency and also the friendly and helpful staff of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales where much of the material was obtained. I owe a special gratitude to Mr John Shipp, Archivist, Michael Birt Library, for his invaluable help on at least two occasions. My fullest thanks are directed to Jean Telford, who was a constant encouragement in this undertaking, and of great practical help at many points — especially with indexing, and in settling the final form of the Ethnic Table. Finally, I want to dedicate this volume to my friend, John Telford, who, for much of the time this work was in preparation, has been attempting to achieve a recovery from the nearly fatal injuries he received in that endless war on our roads.

Bibliography

The information contained in the first part of this book, from January 31, 1852 to March 5, 1862, was taken from the original *New South Wales Government Gazette* in the Michael Birt Library, University of Wollongong ref: S328.994405/1. The remainder of the material was drawn from originals of the *New South Wales Police Gazette* in the Archives Office of New South Wales ref: 1/3197, and in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, ref: Q343.99105/1. The following histories were referred to to assist in some points in the Introduction: Blainey, G. *The Tyranny of Distance*, Sun Books (1966) which was particularly helpful on the effect of the gold rush on shipping; Clark, C.M.H. *A Short History of Australia*, Mentor Books (1969); Pike, D. *Australia: The Quiet Continent*, Cambridge University Press (1966); Shaw, A.G.L. *The Story of Australia*, Faber (1972) were of assistance in relating the fluctuations in the number of desertions to the historical and economic background.

Introduction

The following pages contain approximately 10,000 notified desertions, and other absences by seamen, which occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century throughout the Australasian colonies. Reports of deserting seamen made a sudden appearance, in the *New South Wales Government Gazette* early in February, 1852. No announcement preceded these first notices, nor was any reason for their appearance given. We can fairly confidently surmise, however, that the phenomenon had become a major problem, and that the problem was caused by the discovery of gold in 1851 and the ensuing rush to the fields.

The great exodus to the goldfields stripped the ports of many seamen, as well as potential replacements, necessitating the preparation of warrants for the arrest and return of the deserters themselves. This recourse, alas, appears to have met with little success in spite of the great size of many of the rewards being offered. After, the gold rush desertions continued to be reported, at a moderate to low rate, for the remainder of the century. In fact half of all the desertions in this volume had occurred by the end of 1860. With the exceptions of two prominent nodes (in the 1870's, and 1880's) - one of which was, again, due to the discovery of gold, the number of desertions did not again achieve the high figures of the gold rush era.

The Record

The notices within cover the period, 1852 to 1900, inclusive. These records were taken from the *New South Wales Government Gazette* (1852-1862), and the *New South Wales Police Gazette* which took over the role of reporting desertions, early in 1862. Most of the men and youths named were straight forward deserters, however, a small minority were variously described as Stragglers, Strays, and Absentees, or as being Absent Without Leave. Stragglers, Strays, and Absentees were from among the crew and personnel aboard Her Majesty's Ships, who, in the main, had failed to return in the required time, and might be found in the vicinity of the port. These terms were tentative, however, as the Naval authorities often added an alternative, higher reward, which would be paid if it could be shown that the straggler was in fact a deserter. A deserter, on the other hand, usually made straight for the interior, or some point far from the port of desertion. Seamen and personnel deserted from two main types of vessel — private, and Naval (Her Majesty's Ships, and foreign). Non-government vessels were the source of the great majority of deserters from the commencement of the notices, in 1852, until almost the end of 1857. Thereafter, deserters and stragglers from Her Majesty's Ships began to appear with some frequency; increasing, by steps, to almost entirely dominate the records, from June, 1864, until the end of the century. When the Gulgong goldfields were in full swing, in the early 1870's, a small increase in the number of desertions from non-government vessels occurred, but they did not overtake the departures from Naval vessels at any stage of the overall resurgence. One of the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon of desertion, in the last decades of the nineteenth-century, was the large number of Naval vessels that called at colonial ports (and lost crew through desertion). Approximately 114 of Her Majesty's ships made frequent appearances. Vessels belonging to the German, French, Austro-

Hungarian, United States, Italian, and Netherlands governments, all had the misfortune to lose crew members in the Australasian ports. Up to the middle of 1864, all desertions herein occurred in New South Wales. Most of them were in Port Jackson, but reports from Newcastle were frequent. Only a few were reported at other ports in New South Wales, such as Ballina, Eden, and Port Stephens. From June, 1864, notices of Victorian desertions began to appear and, one by one, all the remaining Australasian colonies — including New Zealand, Fiji, and even Port Darwin — began to feature in the notices. The last peak in the number of desertions was in the years 1880 to 1883. It appears to have been encouraged by a combination of a brief agricultural boom, and an unprecedented spate of railway building, which greatly enlarged employment opportunities in that period. In the severe economic depression of the 1890's, even the great gold finds in Western Australia caused no noticeable increase in the low rate of desertions during that decade.

The Deserters

Particulars

There is considerable variation in the amount and quality of information attached to deserters. In the first two years of these notices up to 50% of deserters are accompanied by no personal particulars whatsoever: only the name of the ship, the seaman's classification and, perhaps, a reward, follow the person's name. From 1854, however, most deserters are graced with a physical description, in addition to the abovementioned details. The description is usually a rather perfunctory one — describing the deserter's height, complexion, hair and eye colour, and obvious marks. A small proportion of notices also provide the deserter's nationality or race; but many apparently foreign names appear without any mention of their nationality. In spite of the absence of particulars of age and place of birth in these early records, sometimes some highly illuminating remark is added to a deserter's description, such as:- very active; has been used to riding in a circus; has a peculiar style of speech; scar on lip and forehead; tattooed with bracelet, small heart, and IS on left arm.

In general, information is more satisfactory if a deserter was from one of Her Majesty's Ships, as the details of age and place of birth were usually included. Such desertions from Her Majesty's Ships noticeably increased from the end of 1857. After the transfer of the notices to the *New South Wales Police Gazette*, early in 1862, even private vessels sometimes provided these details. From June,

1864, when almost all desertions were from Her Majesty's Ships, particulars of birthplace and age became very nearly the rule.

General Characteristics

The characteristics of deserters were very much as one might imagine. They were usually young — 17 to 25. Very few were older than 35 years of age, and men in their 40's and 50's were rare. One deserter was described as an "old man", and perhaps one or two were stated to be in their 60's. Most deserters were from the lower classifications, such as Ordinary seaman, Able seaman, Boy, or apprentice. A small minority, especially during the gold rush, were from higher ratings, such as Chief officer, 2nd mate, Quarter master, or were tradesmen, such as Ship's carpenter, or Sailmaker. Some of the last; plus the occasional (apparently excellent) Captain's cook, were evidently so prized, or essential, that rewards of up to £50 were offered. Like seamen of today, a very high proportion of the deserters bore tattoos, of all descriptions, including one with the rather philosophical, "I could be happy", on his breast. Many of these tattoos appear to have been done in ink by the seamen themselves, during their long confinements on board. Among the deserters from Her Majesty's Ships (which were invariably steam ships) were personnel not noted among deserters from private vessels, such as Engine Room Artificers, Qualified and Leading Signalmen, and Warrant Officer's Servant. There were also deserters from the Marines on board, including members of the Royal Marines Light Artillery, and the Royal Marines Light Infantry. Origins Most deserters appear to have been born in England — particularly in the southern counties, Devonshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Kent, and Middlesex, but also including a large contingent from Lancashire and Yorkshire. Irish (including Ulstermen) were the next most numerous; followed by the Scots. Germans composed the next largest group, with the Welsh some way behind. A whole gamut of nationalities, races, and ethnic groups make up the remainder — lead by the French and Dutch. It is often the case that a deserter (particularly a foreign deserter) cannot be located in the Index to Names — usually because his name was wrongly spelt, anglicized, or deliberately disguised. In those cases the Ethnic Table (pp528-534) could prove to be very helpful. Unfortunately, the nationalities of only about 4,000 of the deserters have been stated, or are readily discernable. About 3,000 of those were English. Therefore, the Table contains entries for a little over 1,000, non-English, deserters. Many foreign names do not have a corresponding entry in the Table because their nationality was not stated, and could not be confidently settled, for the lack of suitable evidence. First Time In The Colonies? In the great majority of cases a notice in this volume appears to mark the first attempt, by the

deserter, to settle in the colonies. Very few were born in the colonies (only 80, in all, were stated to have been). The remainder give every appearance of having enlisted overseas. Some, of course, had obviously visited before — as places the deserter frequented were sometimes named. Others had friends at some distance from the port (eg. at Parramatta), so they cannot have been strangers to the place. Yet others were evidently settlers of some years' standing, as wives and families were residents of the colony. Some used the voyage out as a means of rejoining family members who preceded them to the colony. I recall one such deserter from an Austro-Hungarian warship whose notice mentioned an uncle in George Street, Sydney, who owned a business.

Captures And Returns

Over the whole period of this record there are only about 430 reports of arrests, or voluntary returns (quite a few of whom were repeaters). Almost all of these returns and arrests occurred from 1870 onwards. Before 1870, very few were reported — perhaps as many as 15 only. I cannot tell whether this was because only 15 were recovered, or simply because arrests were not systematically reported before 1870.

Other Notices

In addition to notices which specifically refer to ships' deserters, I have included some notices relating to "Missing Friends", "Deserting Wives and Families", etc., in which actual reference is made to the subject's having deserted his ship, or there was a strong indication that this was the case. Among these notices are enquiries from shipping companies for missing crew, from friends of missing persons, from deserted wives, and one or two enquiries from foreign consuls made at the behest of families overseas.

Perspective

Before concluding, it should be pointed out that not every researcher looking for a possible ship deserter will find satisfaction in these pages. The 10,000 notices in this record (the majority in New South Wales) by no means include all deserters. Countless thousands who deserted in Victorian ports in the early 1850's, do not appear in these records. In the same period (1852-1900) over a million people migrated to the Australasian colonies. Of those million, perhaps 400,000 were adult, or adolescent males; so that, at best, only about 1:40 males arrived by desertion. Even this figure must somewhat exaggerate the importance

of desertion as a means of arrival, for it is likely that many times more seamen merely signed-off upon reaching the colonies.

Conclusion

I have not made a special study of deserters, or of maritime records, in preparing this material for publication. If I am better informed than some it is only because of my familiarity with the information I have now placed before you. Outside the orbit of these notices I can lay claim to no expertise at all about the subject. I have avoided changing the layout of the Material, as much as possible, from the form in which it appears in the sources. The changes I have made are mainly in setting out the information to save space, and to avoid repetition of standard headings, or statements attached to each deserter, where one suffices. Likewise, the long statement of conditions attached to many of the offers of rewards, have usually been abbreviated. Only a few of the most obvious spelling errors or archaisms have been corrected. The remainder (usually place-names), have been left as they stood; relying on the skills of the researcher to determine the correct form. Lastly, I very much hope that many people will find the information they have long sought in these pages — for it is to that end that I have laboured to put these fifty years of notices into one convenient volume.

Information Page prepared by Michael Flynn 2024 based on introductory pages from *Ships' deserters, 1852-1900 including stragglers, strays and absentees from H.M. ships* by Jim Melton (LAH, 1986).

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