



## 'Ready For a Cup of Tea'

The diary of Annie Amelia Duckles, sampled here by Barry York, provides an intriguing glimpse into the experience of English migrants to Australia in the first quarter of the 20th century

**O**f all the delights to be discovered by the historian researching in the National Library's special collections, none is as potentially enthralling as the diary. Diaries are often homely in appearance and fragmentary in nature; the good ones, however, are not only manifestly personal but also reflective of the wider social relations and attitudes of a given time.

With industrialisation and the extension of literacy during the late 19th century, a greater variety of people maintained diaries, including working-class people. The diaries of ordinary people are usually simply written and often serve the purpose, whether consciously or not, of helping the writer to deal with difficult life situations. At

their best, they are lively and detailed—and compelling to read.

All the above apply to the diary of Annie Amelia Duckles, which is held in the Library's Manuscript Collection. The diary covers the period of Annie's voyage to Australia as a 30-year-old emigrant from England on the steamer, RMS *Orsova*, in 1912. Travelling with her husband George and four-year-old daughter Florence, Annie, in her diary, details events on the voyage between 2 August, when the *Orsova* left Tilbury Dock, and 13 September, when it reached Sydney. The family spent one night in Sydney before travelling by train to their destination, Lithgow, on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

On 9 October 1912, Annie added several lines to the diary, with some initial reflections on Australian life. She was surprised to find that 'here it is quite English', despite 'a few different ways and words'. Her surprise was based on the fact that she 'didn't think there could be anything like England at the end of the voyage. after all those awful places in between'. She must have quickly met

above left:  
RMS *Orsova* 1950s  
coloured postcard; 8.7 x 13.8 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3703104

above right:  
Unknown photographer  
George, Annie and Florence Duckles  
in England. Photograph taken before  
their departure for Australia,  
August 1912  
Manuscript Collection, MS 644



above left:  
Unknown photographer  
*Zigzag Railway, New South Wales* [between 1870 and 1899]  
albumen photograph;  
14.4 x 20.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an23763175

above right:  
William A. Bayley  
*The Industrial Valley of Lithgow Looking West in 1939*  
b&w photograph; 8.8 x 14.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3703134

other English migrants for, as she noted, 'We never hear anyone say England always home or the old Country'. She expressed disappointment with the climate, which was too changeable and extreme for her liking and presumably very different to that of Yorkshire in the north of England, from where the family originated. Annie was from Hillam, a farming village in Yorkshire that bordered an extensive rural area and a coalfield. George was from Wakefield, a large coal mining town of many thousand inhabitants. They married and, it seems, settled at Monk Fryston, a quiet farming community of a few hundred people.

The Duckles emigrated at a time when the old stability of rural life was being torn asunder by the second Industrial Revolution. Railways provided an opportunity for mobility, though many rural people still expected to spend a lifetime in a single location. Lithgow was a rapidly growing industrial town of 8000, eagerly absorbing newly-arrived workers into steel production, coal mining, copper smelting, breweries, brick making and meat refrigeration. Many English miners went there in the late 19th century, the best known being Joseph Cook, who became Australia's Prime Minister in 1913–14. However, for Annie, who seems to have led a rural life, departure from the village meant a gigantic rupture with the past. The diary fascinates because it deals with the voyage: the bridge between past and future.

The diary as an object also tells a story. It is a tattered, ink-stained school exercise book. From its appearance, we know at once that the Duckles were not wealthy

people. The writing paper is blue-lined, not embossed or edged, and the cover bears the manufacturer's title: 'British Exercise Book'. This was indeed a time of empire, when the adjective 'British' preceded many nouns. To Annie, as to many other ordinary people who do not realise that it is they who make history, the diary is nothing important. It is ostensibly written for a niece or nephew left behind in England, the result of a promise to do so. Marked 'Aunty Milly on her journey to Australia' (Duckles was known as Milly), this title is followed by the instruction, in the same handwriting, 'Burn this'.

Thank heavens, the instruction was not obeyed!

The handwriting is in pencil and is reasonably legible. The grammar and spelling are basically sound, notwithstanding some obvious mistakes that indicate the limits of the writer's formal education.

The diary begins on Friday 2 August, with a 10-hour train trip from Burton Salmon station, Yorkshire, to St Pancras, London, and then to Tilbury. On the day of departure, we feel Annie's sadness: 'I expect you will have missed us today, especially at the afternoon cup of tea time'. Such are the small yet intimate aspects of life the migrant leaves behind. Departure was made all the more difficult by one of her last glimpses of the farming environment: the sun is 'shining lovely' and 'men were busy in the fields harvesting'. A good diary does more than supply information that can be obtained from other sources. It conveys unique emotional responses.

At St Pancras station, we meet others who are making the voyage. Ships could

carry hundreds of migrants at a time—the *Orsova* could accommodate more than a thousand—and the passengers all converged on the docks at the same time. At St Pancras, Annie observes how they are joined by many others: 'old people and young ones and babies galore. some look only a few weeks old'.

The day has been an exhausting one and as soon as the Duckles board the ship and find their cabin—'about the size of the wardrobe in your spare bedroom'—they fall asleep. On waking, later in the afternoon, they are 'ready for a cup of tea'. How English!

The boat leaves at nightfall and, with Dover their last sight of home, Annie writes: 'If only you were with us or we were not going so far from you'. The voyage commences smoothly; indeed, only the 'noise of the water and the vibration of the boat' make her aware that they are moving. But things quickly turn bad.

Their first night on the boat is a disaster. The sea has turned cold and rough and there are 'undesirable visitors'—bugs—in their beds. Florence falls ill, and then George and Annie. They cannot eat for two days. It leaves Annie feeling 'nervous towards evening' and longing to be on land. It is so awful that Annie doubts she will ever 'face the water again'. The first week at sea gets them to Italy but it 'seems ages' and is 'very monotonous nothing but water'.

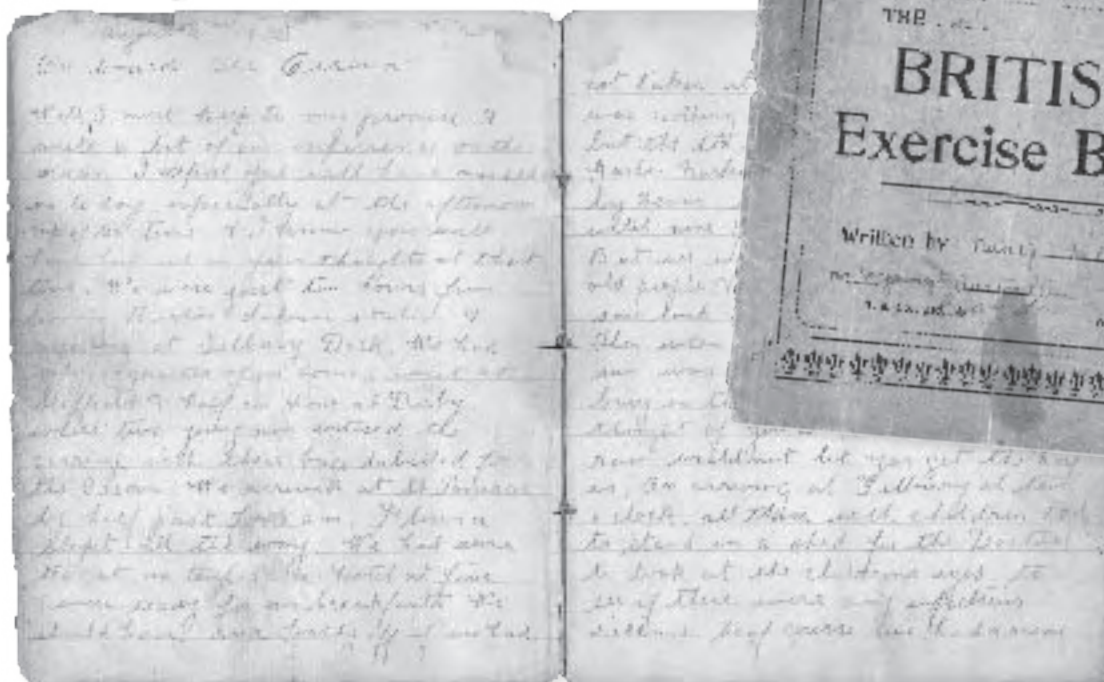
Over the six-week voyage, conditions vary—there are 'lovely sunny mornings', sightings of lighthouses, whales and

Mount Vesuvius. Annie is impressed by the 'magnificent' Suez Canal and she describes ports in which 'natives' row up to the boat to sell baskets of fruit, postcards, shawls and 'thin underclothing'. The fruit is vital, as the meals provided on the voyage are not nutritious. Annie complains that 'it is all meat here, every meal, I think we should go mad if we saw a nice dish of lettuce or anything green'. And there are rough seas and sickness, lack of sleep, monotony, breezeless humid days, thunder and lightning and monsoons. Florence develops a very bad cold as well as the notorious 'prickly heat' rash. Other children faint, and an elderly passenger goes into a coma. The voyage, it must be remembered, is half way around the world: 20 000 kilometres across the English Channel, through the Mediterranean Sea, Suez Canal, Red Sea and Indian Ocean, along the Australian Bight and half way up the east coast.

After two weeks, 'we loose count of the time here [on the boat], we hardly know what day it is'. Three passengers have now died and there is an outbreak of chicken pox in the Second Class section. The affected child is quarantined near the Third Class deck, which raises Annie's ire. She describes it as an 'abominable shame' because most of the children on the voyage are in

below left:  
Pages from the diary of Annie Amelia Duckles, written on her voyage to Australia 1912  
Manuscript Collection, MS 644

below right:  
Cover of the diary of Annie Amelia Duckles, written on her voyage to Australia 1912  
Manuscript Collection, MS 644





Unknown photographer  
Florence, George and His Brother  
Fred Duckles in England 1950  
b&w photograph  
Manuscript Collection, MS 8546

the Third Class and endure badly crowded conditions. In First and Second Class, she observes, they have half the number of passengers and more than three times as much room. Some of the passengers form a committee to protest about the situation but the captain insists that his actions are lawful. Annie concludes from this experience that 'no good comes of complaining'.

At Naples and at Colombo, Annie disembarks because she is desperate to feel 'terra firma' again. But both places disappoint her. At Colombo she declines the opportunity to ride in a rickshaw because she 'pitied the runner too much, fancy having a man instead of a horse'. Everywhere, whether Italy or Ceylon, the local people are referred to as 'natives'.

After 10 days in the Indian Ocean, the next terra firma is Fremantle. Here the locals are not natives but 'all English'. It is 'a nice little place'. At Adelaide, she notes 'all sorts of wild flowers growing and rubber plants' and Melbourne she regards as 'a lovely place, I could have stayed there'.

The *Orsova's* date of arrival at Sydney—Friday 13 September—may have worried the superstitious but it is a joyous event: the end

of the voyage. Moreover, the harbour looks 'lovely' in the morning: 'Never before have we seen anything so lovely'.

*Postscript:*

*Annie Duckles' diary was given to the National Library in 1960 by Annie's husband. George was responding to a clipping from the Yorkshire Post—forwarded to him by Annie's niece in Leeds, Muriel Johnson—that carried an appeal by the Library's Liaison Officer in London, F.W. Torrington, for letters sent home by British emigrants. In 1981, Muriel Johnson wrote to the Library explaining that the diary had been written for her mother and sent to England after Annie reached Sydney. The diary had been returned to Annie in 1946. (Thanks to Graeme Powell for this information.)*

*Annie Duckles (née Dixon) died in 1949, George in 1977 and Florence in 1991. They resided at Narrabeen, Sydney, at the time of their deaths.*

BARRY YORK is a researcher, writer and historian. His email address is: [garocon@pcug.org.au](mailto:garocon@pcug.org.au)