



# The Corrugated Iron House

*The drawings and letters of Jane Dorothea Cannan*

Crescy Cannan tells the story of her great-great-grandparents' voyage to Australia and their four years of living in Melbourne

A sketch, *'Our' House*, held by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, depicts a tiny two-windowed corrugated iron cottage. It stands, starkly, on cleared and fenced ground, with small wooden houses nearby and a background of trees. There are no people to be seen and no smoke curling from the chimney but the door is half open, awaiting its first occupants. Another sketch, also held by the Society, shows the back of the house and a sailing ship on the distant sea.

Jane Dorothea Cannan drew her house in 1853. It had been exported from England to Melbourne by Morewood and Rogers, manufacturers of galvanised iron buildings. Her husband David Alexander Cannan was the firm's representative. The inverted commas in Jane's title on the sketch indicate that the house was the firm's; nevertheless, the couple became very fond of it.

We know the story of this couple from two collections of their letters to relatives. One is in the National Library of Australia, describing their voyage to Australia and their experiences there; the other is at Oxford University in England and covers the earlier and later parts of their lives. And some of the story lies in Jane's drawings of which the Library holds about 20.

Who were Jane and David Cannan? Both had lost their fathers in childhood and both were the poor relations of more prosperous families. They were well educated and, although excited by the marvels of the time, such as the great cotton mills in Manchester, they were concerned about the hardships endured by the poorer classes. Both were also outsiders. Jane was born Jane Dorothea Claude in 1822 in Liverpool, England. The Claudes were Huguenots, Protestants who had fled religious persecution in France and settled in Berlin, from where Jane's parents migrated to Liverpool. The Cannans were Scots from Galloway. David and his brothers and sisters found work in and around Manchester through family connections, the boys in business and the girls as governesses.

Jane Dorothea Cannan (1823–1861)  
*'Our' House* 1853  
pencil  
Courtesy Royal Historical Society of Victoria



above:  
Thomas Rowlandson  
(1756–1827)  
*Farewell, Emigrants Leaving  
England for Australia* c.1805  
pen and wash; 10.5 x 17.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an5601538

below from left:  
Jane Dorothea Cannan  
(1823–1861)  
*View of Suburban Melbourne*  
c.1853  
pencil; 17.0 x 26.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an4564772

Jane Dorothea Cannan  
(1823–1861)  
*Suburban Street* c.1853  
pencil; 17.0 x 26.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an4564778

Jane Dorothea Cannan  
(1823–1861)  
*Street Scene Melbourne with  
Horse and Cart* c.1853  
pencil; 17.0 x 26.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an4564555-1

The families became friends in England's Lake District, where the Claudes had settled and David's sisters were employed. This beautiful area had long attracted artists and intellectuals, such as their friend Harriet Martineau, the celebrated reformer and anti-slavery campaigner. Jane, enterprising and capable, was ready for release from family obligations. There were emigrants already in her family—her uncles in Chile, her brother an engineer building the new railroads in America, and her sister in India—so, after a short engagement, in 1853 she and David set sail for Australia. Anxiety about David's thinness was tempered by the hope that the warmer climate would suit him better.

Jane saw managing life on board the *Hempsyke* as 'capital preparation' for the demands of 'Colonial' life in which she would

have to cook, find provisions and clean, for 'all ladies must grease the domestic wheel'. Her cabin on the ship was:

a wonderful size—I and David and two gentlemen sat in it quite comfortably—though I admit that I sat on the table, which is represented by my two square boxes one on top of the other—there is a shelf all round within a foot or so of the ceiling, on which we can place almost all our possessions. We have more eatables than I think necessary, but we can give them away or live on them in Australia when provisions are dear.

The three-month voyage was demanding, but:

when it was calm I enjoyed putting everything straight in expectation of David's coming down to write or read and of hearing him say our cabin was the nicest place on the whole ship.

In contrast, the poorer passengers:

had a sad life of it down below during the rough weather—the jumbling of such a crowd together dreadful; one old lady shivered in her wet berth, another recounted how the water rotted all her clothes.

David was indignant about the captain's poor treatment of the crew and he and Jane sympathised with the sailors who 'are getting saucy as they near land, as it is supposed all will bolt', given the temptations of the gold rush.



They later heard, through Alfred Webb, a young man whom Harriet Martineau had entrusted to them on the voyage and who was to become a leading Irish and Indian nationalist, that:

all but the two mates had deserted the ship. The carpenter was one of the first to go, he was very officious in assisting the passengers with their luggage and handed down his own boat chest with the greatest coolness, and when all was down slipped in himself.

In Melbourne, the Cannans went into lodgings. An experienced artist, Jane quickly began sketching streets, houses, churches and landscapes, and sent her drawings of buildings, such as the Wesleyan Chapel at Prahran, to Morewood and Rogers. Jane wrote that:

[when sketching] in one of the 'government paddocks', as they call the enclosed parks here, I was delighted with the lengthening shadows on the grass, the parties of people passing through so quietly—and the groups of children playing round favourite old trees, while the ladies sat waiting for them—it was as pretty a scene as much because behind me were the mounted police barracks—and some of the horses were led down to water near the river.

The house arrived and was put up in Prahran with the help of the ship's carpenter who had bolted from the *Hempsyke*. To David's delight it was:

galvanised tinned Iron outside & inside (being double) with a fence of galvanised wire, & a cistern of ditto, Washingtub, Buckets, Washstands & tables, not to speak of Iron bedsteads & even knife rests which do quite

as well as silver ... I am going to have some picture frames made of it. I have also a dish for feeding poultry & have now an extensive stock of chickens.

Jane took on the 'flower department' and imagined:

the house covered with creepers and the paling hid behind roses and laburnums, white lilies, fuchsias and stocks &c, indeed flowers grow beautifully here.

The relative informality and openness of society in Melbourne suited them. Although David struggled with work pressures, Jane was contented. 'I know no music equal to David's voice when he says my Jane my darling my cherished wife,' she wrote. In the evenings:

David sits in the armchair—and I on the footstool by the fire—and we are sure to talk of the Grampians or Carsphairn [in Galloway] and the family portraits have several times come out.

David never lost his nostalgia for Scotland or the desire to return (though from Manchester 'Lord deliver me' he wrote). In the meantime, their 'little pet', Louisa, had been born and placed in a zinc cradle.

Jane and David were acutely aware of the health dangers in Melbourne as they had come from England where the drainage of towns was the subject of public debate, following Edwin Chadwick's groundbreaking report on disease and public sanitation, and they knew Chadwick because he was a relative by marriage. David described the conditions:



below:  
Jane Dorothea Cannan  
(1823–1861)  
*Country Cottage* c.1853  
pencil; 17.0 x 26.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an4564588

bottom:  
Jane Dorothea Cannan  
(1823–1861)  
*Grave of Louisa Cannan* c.1856  
pencil; 17.0 x 26.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an4564809

There is not a single drain, or sewer, or sink or watercourse & no gas & no pavement—the stench is horrible, the flies being the only scavengers, occasionally assisted by a dog—there are no dustcarts either. Water is got in carts from the Yarra at a cost of 3/4d per gallon, the Yarra having the pumps just below where the horses are washed & numerous woolwashing establishments being higher up the said river.

The Cannans' worst fears about the risks to their health in Melbourne were realised when Louisa died of dysentery at the age of nine months.

My dear Jane is very desolate but we are both very glad that we are not leaving here at

present where we have always been so happy together with our little Louisa. I never saw Jane look so nice as she did tonight when I took her to see the grave of our lost Louisa—that is lost to us for this world only.

Jane and David returned to England in 1857 when David's contract with Morewood and Rogers ended. They visited relatives in Scotland and lived in lodgings in London where their son Charles was born. Jane wrote that the baby 'is healthy and strong and we begin to think him like little Louisa', but she was soon advised not to lift him.

I have settled into such a low state of health that a drive at walking pace in a donkey chair is the highest desirable excitement.



She began spitting blood. They tried invalid establishments in Bournemouth and on the doctor's advice sailed to Madeira in the autumn of 1859. Jane died there three weeks after her second son Edwin was born in early 1860 and was buried in the Protestant cemetery.

The iron cottage was the only home that Jane and David would have. But while her premature death cast a long shadow, her sons grew into remarkable adults. Charles Cannan, a classicist, became Fellow and Dean at Trinity College, Oxford, developed Oxford University Press and was an accomplished mountaineer. Edwin became a Professor at the London School of Economics. It was Edwin who, in old age, researched his family's history and preserved the papers which are now in the National Library of Australia and at Oxford University.

CRESKY CANNAN spent her career as a social scientist in British universities. She is now a researcher and writer based in Devon, UK. She is the great-great-granddaughter of Jane and David Cannan