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extra

Epidemic hysteria aboard ship in 1848

Malcolm Kinnear

Dr Colin Arrott Browning (1791–1856), a minister's son from Auchtermuchty, joined the Royal Navy as assistant surgeon near the end of the Napoleonic Wars and served aboard the frigate HMS Hebrus at the bombardment of Algiers in 1816. He rejoined the Navy after receiving his MD and spent several years as surgeon in warships before being appointed surgeon superintendent in his first convict transport in 1831. He made nine highly successful voyages in this capacity, mainly to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), that of the Hashemy being his last, and wrote two books on the subject (*The Convict Ship* and *England's Exiles*, later compiled into one). A dedicated and competent physician, he was a forthright advocate of humane treatment and literacy for convicts, and a fervent evangelist.

'Shortly after the Wakefield and Pentonville prisoners were received on board, many of them were successively seized with a variety of violent, and indeed alarming, nervous affections, which had never occurred in any of my former ships. Two, three, and even as many as nine at a time were borne through the narrow prison door, and conveyed in a state of insensibility, either fainting or in violent convulsions, to the upper deck, and plied with the remedies used in such cases.

'The appearance our decks exhibited for a period of at least three days and nights was most appalling, being often aggravated by the shrill convulsive shrieks of the sufferers, which were most painfully heard in every part of the ship, even in the poop cabins. The whole scene was, beyond description, touching and perplexing. In many instances these fits were followed by severe spasmodic affections of the stomach and bowels. With regard to their cause, I have no hesitation in attributing them to the great and sudden change, from the solitary cell in which the people had been so long buried to comparative freedom aboard the Transport, and unrestrained intercourse with a large body of fellow-prisoners, to whom they were mostly strangers: the excitement acting on men who were in a state of bodily and mental feebleness, and morbidly susceptible of impression. It is worthy of observation, that the Parkhurst boys who had been congregated and worked together for some time before their embarkation, were not attacked with fits.

'The effects of long confinement on the convicts embarked in the Hashemy were most visible; all their energies were impaired, I had almost said gone; their power of thinking, their common sense, and in a peculiar degree their memory, appeared to have been left behind them buried in their cell; many of them seemed like children; all complained of unfitness for the considerate performance of any duty. Those especially whom I had selected to act as petty officers, were soon found not to have strength for the continued execution of duties requiring thought and activity, and often complained to me, in the most plaintive language, of the utter prostration of their energies.'

Extract from *The Convict Ship and England's Exiles* by Colin Arrott Browning, first published by Hamilton Adams in 1851.

Malcolm Kinnear is Colin Arrott Browning's great-great-grandson.

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