

Excerpt from the book

The air reeked of seaweed, dying limpets and ocean organisms cast aside by the last tide. Yet, that fishy, salty odour was a refreshing change to me. A sea breeze swept against my skin as I shuffled along the gangplank among a bedraggled line of convicts. I tucked my sleeves beneath the wrist shackles to ease the pain. The group hobbled forward, dreading how the manacles would rub skin from the bone. Amid moans and sobbing, I heard the mutters of “‘Hell ship’ *Britannia*.”

Once on deck, I lifted my eyes to the rigging, knowing I must do everything to remain in the open air, away from the stinking hold below.

Speaking with a clipped English accent, the first mate barked orders, “Right men, assemble portside.” He stabbed the air with his finger. “Women, starboard.”

“Surgeon Jacques Matisse is here to complete a health clearance; only then will you be assigned a bunk.”

Nearly 200 of us crowded on deck. How would we all survive?

The mate clapped his hands. “Once assigned, proceed below until further orders.” His baton tapped menacingly on his palm. A shudder ran down my spine. “Those with minor offences may see chains removed. But mark me, any trouble; it is a lick of the lashes and a mighty headache.”

No one challenged him.

The movement above caught my eye. Heads tipped towards the sky as the massive sails unfurled. Then the ship’s bell rang out, drawing our attention to a uniformed man. “I am Captain James Phillips.” A low grumble of acknowledgement passed amongst the convicts, many gaunt and hollow-eyed.

“You may have heard the *Britannia* called a ‘hell ship’.” The captain stood, his cravat fluttering in the wind, his bicorn hat perched like Napoleon Bonaparte in an image I once saw in the *Northern Star*. “The rumour is true - under the former Captain Dennott, nearly one in ten perished on the last voyage. But I give you my word, this journey will be different. My crew and I aim to deliver you in good health to Port Jackson.”

If only I were bound for France instead. A tear pricked my eye.

I overheard a sailor as he descended from the rigging. “Right villain, that last captain. Blighters were tossed over like bait.”

Captain Phillips retired to his cabin. The first mate resumed. “Your quarters match your sentence. Get used to it, it will be months until landfall. The surgeon will now screen you for goal fever, plague and leprosy. If there are any signs of illness, you will be offloaded.” He beckoned the ship’s surgeon, who moved forward.

The ship’s surgeon, Jacques Matisse, raised a hand. He was wiry, with sinewy arms and fair, unblemished skin. He looked close to my age, perhaps mid-thirties.

“Form two lines,” he instructed.

A buxom woman pushed to the front. “No pox here, my lordship. And I never charge for an inspection.” She laughed.

“That is enough filth,” barked the mate. “Or you will taste the lash.” Silence fell over us.

The surgeon moved efficiently and with gentle care. When he reached me, he asked, “Your name?”

“Mary McCarthy.”

He removed my chains and inspected my skin, checked my mouth and ticked his register.

“It says ‘lacemaker’.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, head bowed. “But I have also tended the injured, on farms and in homes. I have been the eyes of a physician, instructed in poultice and strapping, and a witness to bone resetting. My visits to the apothecary were many, so I understand the application of numerous remedies to heal the sick and can prepare poultices. Sir, I will help if needed.”

“I shall keep that in mind, Madam McCarthy. You are clear. Bunk eighteen.”

I caught a twinkle in his pale blue eyes before following the others through the hatch into the hull below. I clutched my skirts and climbed down steep ladder-like steps into the dim belly of the ship.

Unlike the Bridewell, there was no mould or spilled slop here, but the air was thick with breath and sweat. I remembered Thomas's advice: *Find a ventilation shaft to stay*

healthy. I counted the bunks and found mine near the port-side slats, close to the ventilation slots. “Buíochas le Dia,” I whispered - thank God in my Irish language.

Each bunk was little more than a wooden shelf with a lumpy straw sack and one coarse blanket. A narrow plank separated me from the next. A steady stream of convicts descended behind me. I lost count after seventy-something.

Grouped with other women convicted of petty crimes like poaching or theft, I fought to claim my space. That is when I heard it.

“Dia’s Muire duit, God be with you, child.”

I turned. “Good God!” My voice faltered as I saw my Great Aunt Etney.

“What are you doing here?” I grasped her hands.

She sat beside me. “Just for a moment, I am bunk twenty-two.” Her shift swamped her frame, engulfing her in fabric folds.

“I foresore your path, but never my own.”

“What happened?”

“I was accused of witchcraft, of communing with the fairies. Years of healing undone by ignorance.” She tucked a grey whisp behind her ear.

“A crime against progress,” I said, putting my arm around her.

“They used my trial to scare others. The English want to claim all Catholic's land.” Her voice trembled. “Dougal’s conversion to Protestantism is not enough; he speaks too freely. Ye do not need to be a seerer to know before year-end the O’Neill estate will be gone.”

“Oh, Etney,” I whispered, the weight of sorrow pressing heavily, “how can any good come of this?”