The *Euterpe / Star of India*: A Living Reminder of Nineteenth-Century Trans-Oceanic Migration

In the early afternoon of Saturday 14 November 1863, a new vessel slid down the ways and into the muddy waters of the River Sulby at the port of Ramsey, on the Isle of Man. Dressed with festive flags and a bright new coat of grey paint, *Euterpe* exemplified for the onlookers' Manx shipbuilding at its finest. Her destiny however, would lie not with the robust seafarers of this island, but rather with distant lands and peoples. Just under six weeks later *Euterpe*, bound for Liverpool, departed the Isle of Man never to return. Her designers and owners had envisaged her primarily as a vessel for the transport of cargo on the India run, and this service occupied the first eight years of her working life.

In 1871 Shaw Savill and Company purchased *Euterpe* with the intention of using her to capitalize on the enthusiasm for the migration of skilled immigrants to Australia and New Zealand. With her capacious hull and sturdy lines, she seems to have been eminently suited to this new role. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 effectively reduced the sea route from Europe to India by some 8,000 miles, allowing cargo-carrying steam vessels to make the run in a matter of weeks rather than months. Their advent relegated *Euterpe* and other large sailing vessels to longer sea routes where speed was not considered vital. Thus was born her second career.

Euterpe at Port Chalmers, New Zealand, in 1882. Copyright Maritime Museum of San Diego

Euterpe's entry into the immigrant trade coincided with a significant shift of populations from Europe to distant regions, largely facilitated by the use of the oceanic sailing ship as a means of transportation. The story of mid-to-late nineteenth century immigration to the islands of New Zealand would be inconceivable without this type of vessel. From 1871 to 1897, *Euterpe* sailed from Europe to Australia and New Zealand 21 times, each voyage with the purpose of transporting immigrants and much needed supplies. In 1840 the European population of New Zealand numbered around 2,000. By 1881, thanks largely to *Euterpe* and other sailing vessels like her, this population had increased to 500,000.

The movement of such vast numbers of people required the development of a sophisticated government bureaucracy to oversee their transfer, and further spawned a series of successful

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commercial enterprises that both assisted emigration to distant lands and profited from it. The majority of emigrant passengers sailed for New Zealand with the benefit of British government subsidies. Government expenditure on assisted immigration to the colonies peaked in 1875 at £447,000. To help defray expenses, the government paid shipping companies like Shaw Savill £14 7s 6d per adult and £8 per child. In addition, the government gave an allowance of £5 to each married man under 45, and the same sum to single men under 35. Adults were given a £1 clothing allowance and children, 10s.

Assisted immigrants assembled and lived in dormitory accommodation at the New Zealand Immigration Depot at Blackwall, on the banks of the River Thames. *Euterpe*, in company with other Shaw Savill vessels, berthed at the East India Dock, a short distance downstream. The point of embarkation at the dock was a place of lively activity as passengers jostled on board with their possessions. For those in first class – up to 12 in number – a relatively luxurious berth awaited. Carpenters were on hand to custom build a small cabin designed to fit the tastes and purses of these travelers. This could be accomplished in a matter of hours. These privileged emigrants would dine together in the saloon onto which each of the first class cabins opened. Weather permitting, they were also free to mount the stairs aft of the saloon and sit on the varnished teak benches on either side of the skylight that illuminated the saloon below the poop deck.

The saloon for first class passengers on the main deck of the Star of India
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For emigrants in second class and steerage, the accommodations were somewhat more austere. Their berths on *Euterpe*'s 'tween deck were to be found beneath the main, or weather deck, and accessed fore and aft by two steep stairways below weatherproof "boobie" hatches. Between 350 and 400 emigrant men, women, and children traveled together in this way. Victorian-era social custom continued to prevail at sea. Single women in steerage berthed aft, while single men were forward. Between the two groups were the family accommodations, consisting of small rustic cabins with multi-tiered bunks.

The numbers of passengers on each voyage varied widely. From a compilation of all available sources, we know the names, ages, and occupations of 1,285 passengers registered as traveling aboard *Euterpe* from 1871 to 1897. Records associated with the 1874 voyage indicate a total of 410 passengers, of whom 407 were assisted. They were not alone. The scale of shipping to New Zealand in this period is truly staggering. Immigration reached a peak between June 1874 and May 1875. In the space of a year, 93 ships arrived in the colony, bringing a total of 31,785 immigrants. Ships of Shaw Savill and Company carried two-thirds of this number. The vast majority of these were English, followed by Irish, Scots, Germans, and Scandinavians.

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With a crew that ranged from 29 to 39 in number, emigrants shared their iron-hulled home with livestock, most of which were destined for the first class passengers' table. She also carried much needed supplies for the distant colony: hospital furniture, pig iron, cloth, household merchandise, and even horses. It was also not uncommon for her to transport large quantities of gunpowder, although the degree to which passengers were cognizant of this is unclear.

Euterpe's voyages to the antipodes usually began by employing the services of a steam-powered tug to negotiate the serpentine Thames, before reaching the open waters of the English Channel. Once out in the Channel, the captain and crew were required to be particularly vigilant as the wind-powered *Euterpe* encountered all manner of shipping in this foggy waterway. The newly embarked passengers, many at sea for the first time in their lives, found these first days and weeks of the voyage particularly trying. Cramped conditions below decks could be relieved by taking the air on the main deck, but only during clement weather. As she traversed the notoriously stormy Bay of Biscay, *Euterpe*'s passengers were pitched about in the gloomy 'tween deck, lanterns swaying, and all manner of personal possessions shifting, as they clung to bulwarks and beams for safety and security. The stench of odors produced by seasickness and rudimentary sanitary arrangements is not hard to imagine.

The Stead Ellis Cabin: An example of how the confined emigrant cabins would have looked
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Out into the Atlantic, and with a few weeks of sailing behind them, the majority of the passengers had found their sea legs and settled down to the routine of life on board. Children were often taught rudimentary skills associated with sailing a square-rigger, and their assistance in hauling a line seems to have been appreciated by the crew. The sighting of another ship was the cause of much excitement, accompanied by flag signals that exchanged names, greetings, ports of origin and destinations. Passengers had the opportunity to witness and even participate in the strange customs and traditions practiced by mariners, like the 'dead horse' ceremony and festivities associated with crossing the Equator. These sights and experiences, so far removed from the familiar world of the landlubber, formed vivid memories in the minds of the voyagers, to be recalled with nostalgia and wonder years later.

The ordering of life at sea was largely the preserve of two officers: the captain and the surgeon-superintendent. The captain held supreme authority and responsibility on board. With his close assistants, the first and second mates, he tasked the crew with the sailing of the vessel. On Sunday

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mornings he presided over a religious service for all who wished to attend. Surgeon-superintendents were usually emigrants themselves, bound for a new life in the colonies. Not only were they charged with the medical care of emigrants, but also their social lives while aboard. They organized races, games, concerts, the recitation of poetry and dancing, to pass the time. Emigrants also entertained themselves through periodic auctions – potted meats, cheese, lemons, sugar, candles, dishes, and items of clothing all changed hands. The *Euterpe* logs were written with the spare style of a seaman's pen, and hence many of these details are not to be found there. Much of what we know about the day-to-day life of emigrants on board may be read in the vivid descriptions left in their letters, diaries, and even newspapers that were written and distributed while at sea.

Food at the beginning of each voyage was relatively plentiful. However, as private stores ran short, particularly on the longer voyages, passengers and crew were sometimes forced to resort to eating 'rat pie' to supplement their increasingly meager portions. Two 4,000 gallon tanks held water for drinking and cooking. During the voyage, these supplies were replenished when possible by rainwater. Generally, salt water was used for bathing and washing.

In the cramped living conditions on the 'tween deck, disease could prove fatal for the most vulnerable – particularly children. Injuries resulting from falls as *Euterpe* was pitched about by huge waves are well documented. Although a remote danger, her owners nevertheless took the possibility of encounter with pirates seriously. This is demonstrated by the checkerboard pattern painted on her hull in imitation of the gun ports to be found on contemporary fighting ships!

The Great Circle route was certainly the most efficient way for a sailing vessel to reach Australia and New Zealand, pushed by unfailing winds far south of the Cape of Good Hope. While relatively speedy, the route was nevertheless fraught with perils. Ships encountered squalls in the Atlantic, sweltering heat in the tropics, and finally the icy blast of the roaring forties in the Southern Ocean. These were accompanied by mountainous seas, fierce storms, and the possibility of encounters with icebergs. For experienced sea captains, and the ship owners who employed them, the risks posed by a relatively speedy passage through these lonely seas vastly outweighed the costs incurred by longer voyages and visits to ports along the way. Yet despite her 21,000 square feet of flax sails, *Euterpe* was not a particularly fast vessel. Her voyages from Britain to New Zealand never took under 100 days and, on average, the passage would be anywhere from three to four months.

Star of India at sea, showing the ship from the port bow with every inch of canvas unfurled
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By the late 1870s, the heyday of assisted immigration to New Zealand was past. Governments – both national in Great Britain, and provincial in New Zealand – realized that the limits of colonial infrastructure had been sorely tested by the sudden influx of tens of thousands of new arrivals. With opportunities for entrepreneurial investment and gainful employment in the colony becoming increasingly scarce, it is no surprise that *Euterpe*'s passenger lists grew significantly shorter by the early 1880s. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, steam-powered vessels came to rival and eventually supplant sailing ships in the immigrant trade.

In the late 1890s *Euterpe* began her third career under new owners, returning to the role of transport and carrying lumber and coal across the Pacific. She would eventually be purchased by the Alaska Packers Association and renamed *Star of India* in 1906. Until 1923, she sailed annually from San Francisco to Alaska carrying fishermen and returning with canned salmon. Finally retired from this service, she was brought to San Diego in 1927, and has remained a fixture on the waterfront since then. In a working career lasting some sixty years, the *Star of India* would come to represent both the dominance and decline of the oceanic sailing ship in the transfer of trading goods and the migration of peoples over vast distances.

Now fully restored, she sails each November, a living reminder of the vital role played by wind-powered vessels in the great age of oceanic migration to new worlds.

Explore specially commissioned photographs of the Star of India and discover how she would have looked as a Victorian emigrant ship using our interactive Star of India Emigrant Ship Plans.

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