The promise of gold has lured many an adventurer to foreign lands. James Cain was one, sailing from the Isle of Man to Victoria in a purpose-built schooner in the 1850s. A fortune in gold eluded him, writes Welcome Wall historian Veronica Kooyman, but he settled the land and became the ancestor of Australian generations.

GOLD TRANSFORMED THE AUSTRALIAN colonies, and it transformed countless lives too, although not always in the expected way. Manxman James Cain embarked on a trim and speedy schooner in 1853, built to carry hopeful prospectors to the Victorian goldfields. For him the land would yield not gold but an honest farmer's livelihood, enough to found a dynasty of Australians. His name was added to the Welcome Wall by the family of his grandson, Paul Benjamin, and unveiled on a new panel in May 2013.

In 1851 Edward Hargraves discovered a grain of gold near Bathurst, NSW, by legend recognising geological features similar to those of the Californian goldfields from which he'd just returned. Within four months, Ophir – the place where he found gold – was home to more than a thousand prospectors. Within a year gold was struck at Ballarat and Bendigo in the colony of Victoria, where a £200 reward had been offered for its discovery. News spread around the world and the gold rush was on. Within two years the state's population exploded from 77,000 to 540,000. Imports and investment boomed, including Australia's first railway and telegraphs, as Victoria contributed more than one third of the world's gold. Immigrants arrived from Britain, the United States, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary and China.

Far away in the Irish Sea, between Ireland and northern England, lies the Isle of Man. Never a part of the UK, it survived on fishing, farming and mining and had suffered potato crop failure and depression in the late 1840s, encouraging emigration. Lured by the stories of gold discoveries, a group of Manxmen determined to make their way to Victoria and had a schooner named Vixen purpose-built for the long voyage, by H Graves in the port of Peel. The Manx Sun of 6 September 1851 called her ‘one of the finest vessels that has ever been launched in Peel … coppered … 93 tons new measurement, and has proved herself to be what she appears’. She demonstrated her qualities by outsailing several rivals while earning her keep under charter, in the years before she sailed for the goldfields.

On 20 January 1853 Vixen sailed from Peel carrying 57 men and no shortage of captains. They have been recorded as Captain Tom Cubbon, Vixen’s navigator; Captain Corlett from the Isle of Man Steam Packet Co, with a Port St Mary fisherman named Captain Sansbury rated as the actual commander. Their cargo included picks, shovels, clothing, boots, barrows and chairs – but no spoons to eat their soup with, in one report. The frugal Manxmen carved spoons from beef bones. All, including 14 married men, had left behind their families to prospect for gold on the other side of the world. The complement included three brothers: James, John and William Cain.

They must have sailed swiftly and directly, for it’s reported they crossed the Equator on 23 February and reached Port Philip Heads in only 92 days, arriving in Port Melbourne on 3 May 1853. Vixen was laid up under a watchman and in small parties the adventurers headed for the various goldfields in Victoria. Mining for gold was hard and dirty work and many prospectors suffered in the hard times. The living conditions were poor, claims were small, competition was fierce and the licence fees were high. Police were deployed on ‘digger hunts’, searching the

To Victoria from the Isle of Man

IN A HOME-MADE SCHOONER
The Light Between Oceans

WELCOME WALL

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The Welcome Wall

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The Light Between Oceans


The light station on James Rock is a key backdrop to the immensely emotional high drama. Stedman does a great job of making it feel as though the long 19th century has never ended on the far flung reaches of remote Western Australia in the 1850s. Neither has racism or bigotry. Stedman’s depiction of the fictional Point Parramore and James Rock (with all its symbolism of the two-faced Greek God Janus looking at once back into the past and forward to the future) is realistic and evocative. The life of a remote light station keeper keeping his oil-burning, third-order, dioptric, Chance Brothers lens in working order is accurately portrayed.

In her debut work of historical fiction Stedman has crafted a story that is extraneously spellbinding. There are wonderful moments of writing, though sometimes lost in uninspiring dialogue.

Personally, I longed for this story to be less “life-like” and more magic realism. Perhaps this remains for the filmed version of the dilemma of the post light station family of Tom and Isabel Sheilbourne.

Dr Stephen Gapps, curator

The Members book group will discuss The Light Between Oceans at its inaugural meeting in the Members lounge at 4 pm on Sunday 18 August. Meet curator and book reviewer Dr Stephen Gapps. Details page 47.