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# To Victoria from the Isle of Man

IN A HOME-MADE SCHOONER

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.

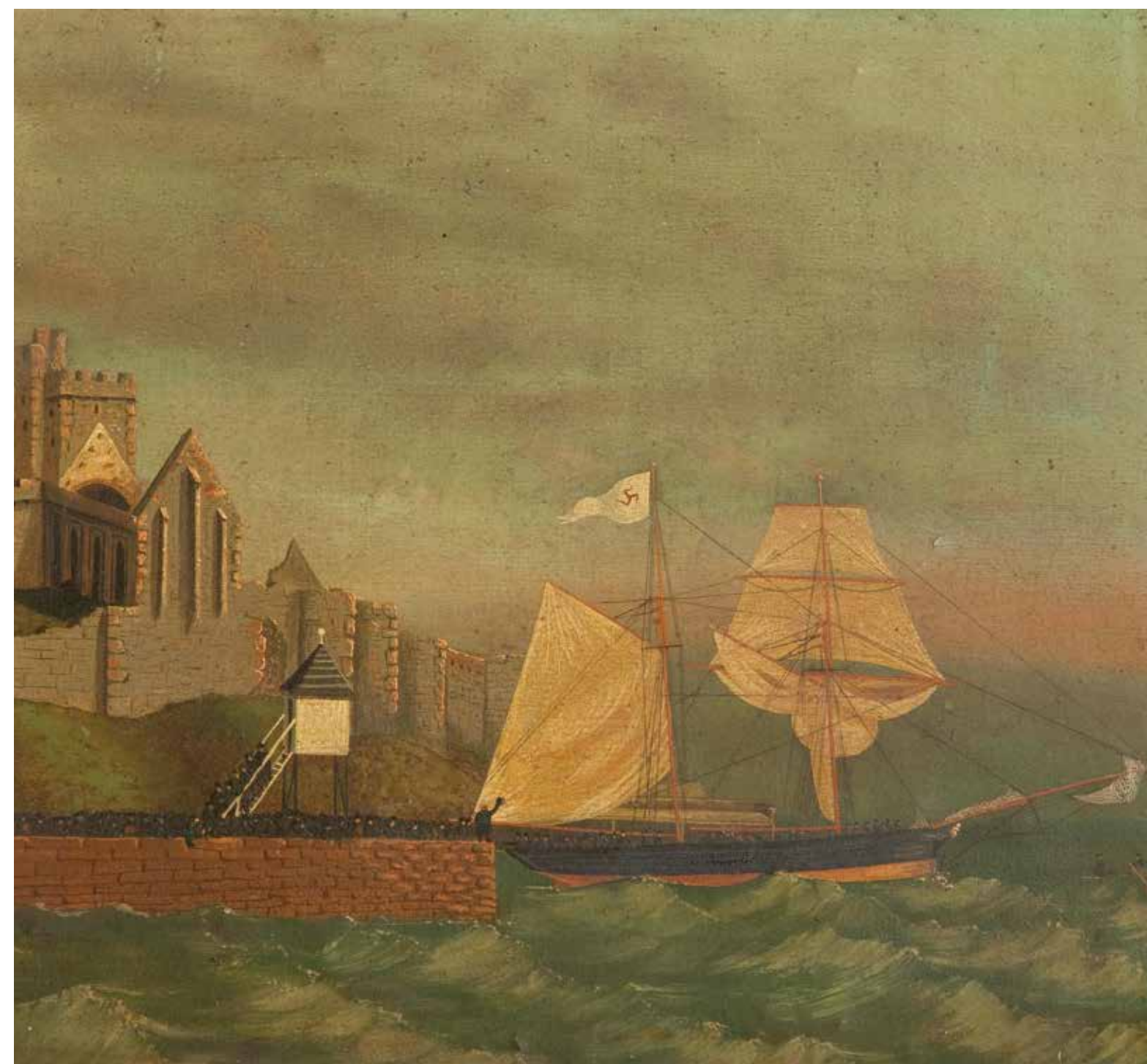
On 26 January 1853 *Vixen* sailed from Peel carrying 37 men and no shortage of captains. They have been recorded as Captain Tom Cubbon, *Vixen's* navigator Captain Corlett from the Isle of Man Steam Packet Co, with a Port St Mary fisherman named Captain Sansbury rated as the actual commander. Their cargo 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

- 01 Portrait of James Cain. Photos courtesy of his descendants  
02 Schooner *Vixen* departing the town of Peel, 1853, flying the Isle of Man pennant from her topmast. Artist unknown, oil on canvas. Reproduced courtesy of the Manx National Collection

In one of history's great migrations, over six million people have crossed the seas to settle in Australia. The museum's tribute to all of them, The Welcome Wall, encourages people to recall and record their stories of coming to live in Australia





- 01 Gladys Benjamin, 91, a descendant of James Cain, attended the unveiling of his name on the Welcome Wall in May, reported in her local newspaper *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*.
- 02 Extended family and descendants of settler, Manxman James Cain, among those shown at a picnic at Natte Yallock c 1910. Photographer unknown, reproduced courtesy of the family



Historic link: Gladys Benjamin, 91, is looking forward to her and her husband's families being memorialised. **Picture: Lisa McEneaney**

## History connects family

By **Monica Heary**

GLADYS Benjamin, 91, of Cronulla, has looked forward for a long time to a kind of landing at the Australian National Maritime Museum.

This was when the name of her own ancestor was placed close to that of her late husband's on the Welcome Wall at the museum. The unveiling took place on May 5 when 450 new names were added to the wall.

The one that reads Cain commemorates three brothers – James, John and William Cain – who set off in a small custom-built boat called the *Vixen* from the Isle of Man in 1853.

"The boat was only 93 ton and there were 30 passengers plus the captain, with chairs, wheelbarrow, picks and shovels – anything suitable for mining, but they forgot spoons which they fashioned from bones," Mrs Benjamin said.

"She said when the ship was near the African coast those on other boats thought the ship, with its all-male passengers, contained pirates, and at first refused to take their mail to port for those on board."

"When the Americans found out they weren't pirates, they took the mail," Mrs Benjamin said.

Eventually, the family of James, her husband's ancestor, settled at Natte Yallock near Avoca in Victoria where one of the great-grandsons still works as a farmer.

Mrs Benjamin said her own ancestors were the Flemings, the name later becoming Hangan, with ancestors setting off in 1858 from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, with a family of nine children and settling in the Shearwater region.

Mrs Benjamin has three children and six grandchildren and has lived in Sutherland Shire since 1956.

**WELCOME WALL**

The Australian National Maritime Museum unveils new names on the migrant Welcome Wall twice a year.

The latest is the 31st unveiling ceremony bringing the total number to 25,536.

There are 228 countries represented on the wall, with England leading with 7268 names, followed by Italy with 3417.

The wall, on the museum's northern boundary, facing Darling Harbour and Pyrmont Bay, was opened in 1999.

**Details: 9298 3667 or [anmm.gov.au/ww](http://anmm.gov.au/ww)**



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goldfields for those who had failed to pay their fee. A number of the Manxmen gave up the treasure hunt and returned to their ship, reviving their sailing traditions by starting a venture as a mail boat between Melbourne and Sydney, and lightering for large cargo ships.

James Cain persisted in his quest for eight years, digging at various locations in Victoria. In the early 1860s he walked from the diggings with his shovel and was one of the first men to select an 80-acre block on the rich river plains at Natte Yallock on the Avoca River west of Bendigo, which had recently been opened for land selection. Here he began a new livelihood, initially cultivating onions and potatoes with unexpectedly successful results.

The work was tough, with the settlers hauling their produce on their backs to towns ten or more miles away, and carrying their purchased supplies back to the settlement. Descendants say James Cain was the first pioneer in the area to cultivate wheat, grown on half an acre dug with a spade. His first crop of 35 bushels was reaped by hand with a sickle and threshed by hand with a flail. Over time more efficient,

capital-intensive methods were employed, and the success of men like James Cain stimulated the development of farming in this rich agricultural district.

James settled in Natte Yallock with his wife, Mary Anne Henderson, who was a widow with three children, and together they added two sons and a daughter. The farm at Natte Yallock has remained in the Cain family, expanding in size and diversifying. It is currently cultivated by James' great-grandson, Maurice Cain, and his family.

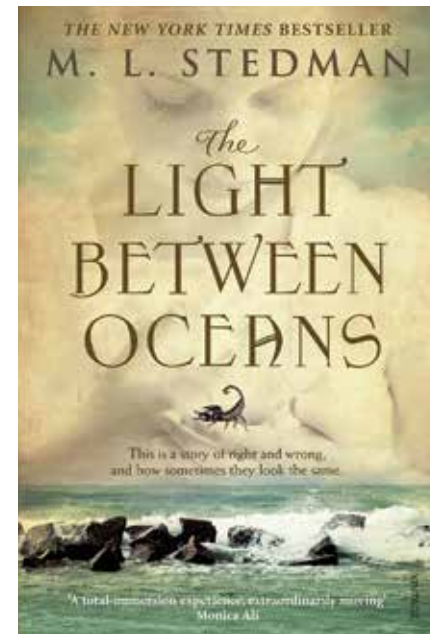
But what happened to the plucky little *Vixen*? Ten years after arriving in Australia, 27 of the original Manxmen made the return voyage home aboard the ship they had sailed to Australia. Back in Peel the schooner continued working coastal trades and fishing. In March 1864, after sailing safely half-way round the world and home again, *Vixen* was caught in a blowing gale and foundered with all hands off a small island close to home, called the Calf of Man. However, the intrepid adventure of the men of Peel inspired another group of local men, only a few years after the departure of the *Vixen*, to build a sloop called *Pevenil* to sail to Melbourne. But that's another story.

## 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

### The Welcome Wall

It costs just \$105 to register a name and honour your family's arrival in this great country! We'd love to add your family's name to The Welcome Wall, cast in bronze, and place your story on the online database at [www.anmm.gov.au/ww](http://www.anmm.gov.au/ww). So please don't hesitate to call our staff during business hours with any enquiries on 02 9298 3777.

# The Light Between Oceans



### The Light Between Oceans

M L Stedman, published by Vintage Books, Sydney, NSW, 2012. Paperback, 362 pp. ISBN 9781742755717. RRP \$19.95

POOR TOM SHERBOURNE SURVIVED SEVERAL years in the trenches during World War 1. He is wracked by a sense of guilt – why did he return unscathed when so many others did not? Tom takes a job that certainly promises solitude and with it, perhaps, the possibility of solace – it's the lonely life of a lighthouse keeper. He is stationed on Janus Rock, a small island off the coast of Western Australia.

Although the warning signs are there – the last light keeper at Janus Rock went quite insane – things appear at last to be going well for Tom. While on one of his rare shore leaves in the small Western Australian town of Point Partageuse, he meets a bold and loving local girl, Isabel, marries her and brings her to Janus Rock. The newlyweds revel in the windswept wildness of the island. But their idyll is marred in the years that follow by Isabel having a stillborn child and suffering several miscarriages. It appears that she is unable to have children.

Then, right on cue, a boat washes ashore carrying a crying baby. It also carries a dead man.

Against Tom's instincts and the moral compass that has survived the war, he allows Isabel to convince him that the child is a gift of fate. They bury the man, assuming the mother is also dead. The outside world only impinges on their lives every few months with the arrival of the supply boat, and so they are able to pretend to outsiders that the baby is theirs. Yet what appears as a godsend soon becomes a complex emotional journey in which the reader becomes moral judge and jury.

*The Light Between Oceans* has received some critical acclaim, and it won the Indie Awards 'Book of the Year' in 2013. Yet refreshingly, it has not been a best seller through glowing reviews and slick marketing, but through an avid readership and word of mouth. It was voted 'Historical Novel of the Year 2012' by GoodReads, the online reading community.

*The Light Between Oceans* was not, initially, this book reviewer's delight. The first hundred or so pages I found to

be somewhat uninspiring and at times clichéd. But when the Indian Ocean brings forth the flotsam of a baby they name Lucy, the book shifts several gears, creeps up on you and becomes hard to put down. Like watching a train crash, even though you know what is coming, you can't look away. It is no wonder film rights have been taken up by Dreamworks: the story is compelling.

## It's the first selection for the museum's Members fledgling book group

The light station on Janus Rock is a key backdrop to the ensuing 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 1920s. Neither has racism or bigotry. Stedman's depiction of the fictional Point Partageuse and Janus 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 excruciatingly 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 poor light station family of Tom and Isabel Sherbourne.

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