

Classic Australian Stories
General Editor: Lesley Zuber

**THE LETTERS
OF
RACHEL HENNING**

Adapted by Ida Veitch

NELSON

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Note: In an attempt to make the stories in the Classic Australian Stories series more accessible to today's readers, metric measurement has been used, except in dialogue taken from the original editions.

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Glossary

- Blacksmith:** a man who makes and repairs things of iron and who shoes horses
- Bonnet:** a lady's hat with ribbons that tied under the chin, and a large curved brim
- Boomerang:** a curved stick of hard wood that can be thrown so that it returns to the person who threw it
- Bullock:** a castrated bull. Bullocks were used to pull drays. Two or more bullocks harnessed to a dray were called a bullock team
- Bushman:** a man who knows how to live in the bush
- Coach:** a passenger carriage pulled by a team of horses
- Colonial experience:** learning what it is like to live and work in a colony
- Crocodile:** a large river reptile with a long body and tail, covered with a hard skin
- Damper:** a sort of bread made by mixing flour and water to form a dough. The dough is baked in the hot ashes of the camp-fire
- Digger:** a man who digs for gold
- Diphtheria:** a serious, infectious disease of the throat
- Dog-cart:** a small, open carriage, usually pulled by one horse

Dray: a low, flat, four-wheeled cart, without sides, used to carry heavy loads and pulled by a team of bullocks or horses

Drive animals: move a mob of cattle, sheep or horses on foot across country

Flirt: try to attract someone of the opposite sex, without meaning anything serious

Flog: punish someone by hitting him with a whip

Gully: a narrow channel on the side of a hill, made by the action of rainwater on the land

Harness: leather straps used to attach a horse or bullock to the vehicle it is going to pull

Muslin: thin, fine, cotton cloth

Pack-horse: a horse used for carrying luggage. The luggage was packed in bags that were strapped on the horse

Pannikin: a small metal cup

Petrified wood: wood that has become stone by the action of mineral deposits

Pet lamb: a lamb whose mother has died and who is looked after and fed by humans

Platypus: A small water animal with webbed feet and a duck-like bill

Pot: round metal container for liquids. A *pint-pot* holds one pint, a *quart-pot* holds one quart (one quart equals 1.14 of a litre)

Ransom: a sum of money paid to obtain a prisoner's freedom

Rcin: a long, narrow strap that is fastened to the bridle of a horse and used to control the horse

Saddle: a leather seat for the rider of a horse

Saw-man: a man who was employed by a station-owner to cut wood needed for building

Scrub: bushes and very small trees growing close together

Sheep-dog: a dog trained to collect and drive sheep

Slab: a thick, flat piece of wood

Stretcher: a bed made of a piece of canvas stretched between two long sticks of wood. The legs are made of pieces of wood in the shape of an X

Stock: animals; usually sheep, cattle or horses

stockman: a man who works with animals on a station;

stockwhip: a whip with a very long lash, used by stockmen;

stock-yard: a fenced area where a mob of animals can be kept together for a day or two

Tinker: try to repair something in an inept way

Tipsy: slightly drunk; a little drunk

Tramp: a man without a home. He spends his life walking the roads

Introduction

Rachel Henning wrote the letters in this book between 1854 and 1865.

Rachel's father was a clergyman who lived in Dorset, England. He married Rachel Lydia Biddulph in 1825, and Rachel Henning was the eldest of their five children. Her sister, Etta, married the Reverend Thomas White Boyce. Most of Rachel's letters were written to Etta or to Mr Boyce. Rachel always called her brother-in-law Mr Boyce.

In 1853 Rachel's brother, Biddulph, and her sister, Annie, set sail for Australia, taking sixty days to travel between Liverpool, England, and Melbourne, Australia. Rachel soon decided to go to Australia, too. In 1854 she and her sister, Amy, left England. They travelled with their cousin, Tregenna. Rachel's first letter in this book is from the ship *Calcutta*.

This first time, Rachel stayed only two years in Australia. She was homesick for England, and she did not like the climate, the scenery or the society of New South Wales.

Rachel stayed five years back in England, where she lived most of the time with Etta and Mr Boyce. In 1861 Rachel returned to Australia for the rest of her life.

Leaving England

Aboard the *Calcutta*,
August 1854

My Dearest Eitta,

I am writing to you today because we hope to send letters home when the ship calls at St Vincent's.

Amy, Tregenna and I watched you from the deck of the ship on that rainy morning when we left. We watched until we could not see you. Then we went inside the saloon and talked about you. We talked and thought of you and home until it was time for dinner.

Amy and I looked at all the passengers. There was only one we liked. She is very pleasant and good-tempered and, I think, a lady. We are lucky, because she is sharing our cabin.

She is going to Melbourne with her uncle and brother. Her uncle is a queer old gentleman. He makes jokes all the time and objects to shaving. The brother is a good-tempered boy of fourteen.

Our cabin is really very comfortable. We put away all our things after dinner and found plenty of room for them. I hammered in some nails to hang our

clothes on. No one objected. Our cabin is directly over the propeller, so I think they did not hear the hammering!

It poured with rain the whole of Friday, so that we could not go on deck and see the last of old England. We have had very fine weather since then. We have had some wind so the ship has gone very quickly. Yesterday, the wind got stronger. They stopped the engine and we went along under sail. I thought the movement was very pleasant, but the ship rolled about a good deal more.

Some of the passengers have been dreadfully ill. I was seasick all one afternoon, but I was better in the evening and have felt very well ever since. The voyage is exactly what I had expected. It is very dull, and three months seems a long time to spend on this ship. However, day after day will pass, I suppose.

We have breakfast at 9 am. They give us a huge breakfast. We have hot meat, and potatoes, and fish, etc. We have lunch at 12 pm, and dine at 4 pm. The cook certainly feeds the menagerie very well. We get soup and fish, all sorts of meat and poultry, pudding and fruit. Tea is at 7 pm, then we stay on deck until it is dark. This is the only pleasant part of the day. There was a full moon last night, and the sea was most beautiful.

We do not know many of the other passengers. There are very few women among them, and hardly any real ladies.

Mr and Mrs Donaldson think they are the great people on board. He is actually a member of the

Australian Parliament (I did not know they had one). He is very fat, very bossy, and eats a great deal. Mrs Donaldson is handsome and affected and has not been married very long. She has been dreadfully seasick.

Then there is a dismal-looking Mrs Macdonald. She is going to Melbourne to look for her husband. He has not been heard of for two years, so I do not think she can be very hopeful!

There are eight or ten children on board. They do not bother us much, as they live mostly on deck. One baby screams all night long.

If we ever survive to reach Australia, I am sure we will stay there for life. I do not think I could undertake another voyage even to get home again. It is most wearisome; the noise is wearisome, the people are wearisome and life is wearisome. It is too hot to work. I am getting quite tired of novels, and there are no other books on board.

How pretty England must be looking now. I keep thinking of the green woods. I wonder how the flowers are getting on in your garden, and how the ducks are. Do you often walk in the woods?

Good-bye, my dearest Erta. Kind love to Mr Boyce, with very much love,
Your affectionate sister,

Rachel Henning

