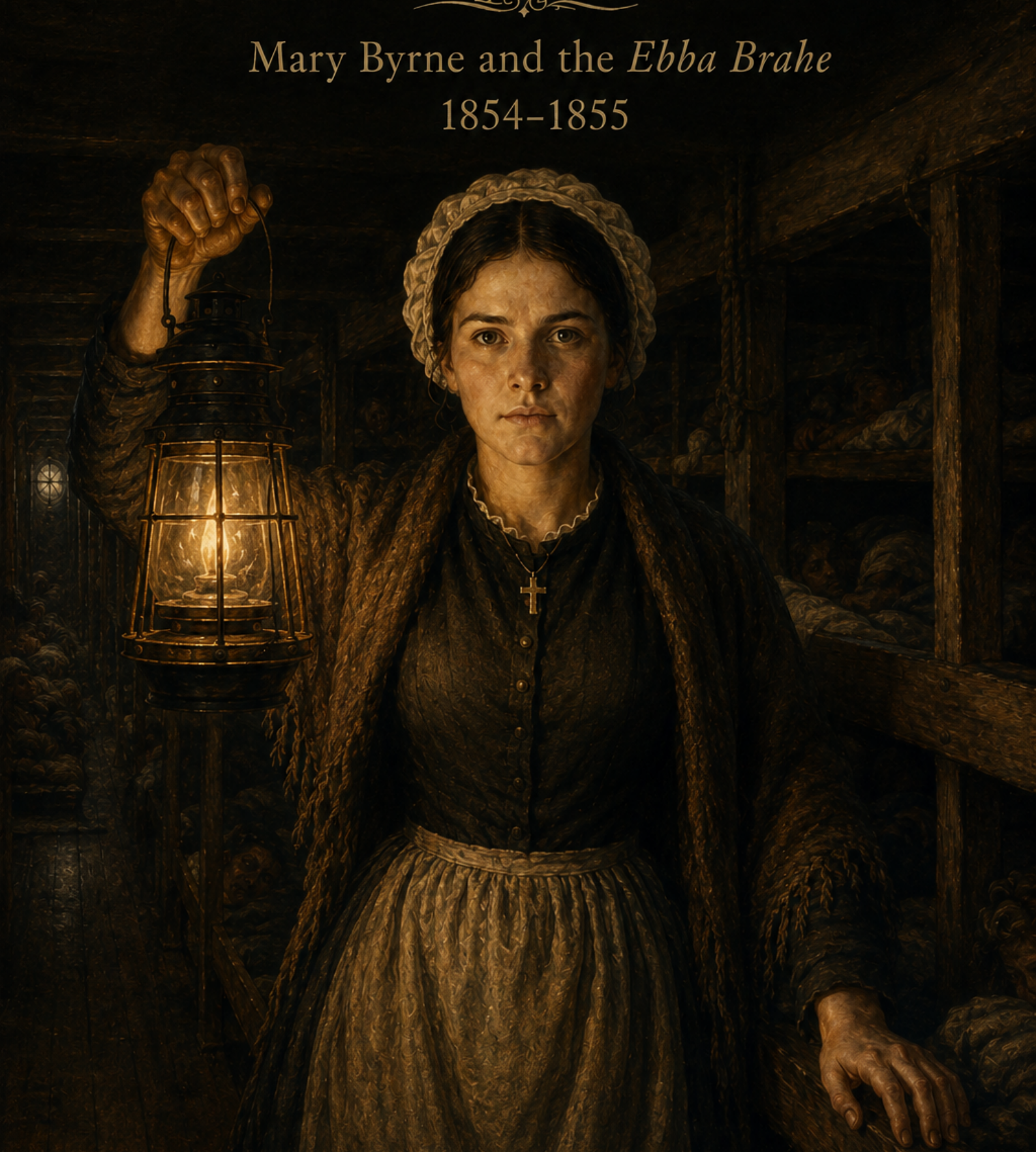


A Malicious and Wicked Conspiracy

Mary Byrne and the *Ebba Brahe*
1854–1855





It is the morning of 6 January 1855, and the Ebba Brahe is standing in through the heads of Sydney Harbour after eighty-three days at sea. Mary Byrne is at the rail, watching a low green shore slide by that is nothing like Carlow.

She is twenty-one, and she has buried a great deal on this voyage. Behind her, below the deck she is standing on, sixteen coffins have already gone over the side, most of them children. The word for what killed them, cholera, has been whispered so often that it has stopped frightening anyone.

A yellow flag climbs the mast. Quarantine. The ship will not land at the town; she will be held at the North Head station until the fever is judged spent. Mary knows this means more waiting, more washing, more counting of heads.

What she does not know is that a boat is already being rowed out to them, and that in it sits the Agent for Immigration and his clerk, with a clean sheet of paper. Within the hour, women she has kept in order for three months will begin to speak against the ship's doctor, and her own name will be written down beside his.

She smooths her apron and turns to muster the girls. There is work to be done. She does not yet know that she is about to become the most talked-about young woman in the colony.



Introduction

In the summer of 1854, an orphaned Irish housemaid named Mary Byrne stepped aboard an emigrant ship at Plymouth and sailed to the far side of the world, alone, to a country where she knew not a single soul. She was twenty-one, she could read and write, and she was carrying almost nothing but her character. Three months later that character would be put on trial.

This is the true story of the *Ebba Brahe*: of the hard voyage out, of a proud and difficult ship's surgeon, of two women he sacked and the revenge they were said to have taken, and of the one dark night at sea when Mary Byrne was accused of taking that surgeon into her bed. It is the story of the colonial inquiry that followed, sitting like a court for weeks, and of the verdict that gave this booklet its title. Every scene in it is built from the surviving records: the minutes of evidence, the letters, the reports and the family's own papers. Where those records fall silent, the telling says so. Where they speak, they are quoted. And they have a great deal to say about a young woman who, in the worst weeks of her life, stood up in front of a board of colonial gentlemen and, asked point blank whether the story was true, answered plainly: "No, it is not."

Carlow, and the leap

Mary Byrne was baptised on 17 March 1833 in the parish of Tinryland, in County Carlow, in the south-east of Ireland.⁴ Her godparents that day were Jonathan Murphy and Bridget Byrne, of Pollerton, most likely an aunt and uncle. Her parents were Luke and Ellen Byrne. By the time Mary was grown, both of them were dead.³

She grew up in hard years. The Great Famine, the failure of the potato crop that starved and scattered Ireland, ran from 1845 to about 1852, and Carlow felt it like everywhere else. When it was over, the country that remained was emptier and poorer, and for a young woman with no parents and no land, the choices were few. Mary found work as a housemaid, and she was attached to St Mary's, in Carlow town.³ She was, unusually for a poor Irish girl of her day, able to read and write, and she was a Roman Catholic, which in the story that follows turns out to matter more than you might think.

There was one door out, and thousands of young Irish were walking through it. The British government, needing workers for its colonies and wanting to thin out an overcrowded home country, ran an enormous scheme of assisted emigration. It sold Crown land in Australia and used the money to pay the fares of emigrants who were free and willing but too poor to pay their own way.⁷ New South Wales in particular was crying out for labour. Its men had bolted for the goldfields in the early 1850s, and the colony wanted servants, especially young single women, and it wanted them badly enough to bring them out for almost nothing.

So Mary Byrne, orphaned, literate, Catholic, twenty-one, put her name down as an assisted emigrant. She had, the record notes flatly, no relations in the colony she was sailing to.³ There was no one waiting at the other end. She was, in the plainest sense, on her own, and she got on the ship anyway.

A note on the world she left. This is not yet the Ireland of tidy cottages and green postcards. It is a country that has just been through mass death and mass departure. For a servant girl with no family and no prospects, a free passage to a labour-hungry colony was not an adventure so much as the only sensible move on the board. That she could read and write set her a notch above most of the women she would sail with, and it is part of why she was so quickly given authority over them.⁸

The ship and its little kingdom

The *Ebba Brahe* was a big ship for her trade, about seventeen hundred tons, a well-built vessel with roomy space below the main deck.¹¹ She left Plymouth on 14 October 1854, bound for Sydney with something close to four hundred immigrants aboard, most of them Irish.¹¹ To understand what happened on her, you have to understand that an emigrant ship in 1855 was not just transport. It was a small, sealed kingdom, with its own laws and its own peculiar division of power.

Two men ran her, and their jobs were deliberately kept apart. The Master, Captain Robert Pollock Davison, commanded the sailing of the ship, the crew and the rigging.¹ But the Master had no authority over the emigrants. That belonged to a second officer entirely: the Surgeon-Superintendent. Since the days of the convict ships, the government had learned that putting a doctor in charge of the passengers, rather than the captain, kept far more of them alive.⁷ By the 1850s the Surgeon-Superintendent's job was written out in fifty-seven numbered duties. He was the emigrants' doctor, their disciplinarian, their record-keeper, and in every practical sense their governor at sea. He was even paid partly by a bonus, a "gratuity," handed over at the end of the voyage only if the authorities judged that he had run a good ship.⁷ Hold on to that bonus. It is going to matter.

Below decks, the emigrants lived in "messes," little groups of six to ten who drew their rations and cooked together, sleeping in tiers of wooden berths.⁸ And in the stern of the ship, fenced off behind wooden partitions, lived the single women, in a world of their own.

WHAT IT WAS TO BE A SINGLE WOMAN ABOARD

The protection of unmarried female emigrants was treated as something close to a sacred duty, half genuine care and half Victorian nerves about respectability. The women were accepted only within set ages, roughly eighteen to thirty-five, and had to satisfy the authorities that they were of good character.⁸

On the ship they were kept apart. They were berthed together in the stern, fenced off, forbidden to speak to the sailors or the male passengers, and locked into their compartment at night, with the key held by an officer.⁸ Over this small enclosed community ruled a Matron, and under her a handful of "sub-matrons," trusted young women chosen from among the emigrants themselves. A sub-matron kept order, gave out and inspected the work, enforced the rule that kept the girls away from the crew, and took her turn on the night watch, awake and in charge in the dark while the others slept.

For all of this a sub-matron was, in the 1850s, generally paid no wages at all. Her reward came only at the far end of the voyage - a gratuity, a lump sum - and only if the surgeon-superintendent certified that she had served well; with it came better quarters, relief from the ordinary passenger duties, the surgeon's good word, and the hope of a better place on landing.⁸ Hold on to that, because it means the surgeon held the purse. When he dismissed the Matron and the nurse, he did not just take their posts; he put their pay at risk - and pay, in the end, is what the Board decided the whole quarrel was really about.

Why this matters. Almost everything that went wrong on the *Ebba Brahe* grew straight out of this design: a surgeon with a governor's power and a bonus to protect, a locked cabin of young women, and one of their own set to watch them through the night. Mary Byrne was about to be handed that watch.

Out into the fever



It is a grey morning in November 1854, somewhere in the South Atlantic, and a sailmaker is stitching a small bundle into a length of old canvas on the fore deck. Mary Byrne stands a little apart, holding a lamp she does not need in the daylight, because holding something helps.

The bundle is a child. This is the eleventh time. The mother, an Irishwoman, is not crying any more; she has run out. A sailor lays the last stitch through the tip of the nose, the old grim custom, to be sure.

"Ready, then," the mate says, quietly, and it is not really a question.

The surgeon reads the words. The board tips. There is the sound Mary will never quite forget, a small, clean splash, and then the sea closes over it as if nothing at all has happened.

She feels the anger before she feels the grief, anger at the ship, at the water, at the God she prays to every night. Then she folds it away, because there are two hundred living people below her feet and someone has to keep them clean and fed and in order. She turns back to the hatch. There will be time to feel this later. There is always, she is learning, less time than you think.



Cholera came aboard early and it did not leave. Along with measles, chicken pox and the ordinary miseries of a crowded ship, it worked its way through the passengers for the whole passage. By the time the *Ebba Brahe* reached Sydney, sixteen of her people were dead, most of them small children, and there had been three births to set against them.² The official list of the dead reads like a roll call of the very young: Rose Martin, four years, cholera; Peter Martin, an infant; Robert Armstrong, seven; and on down the page.²

It was in this atmosphere, of sickness and fear and hard work, that Mary Byrne was singled out. About a week after the ship sailed, sub-matrons were appointed to help keep the single women in order, and Mary was made one of them.¹ By her own account she was given the post almost at once. It was a mark of trust: she was sober, she was literate, and she was willing to be strict. She took the night watch in her turn, she kept the girls from the sailors, and she did not make herself popular doing it.

That last part is important, and every side of the later quarrel agreed on it. Mary Byrne was not liked by all of the girls she policed. One witness called her "rather impudent" and "no favourite on board."¹ Others, asked directly, said the opposite, that she was as well-conducted a girl as any on the ship.¹ Both things were true. She was doing an unpopular job well, and the girls who resented being kept in line resented her for it. In a sealed community with nothing to do but talk, that resentment had somewhere to go.

The doctor, and the two women he sacked

The Surgeon-Superintendent of the *Ebba Brahe* was Dr Louis Foucart, and he was a character. He had been born in London in 1818, the son of a French fencing-master who had ridden with Napoleon's Imperial Guard and survived the Russian campaign of 1812.¹² Foucart himself told anyone who would listen that he had attended the great British statesman Sir Robert Peel at his death, and later advertised himself in Sydney, without much modesty, as "physician to the Royal children."¹² He was clever, proud, quick-tempered, and thoroughly convinced of his own importance. The Board that later judged him would call him a man of "extreme irritability of temper and haughty demeanour."¹

A man like that, handed a governor's power over four hundred frightened people, was always going to collide with someone. He collided with almost everyone. He fell out with Captain Davison, whom he came to accuse of every kind of fraud. And, fatally, he fell out with the two women who ran the single women's quarters.

First he dismissed the Matron, Elizabeth James, an older woman appointed by the Commissioners in London, sacking her on 22 October 1854, barely a week into the voyage.¹ Then, in late November, he dismissed the ship's nurse, Hannah Clements, whom the records also call Mrs Clements.¹ His written reasons for sacking Clements were serious: that she drew freely on the medical stores for her own use, that she blackened his character, and that she tried to stir up "riot, insubordination and mutiny" among the passengers.¹ Whether those charges were fair or not, the effect was plain. Two women had been stripped of their posts, and with them their end-of-voyage gratuities, their pay, by the surgeon. In their place, Foucart leaned on younger women he found more willing, Mary Byrne among them.

Here is the shape of the thing, then, weeks before anything happened. A proud surgeon with a bonus to protect. Two older women, freshly sacked and out of pocket, with every reason in the world to hate him. And a young sub-matron, promoted into their place, whom the surgeon plainly favoured, walking the night watch in a locked cabin of women, some of whom already disliked her. It did not need much of a spark.

CLASS, FAITH AND THE TEMPER OF THE SHIP

Under the personal quarrels ran deeper fault-lines. The emigrants were mostly poor, Catholic and Irish; the officials who judged them were mostly Protestant and English, and their reports sneered openly at the Irish as "of an inferior class" and "ignorant."² Religion ran right through the ship. Among the surviving papers is a petition signed by the Roman Catholic emigrants, Mary Byrne's name among them, complaining that Mrs Clements mocked their prayers.¹ When the trouble came, it did not come into a calm ship. It came into a crowded, grieving, divided one.

The night



It is past midnight, the night of the 6th of December 1854, in the between-decks of the Ebba Brahe. A child is crying in the hospital, and the third mate has come to fetch the doctor. The key to the women's hatch is handed up, then down.

Foucart goes below. Mary Byrne is on watch, pale and unwell; he tells her she can go to her bed, that the nurse will sit up. He doctors the sick child, then finds the water-closet flooding, its foot-board jammed, and gets down with a swab to clear it. A girl pushes the door and calls out, "The doctor is inside."

Then, through the dark, comes a woman's voice. It is Mrs Clements. "Mary Byrnes," she calls. "Mary Byrnes, where are you?" And a third time, "I want some ginger, Mary Byrnes."

What happens in the next few minutes is the whole case, and there are two flatly opposite versions of it. In one, told by Clements and by the sacked Matron, a lamp is raised, a curtain is pulled back, and the doctor is seen in Mary Byrne's bed. In the other, told by Mary, by the nurse, and by the women who slept an arm's length away, nothing of the kind occurs: Mary gets up at the call, the doctor is at the water-closet and then the hospital, and no curtain hides anything at all.

Only one of these can be true. By morning, it will not matter which. The story will be everywhere.

The accusation, once it was made, was simple and devastating: that on that night Mrs Clements, going to call the sub-matron Mary Byrne, had discovered Dr Foucart in bed with her.¹ Clements put it in writing to the captain the very next day. "To my great surprise," she wrote, "I discovered Mr Foucart the Surgeon in bed with Mary Byrne."¹

Around that central charge, other complaints gathered like iron filings. Some of the single women said the doctor had tickled them or tried to kiss them on his night rounds. The sacked Matron, Elizabeth James, swore she had seen the same thing Clements had, the surgeon behind the curtain, "not undressed but had got on an old plaid coat that he used to wear."¹ Two or three of the girls said they had watched the doctor go to Mary's berth.

Foucart's own account of the night was long, detailed and completely innocent. He had been called to a sick child; he had sent the unwell Mary to bed; he had cleared a flooded water-closet; he had heard Clements calling for ginger for a stomach pain; he had given her the ginger, locked the hatch, smoked a cigar on deck, and gone to bed.¹ The berth in question, he pointed out, was in the most open, lamp-lit part of the deck, overlooked by two-thirds of the women; to go there for any wrong purpose, he said, was "to suppose me an ass."¹

The truth of what happened behind that curtain, if anything happened at all, is the one thing the records cannot give us, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. What they can give us is what it did to Mary. Whatever the doctor did or did not do, it was her name in the story, and it was her the ship punished. By her own account, for three days afterwards she was "hooted by the sailors," and could not walk the deck "without insult."¹ She was twenty-one, she had no family within ten thousand miles, and she was being jeered along her own deck for something a court would later decide had never happened.

Sydney, and the reckoning

The *Ebba Brahe* reached Sydney on 6 January 1855, and because there was measles aboard she was sent straight into quarantine at the North Head station, at the mouth of the harbour.^{2,10} The whole of that headland had been set aside decades earlier precisely for ships like this one, arriving with sickness in the hold.¹⁰ The passengers were landed, inspected, washed, and held until the fever was judged spent. It meant that the shipboard community, already at each other's throats, was thrown together for still longer, on shore, with time on its hands.

Arrival was not just disembarkation; it was an audit. The colonial Agent for Immigration, H. H. Browne, came aboard to inspect the ship and the emigrants and to hear any complaints.² And the complaints came. At that inspection, a number of the single women spoke against the surgeon, and their words were written down on the immigrant list.³ The names and ages recorded there survive: Anne Freeman, twenty; Frances Hetherington, nineteen; Ann Holland, nineteen; Susan Lowe, twenty-three; Margaret McCarthy, twenty-six; Bridget Mealey, twenty-four.³ One complained the doctor had called her bad names; another that he had kissed her; several that they had seen him go, in the night, to Mary Byrne.³

This was the escalation. What might have stayed shipboard gossip was now on an official page, and an official page could not be ignored. The matter was referred to a full Board of Immigration, which would sit like a court and take sworn evidence.

Meanwhile, the ordinary business of the colony rolled on around the scandal. On 15 and 16 January the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a notice from the Immigration Office: the single women of the *Ebba Brahe*, about one hundred and twenty-seven of them, could be hired at the Hyde Park Barracks depot from Friday the 19th.⁵ The notice even broke them down by trade: twenty-one general house servants, twenty-eight farm servants, thirty-one housemaids, and so on down to five cooks.⁵ Mary Byrne was one of those thirty-one housemaids.⁵ Even as her name was being argued over by a Board of colonial gentlemen, she was, on paper, simply one more Irish servant waiting in the hiring room for an employer to walk in.

THE HIRING DEPOT AT HYDE PARK BARRACKS

The single women were received into the Female Immigration Depot at Hyde Park Barracks, in the heart of Sydney.⁹ It was a reception and hiring place: employers came to the "hiring room" to engage servants, and women with family in the colony were collected there. For a girl like Mary, with no relations waiting, the depot was the whole of her arrival, a room, a bed, and the hope of a decent place. The building still stands today, a museum; you can walk the floor where she waited.⁹

The inquiry

The Board of Immigration sat over seven days across late January and early February 1855, chaired by the same H. H. Browne, with two colleagues beside him.¹ It heard the accusers first. The single women told what they had seen or thought they had seen. Then Mrs Clements gave her long, detailed account, and it was a set-piece: woken by her sister, told by two girls that "the doctor is in bed with Mary Byrnes," sitting on a chest and calling out the name three times, the lantern raised, the curtain opening, and there, she swore, "the doctor in the bed with Mary Byrnes on the right side of her as she lay."¹

Then Mary Byrne was called, and she did not flinch. Her evidence was steady and consistent. She said the surgeon had always been "very particular" and had never taken a liberty with her or any of the girls. She gave her own plain account of the night: sent to her bed, called up again by Mrs Clements crying for ginger, dressed, went and sat with her, and saw nothing improper.¹ And when the Board put the charge to her directly, the exchange in the minutes is as bare and as brave as anything in the whole file. "You are aware of the report that was circulated respecting your having gone into the doctor's bed?" "Yes." "Is that the case?" "No, it is not."¹

She was not left standing alone. A wall of women came forward for her. The sub-matrons who slept in the berths above and beside her, Mary Kelly, Margaret Kelly, Bridget O'Hare, the nurse Sally Aherne, and Mary Stone in the berth opposite, all said the same thing: that Mary had gone to bed alone, that they had heard nothing in the night, and that they would certainly have woken had the doctor climbed in beside her.¹ One after another they also vouched for her character. Margaret Crichton put it simply: "My opinion is that she is really innocent, a pious girl."¹

And then there was Foucart himself, who did not so much defend as go to war. His written rebuttal ran on for pages, in language the Board itself found "peculiar and at times offensive."¹ He laid the whole affair at Mrs Clements's door as revenge for her sacking. He blackened the character of nearly every girl who had spoken against him. He dragged the captain into it, firing off a list of twenty-five counter-charges of fraud and mismanagement.¹ He even offered, in writing, to have Mary Byrne medically examined to prove her innocence, calling her "a most exemplary pious virgin."¹ All the while, Captain Davison sat annotating the surgeon's pages in the margins, coolly contradicting him point by point, and refusing to endorse Foucart's slander of the women: "I have seen no transactions to warrant such assertions."¹

The verdict, and after

The Board signed its report on 26 April 1855, and on the central charge it came down firmly. It found no evidence that Dr Foucart was a man of immoral habits, noted that most witnesses spoke well of him, and then delivered the judgement that gives this booklet its name. It felt bound, it said, "to disregard the whole of the evidence directly bearing on this charge, and to attribute it to a malicious and wicked conspiracy on the part of Mrs Clements to revenge herself on the Surgeon for the step he had taken in removing her from office as Nurse."¹

In plain words: the Board did not believe it happened. It thought the whole thing had been got up by a woman with a grudge. Mary Byrne was cleared.

The Board did not let the doctor off cleanly. It blamed him for his want of discretion, for sacking the elderly Matron so harshly, and above all for promoting a young woman he favoured into a position under his own authority, which, it said drily, "would necessarily create suspicion."¹ He was censured for walking the deck at night with Mary, and for wandering the single women's quarters without a matron as the rules required.¹ He kept his gratuity but was told he should not be given another emigrant ship. The captain was cleared entirely and even praised. The only two people to be punished in the pocket were Mrs James and Mrs Clements, whose gratuities were withheld, Clements being pointedly criticised for handling her great "discovery" so badly that she never even fetched an independent witness, but "only troubled herself about getting a piece of ginger."¹

And Mary? Here the ship's records let her go, and the family's records pick her up. She did not vanish into the hiring room and out of history. Within a couple of years she married a man named John Kelly. She was widowed about two years after that, left with a young daughter. And then she married again, this time to William Zotzenbach, and by 1868 she had settled with him in the Molong and Larras Lake districts of central New South Wales.⁶ She is the "wife Mary" named in William Zotzenbach's will, whose estate papers, forty-odd years on, sit in the same archive as the inquiry that once put her name in every colonial mouth.⁶ The frightened girl at the rail became a wife, a mother and a settler, and the ancestor from whom a whole colonial family descends.

As for the doctor who caused it all, Louis Foucart stayed on. He never got his emigrant ship, but he made a life in Sydney, of all things as a musician, a member of the Philharmonic Society. He married in 1867, left the colony in 1887, and died in Yorkshire in 1899, an old man, still, one suspects, quite sure he had been right about everything.¹²



It is a hot afternoon, some year in the late 1860s, on a selection in the Larras Lake country, west of the mountains. A woman in her thirties stands at the door of a slab house, shading her eyes, watching a small girl chase a hen across the yard.

Her name is Mary Zotzenbach now. Once it was Mary Kelly. Before that, a long way back and a long way east, it was Mary Byrne, of St Mary's in Carlow, and for a few bad weeks it was the most talked-about name in Sydney.

"Mind the fence," she calls, in an accent the neighbours can still place at fifty paces. The child ignores her, the way children do.

She thinks of the ship less often now than she used to. When she does, it is not the curtain or the lamp or the jeering sailors she remembers first. It is the small splashes over the side, and the mothers who ran out of tears. She has a daughter of her own to keep now, and land, and a name that is only hers.

No one out here knows a thing about the Ebba Brahe, and she is content to keep it that way. She goes back inside to start the bread. The past can look after itself; there is an afternoon to get through.



What are we to make of it, all this time later? The honest answer is that we cannot know what, if anything, passed between Mary Byrne and Louis Foucart, and anyone who tells you otherwise is guessing. But we can weigh what the records show, and they lean a long way in one direction. The people best placed to know, the women who slept beside her, stood by her. The two who accused her had just been sacked by the man they accused, and had every reason for spite. A Crown board that heard it all, at length, threw the charge out. On the evidence, Mary Byrne was far more sinned against than sinning: a strict, capable, devout young woman, alone in the world, disliked for doing an unpopular job well, and publicly shamed for something a court decided had never happened. That she showed the imprudence of youth, in letting a powerful man's favour settle on her, is probably the worst that can fairly be said. And even that she outlived. She got off the ship, dried her eyes, and went and had a life.

Cast of the story

Mary Byrne - the protagonist; orphaned Carlow housemaid, sub-matron aboard; later Mary Kelly, then Mary Zotzenbach of Molong.

Dr Louis Foucart - the Surgeon-Superintendent; proud, clever, quarrelsome; later a Sydney musician.

Captain Robert Pollock Davison - the Master; older, respected, at odds with the surgeon.

Hannah ("Mrs") Clements - the ship's nurse, sacked by Foucart; the accuser, and, per the Board, the author of the "conspiracy."

Elizabeth James - the Matron, sacked by Foucart; Clements's ally.

Mary Kelly, Margaret Kelly, Bridget O'Hare, Sally Aherne, Mary Stone - sub-matrons and nurse who gave evidence for Mary.

The complainants - Anne Freeman (20), Frances Hetherington (19), Ann Holland (19), Susan Lowe (23), Margaret McCarthy (26), Bridget Mealey (24).

H. H. Browne - Agent for Immigration and chairman of the Board, with G. K. Mann and Warner Gibbes Alleyne.

References

Sources cited

The inquiry itself is a **single record** in the NSW State Archives: **INX-106-78919** (Colonial Secretary's Letters Received, **Letter 55/7931**). It was transcribed in nine parts labelled 2a to 2i for processing; those are internal divisions of the one source, not separate sources.

1. The Board of Immigration inquiry into the immigrant ship "Ebba Brahe," 1855 - the Minutes of Evidence (the single women; Hannah Clements; the former Matron Elizabeth James; Mary Byrne's own deposition, "No, it is not"; and the defence sub-matrons), the Board's Report and findings (26 April 1855 - the "malicious and wicked conspiracy," the censure of Foucart, the withheld gratuities), Dr Foucart's written rebuttal with Captain Davison's marginal replies, and the enclosures (the dismissal letters of Mrs James and Mrs Clements, the Roman Catholic emigrants' petition, the riot depositions, and Mrs Clements's written accusation to Captain Davison of 7 December 1854). NSW State Archives, INX-106-78919 (Letter 55/7931). One record, transcribed in parts 2a to 2i.
2. The Agent for Immigration to the Colonial Secretary, arrival report of the "Ebba Brahe" with the return of births and deaths, 28 February 1855. NSW State Archives, INX-106-78918 (Letter 55/4414); "Ebba Brahe Immigration Report."
3. Arrival complaints on the immigrant list (pp. 37-42), with the complainants' ages, and Mary Byrne's own particulars (housemaid of St Mary's, Carlow; parents Luke and Ellen deceased; able to read and write; no relations in the colony); family working notes from the "Ebba Brahe Immigrant List."
4. Baptism of Mary Byrne, 17 March 1833, parish of Tinryland, County Carlow, Ireland; family record (parish register; original not yet obtained).
5. "Single Females, per Ebba Brahe," Immigration Office notice, Sydney Morning Herald, 15-16 January 1855 (about 127 single women; 31 housemaids; hiring at Hyde Park Barracks from 19 January).

6. Estate and probate of William Zotzenbach of Molong (the "wife Mary"), 1885-1904; NSW State Archives, NRS-13660 Probate packets, and Deceased Estates Index INX-15-180287; and the family's marriage records (Kelly; Zotzenbach).

Background & context

7. The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, the assisted-emigration system, and the office of Surgeon-Superintendent (its 57 duties and gratuity; S. Walcott, "Instructions for Surgeons of Emigrant Ships," 1847). Wikipedia, "Colonial Land and Emigration Commission" and "Surgeon-superintendent" (accessed July 2026).

8. Shipboard life, the single women's compartment and the matron system: State Library of New South Wales, "Life on board" and "Female emigration."

9. The Female Immigration Depot and hiring room, Hyde Park Barracks: Museums of History NSW.

10. The North Head Quarantine Station: Museums of History NSW / published histories of the station.

11. Ship facts (about 1,700 tons; Plymouth, 14 October 1854; Sydney after 83 days; about 392 immigrants, mostly Irish; sailed for Callao 7 April 1855): Manly Library Local Studies, "Ebba Brahe 1855."

12. Dr Louis Foucart's life (born London 1818; his father's Napoleonic service; the Peel story; Sydney musician; died Yorkshire 1899): Australharmony (University of Sydney), "Foucart, Louis," drawing on Trove newspapers.

Image sources. The reconstruction scenes in this booklet are original artwork to be created for it. The full transcripts, the context primer, the timeline and the Mary Byrne evidence compilation on which this story rests are held in this project's folders.



She sailed to the far side of the world alone, an orphaned Irish housemaid of twenty-one, and was made to keep order over a shipload of young women. Then, on one dark night at sea, she was accused of the unforgivable. This is the true story of Mary Byrne and the immigrant ship Ebba Brahe: the fever-struck voyage, the proud surgeon, the two sacked women said to have plotted her ruin, and the colonial inquiry that weighed it all and called it what it was, a malicious and wicked conspiracy. Reconstructed entirely from the surviving records, it is the story of a young woman who was shamed for something that a court decided never happened, and who got off the ship and went and had a life.

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