# Collecting Narratives of Migration: Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Collections at Museum Victoria, Melbourne

## Introduction

Migration is a complex, varied, and global experience that has impacted directly or indirectly on all Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, for nearly 230 years. Australians have been migrants, been related to migrants, known, worked with and married migrants, been part of diverse communities and held opinions on policies of colonialism, migration, refugees and multiculturalism. Some are newly arrived, many swept in during the post-World War II boom, and many others trace ancestry back to the earliest arrivals. Whatever the story, whatever the connection and regardless of the passage of time, there is one constant – we are our family narratives, and sooner or later, most people go searching for meaning and understanding through uncovering their ancestry. These narratives and their related material culture are frequently contributed to public collections such as Museum Victoria.

Public archives and libraries offer the paper trails to help trace people; their origins, birth, marriage and death dates, their ships, places of settlement, work, and children. They can also house gems in the form of personal diaries and letters, photographs, artworks, and artefacts. Museum Victoria offers another layer by documenting (through objects, images, diaries, letters, and oral histories) the personal experiences of the people who have arrived in Australia, most particularly in Victoria, since the 1830s.

The emphasis on the personal layer which lies beneath the material object highlights the Museum’s belief that seemingly simple or ordinary objects can be symbols of extraordinary experiences and have great emotional power. This essay highlights migration collection material from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on settlement histories in the colony of Port Phillip which became the state of Victoria in 1851. While this earlier period of Australian migration history has a relatively modest array of artefacts held in the Museum’s collections, letters, diaries, promotional publications, and personal artefacts provide researchers interested in this subject with a rich and well-documented resource – and with the layer of personal connections not often associated with similar items in libraries and archives.

## Migration to Victoria – Historical Context

In 1803 there was a failed attempt to establish a convict settlement at Sorrento on the Victorian coast. Whalers and sealers sailed the coastline from the 1820s and settlers made their way overland from New South Wales and across Bass Strait from Tasmania in the 1830s, establishing a thriving pastoral district. In 1851, the discovery of gold in central Victoria transformed the fledgling frontier town of Melbourne into a heaving, instant city that would become by the 1880s one of the world’s great international cities. By 1861, half a million people had descended upon Victoria. Migrants were predominantly British but substantial numbers arrived from Europe and also from China. Anti-Chinese legislation came and went but was reintroduced in the 1880s and cemented by the new Federal Parliament through the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*.

During these decades and into the 1930s, state, federal and British governments provided assistance to British migrants while prohibiting migration from Asia and introducing quotas on selected European countries during the 1920s. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, migration all but ceased.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is within this context of population growth, economic ebb and flow, Federalism, racially-based policy, Indigenous dispossession, nation-building and cultural development that the Museum’s migration collections can be placed and the histories personalised.

The collection includes some 8,000 items which span over 180 years and aim to represent cross-cultural migration experiences from the earliest Port Phillip settlers, such as the English pastoralist Henty family. There are stories from English, Scottish, Irish, and German nineteenth century migrants, and Chinese and Japanese narratives from the late nineteenth century which help to trace generations of subsequent family stories, despite the onslaught of the White Australia policy. There are also stories of English, Italian, Greek, German, Albanian, Bulgarian, and Scottish migrants from the early twentieth century which collective demonstrate the cultural diversity of Australia’s migration history well before the post-World War II migration boom.

These varied narratives represent urban and rural settlement, assisted and non-assisted migrants, people of multi-faith backgrounds, solitary migrants and families, chain migration, return migration, prisoners-of-war and internees. The material also relates to the processes of migration from application to departure and includes details of voyages by ship and plane; personal belongings brought, created and purchased; luggage; items of work, domesticity and artistry; objects for maintaining connections to homelands; documentaries of migrant life through writings, film and photographs and community and organisational experiences.

## Paper Trails

The very nature of migration – identifying, processing, recording and corresponding – lends itself to paper-based material. The Museum’s collection contains passports, vaccination certificates, application forms, official correspondence, information booklets, shipboard ephemera, ship and plane tickets, baggage labels and more from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such material illustrates how immigration processes have evolved over time, how transportation has developed and how promoting Australia as a migrant destination has changed (both in terms of the opportunities sold and the people encouraged). Documentation is particularly rich during the post-World War II era, with migrants represented in the Museum’s collection through piles of papers from first application to official correspondence, personal references, tickets, vaccination certificates, luggage receipts, shipboard menus and programs and orientation materials. Immigration processes were (and remain) highly bureaucratised and reflect the administering of mass migration. Between 1947 and 1971 the Australian population rose from 7.5 million to 12.7 million, primarily due to immigration[[2]](#endnote-2). Migration to Australia during the nineteenth century was also regulated; the administration of assisted migrants was rigorous and divided between colonial and British governments, but the exchange of applications, correspondence and information was far less prolific and not as stringently regulated.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Museum’s collections contain tickets of passage which reveal ship names, departure and arrival points and the cost of a passage. Identity documents such as birth and marriage certificates contain names to trace and passports and naturalisation certificates demonstrate global movements of people and early examples of colonial citizenship. Rather than being treated as purely archival documents, of value primarily for the information they contain, the Museum is also interested in the intrinsic value of the ticket or passport as an artefact in its own right. Elizabeth Pratt may have clutched her two tickets of passage **(HT4746 and HT 4747)** as she herded her children onto the *Netherby*, a Black Ball Line clipper ship which transported her in steerage from London to Melbourne in 1862. The tickets would also have been handled by the issuing officer, and those checking the tickets at points of departure and arrival. Thus simple, ephemeral pieces of paper have connected people across the ocean, and now across time, and help us to imagine their journeys and experiences.

## In Their Own Words

Migrants have frequently been excellent documenters of their own stories. Letters, diaries, postcards, annotated photo albums and even narrated film bring a personal voice to the past. Written usually around the time of the event (although often transcribed from their shipboard notes after reaching landfall), they reflect the feelings and emotions of the moment. They give us glimpses into the lives of the writers as well as the common motivation to describe the shipboard experiences to family back home. Indeed some of the Museum’s letters and diaries were acquired from donors and vendors in the UK, rather than in Australia from the writers’ descendants. Most of the Museum’s collections of ‘autobiography’ are travel writings – they may have been written to provide information to those left behind, as part of a routine to fill idle hours during long monotonous days at sea, or as a form of therapy to soothe anxieties and enable the writer to reflect on events or unfamiliar experiences. Certainly during the nineteenth century, when ship voyages could take at least three months (and even later journeys on ocean liners up to six weeks), these passages were viewed as momentous, marking both a physical and emotional separation from home and family. These were considerable endeavours considering most people had never left their home countries before.

The Museum holds a small but significant collection of shipboard diaries, both nineteenth and twentieth century, written in English by migrants from the UK and Ireland. Some of these diaries and letters were also written post-settlement, providing fascinating glimpses into, in particular, early Melbourne life. The diary written by M. P. O’Shea **(HT15834)**, an Irish migrant sailing to Melbourne in 1857 is full of energy and offers colourful insights into life in steerage:

*“The old scoundrel of a cook is drunk to-day again and burned the rice which had to be thrown overboard ... Well, what a night it has been. Such falling, tumbling, crashing and uproar. Boxes, hat cases, carpet bags, wash-basins, dishes, plates, pans, bottles, knives and forks all rolling and clattering about in the most confounded confusion within ... On examination I find we have the representatives of 17 different nations on board – English, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, Yankee, French, German, Polish, Hamburgher (sic), Austrian, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Prussian, Greek, Australian, and perhaps more if I could discover them.”*

These invaluable descriptions of communal life in steerage are unusual – diarists tended to be people able to afford a cabin berth, more likely to be literate and able to reflect and write in relative comfort and quiet.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The collection also includes a letter written by 23 year old Rebecca Sarah Greaves in 1851 **(HT8270)** whose family settled in Victoria from England on the Plenty River near Heidelberg. The letter reveals the complex feelings of loss and separation, as well as the excitement and adventure felt by newly arrived migrants, the hard work involved in establishing a rural property from scratch and how families dispersed to find work. It includes useful details about the cost of land, crops, stock and supplies. The letter contains a wonderful description of the excitement and chaos caused by the Victoria gold rush as well as a calm, yet dramatic, picture of the threat posed by bush fires. One evocative quote hints at Rebecca’s independent spirit:

*“… everyone has left town to go to the gold diggings, there is not a man or boy to be seen in the town even the gents at the bank are 'off to the diggings' such an uproar was never known in the colony before. Not a ship can leave the bay for as soon as the ships get in port the sailors are away to the gold mines ... If I were only a young man would not I go gold digging? and even now I feel half inclined to dress in men's clothes and go. I am certain if I could not dig I could rock the cradle only I should be afraid they would know I was not a man as I should not like to part with my curls …”*

The collection currently holds a preponderance of English recorded experiences – and this seems to mirror many Australian public collections. This reflects the reality of Great Britain as by far the dominant source of migrants to Australia and possibly a tendency for migrants from other countries not to be such active documenters of their experiences; or perhaps it is simply that accounts have not survived or not been passed into state collections.

## From Personal to Grand Narratives

The Museum’s migration collections offer researchers the opportunity to make connections between personal and broader narratives, thus positioning the experiences of migrants within social, political and economic contexts. A single object can provide these different layers of insight, and seemingly unconnected artefacts can provide contexts for each other.

For example, Rebecca Greaves’ letter referred to previously is not only the narrative of a young woman negotiating a new life in a foreign landscape, but an important historical observation of the impact of the 1851 gold rush on the fledgling city of Melbourne. This in turn provides a context for the publication of numerous immigrant guides to the Australian colonies at this time, which were responding to, and encouraging, the movement of primarily British migrants to cement the colonisation of Australia. The Museum holds a number of these guides in its collection, including Dr John Dunmore Lang’s *The Australian Emigrant’s Manual* published in 1851 **(HT8393)**. Lang was a great exponent of emigration to Australia, although principally interested in bringing out Protestant immigrants to Australia. This was unlike philanthropist and migration advocate Caroline Chisholm who appears to have had no religious prejudices (herself a Catholic) and of whom Lang was a vocal critic. Chisholm organised Jewish families to come out to Port Phillip as well as people of Protestant and Catholic backgrounds.

Insight into the life and achievements of this remarkable woman can be gleaned through one of Museum Victoria’s most precious historical artefacts. A scrapbook, over 100 years old and containing material that is around 150 years old, was handed down through the Chisholm family, and consists of material relating to Chisholm's work assisting immigrants before and after they had arrived **(HT3141)**. Most of the items relate to her 1852-1854 period in the UK promoting emigration and her Family Colonization Loan Society, and her second period in Australia from 1854-1866. The scrapbook contains newspaper clippings, public notices, correspondence and meeting minutes. There are posters advertising the emigration lectures she gave across Great Britain; railway tickets stamped giving her free travel, which indicate the distances she traversed and the official support for her project; invitation cards revealing a woman circulating in high society, where her fundraising efforts would have been concentrated; and lists of names recording the people she assisted financially to migrate to Australia.

Caroline Chisholm was born in 1808 and made her first visit to Australia in 1838. She spent about 20 years of her life active in the public sphere as a social reformer and philanthropist. She tirelessly promoted immigration to Australia, and her particular passions were reuniting families separated by distance, improving the often appalling conditions of emigrant ship travel, and looking after single young women who, from the 1830s, came to the colonies without support, finances or protection. She desired a national system of colonisation in Australia. Her activities were varied, wide ranging and invariably practical, and included the establishment of a variety of temporary immigrant accommodations, authoring political pamphlets and submissions to British parliament, fundraising, setting up loans, and undertaking lecture tours. Caroline Chisholm saw value in encouraging emigration to Australia, but wanted to improve its processes and outcomes for women and families.[[5]](#endnote-5)

There is a certain irony about scrapbooks because their very function is to preserve the memories, special events, activities and achievements of a particular person. And yet the very nature of scrapbooks is that they are in fact ephemeral, made of paper, and full of material that is often not meant to survive. This scrapbook provides insights not only into the life of Caroline Chisholm, but nineteenth century migration history to Australia, the processes of that migration, the ships that were transporting migrants, and even the details of some of the people who arrived.

Another example of a single object in the Museum’s collection within a grand narrative is the sheet music for the *White Australia* song, composed by W. E. Naughton, lyrics by Naughton and W. J. W. Gyles **(HT17014)**. It is an evocative example of the popular promotion of the white Australia sentiment which dominated Australian immigration policy after Federation in 1901 and which was promoted by organisations such as the Australian Natives' Association. Performed in 1910, it includes such lyrics as:

*Australia! Australia!*

*Sunny south of Old Britannia's sons,*

*Australia, the white man's land,*

*Defended by the white man's guns,*

*Australia! Australia!*

*For Anglo Saxon race and Southern Cross,*

*God bless and help us to protect*

*Our glorious land Australia.*

Within this politically-endorsed racist environment is the story of Setsutaro Hasegawa who migrated to Australia from Japan in 1897 – just four years before the introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901) which would have made his immigration almost impossible. The Museum holds documents, photographs and objects which relate to two generations of the Hasegawa family. He established a laundry business in Geelong, where there was a small Japanese community and in 1905 married Australian-born Ada Cole and had three children. Setsutaro unsuccessfully applied for naturalisation; natives of Asian countries were ineligible to become naturalised under the White Australia policy. In 1941, when over 70 years old and having lived in Australia for over 40 years, he was interned as an enemy alien. He was released due to his age in 1943 and was fortunate not to be deported as most Japanese internees were after the war. Amongst the most evocative objects in this collection is one of Setsutaro’s suits **(HT24660)** made by a Japanese tailor in Melbourne, his original passport **(HT22208)** and a photograph taken of him with his son and grandchildren around 1933 **(MM107263)**.

In stark contrast to objects representing cultural groups whose entry was barred or whose permanent residency was made difficult, a set of postcards promoting rural settlement in Victoria **(HT32384-32390)** are part of the larger context of the *Empire Settlement Act* (1922). It saw the British Government augment existing Australian state and federal subsidies with financial assistance to British families to settle in regional Australia.[[6]](#endnote-6) These were the desired, white British migrants favoured to maintain a predominantly white, British Australia.[[7]](#endnote-7) A personal insight into this scheme is provided by Susannah Nicholls, who migrated under the scheme to Australia with her family from England in 1923. Susannah and her husband Will were both teachers but they settled on the Mornington Peninsula to try farming. Like so many of their compatriots during the 1920s they were ill-equipped for farming, failed and returned to teaching. Sadly, Susannah died in 1926 and Will returned to England with the family. The Museum holds personal effects and photographs which had belonged to Susannah and family. They are poignant, simple symbols of attempts to build and furnish a home in regional Victoria, including a soup bowl **(HT7816)**, candlesticks **(HT7815)**, prayer book **(HT7813)** and carpentry tools such as a smoothing plane **(HT7829)**. Susannah wrote letters home to her family (held by the State Library of Victoria) which reveal her homesickness and stoicism, as well as making real connections between Susannah’s voice and the Museum’s objects:

*“... If this place, climate and freedom were just transplanted to England and us with it, within reach of you all, I could be absolutely happy ...”*

*“... We have all we need and if our tables are packing cases on legs and our chests of drawers are kero tins in cases cut long ways, we can cover the defects with a cloth and hanging a drape in front of the tins and there you are.”[[8]](#endnote-8)*

The Museum collection also features a travel bath brought from England by the Davies family when they migrated to Australia in 1852 **(HT19350)**. In England, John Davies had owned a factory manufacturing shoes and he transported many of his family’s personal belongings, silk paintings and household furniture. Family lore recalls the bath being used en-route as both travel bath and travel trunk. It has passed through several generations and even during the 1920s was being used as a functional everyday object for family bathing. The bath’s significance goes beyond a family narrative however, and can be used to explore the increasing attention to personal health and hygiene which evolved as a result of industrialisation in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Photographs in the Museum’s collection are also evocative and revealing documents which, while frequently highly personal and localised in their content, can also be used to interconnect with national and even global histories. A photograph taken around 1937 of a group of people enjoying a bush picnic in Melbourne’s outer east **(MM110705)** appears ordinary enough. The group is part of the ‘Kadimah’ community organisation which was founded in Melbourne as a secular cultural institution by recently arrived Eastern European Jews in 1911. One family featured are Jewish refugees; another is the family who sponsored their migration. At around the same time as this photograph was taken, the 1937 Évian Conference of allied nations revealed an international unwillingness to accept Jewish refugees escaping Nazi persecution in Germany. Australia reluctantly agreed to accept 15,000 people but only 7,500 refugees arrived by 1939 before the doors were closed. Consequently, here perhaps we are gazing at the fortunate few.

## Behind the Single Object

Material culture can also have intrinsic value due to an object’s craftsmanship, its beauty and its functionality, yet the attached narratives are what give such objects an extra layer of significance. For example, the Museum’s collection holds two nineteenth century, hand-made quilts, each beautiful in their own way, which also speak to the needlecraft skills brought by migrating women and the assignment of heirloom value to the items by subsequent generations. Martha Bergin made her quilt in 1843 **(HT12340)** in Athlone, Ireland when she was about 21 years old and brought it with her when she migrated with her husband Andrew Tipping in 1851. Finally settling in central Victoria, only one of their seven children survived childhood. The quilt remained in the family until donated to Museum Victoria in 2006. It is a lovely example of appliqué work and Martha’s personal connection will always be visible through her stitched name, date and place of creation amongst the flowers and birds she had carefully crafted. Isabella Falconer Murray Spence brought her patchwork quilt **(HT28831)** when she migrated from Forfar, Scotland with her husband David Spence in 1853 and settled in inner Melbourne. The quilt was probably made in the 1840s or early 1850s by Isabella’s grandmother Jane Burn and given to her perhaps as a glory box or wedding gift. This quilt was passed down the family line until donated to the Museum in 2011. Thus two quilts, two women, two makers, created quilts at a similar time in neighbouring countries. They are technically and stylistically quite different, but represent both the cultural, social and gender significance of quilts and quilt-making and their place as items of cross-generational meaning.[[10]](#endnote-10)

## Conclusion

The theme of migration will always offer opportunities for collection growth in terms of developing existing themes and narratives as well as exploring new ones; always with the aim of representing the diversity of migrant experiences in Australia by making very personal connections through material culture. Thus a diary allows us to hear a voice from another time; a teacup lets us hold a handle where the original owner had once placed their hand; a dockside photograph reveals facial expressions of hope or fear; a registration certificate with a handprint preserves an ancestor’s physical presence in an immediate, quite confronting way; and a suitcase captures a moment of decision and severance from homeland. The Museum’s collections are living collections, and an invaluable community resource which are increasingly being made accessible online.

Beyond the personal, and the intimate, all these hundreds of stories create interconnected, interwoven narratives which provide insights into who we are as a community, where we have come from, and who and what will shape us into the future. Objects, photographs, oral histories, documents, and diaries help us to keep these personal stories and larger historical narratives real, tangible and constant.

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### Endnotes

1. Geoffrey Sherington, *Australia’s Immigrants* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, 1990) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera. The Story of Australian Immigration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For an overview of Australian nineteenth migration policies and procedures, refer to A. Martin, ‘Immigration Policy before Federation,’ in *The Australian People. An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins*, ed. James Jupp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp39-44 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Penelope Layland, ‘All at Sea’, in *National Library of Australia News* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, August, 1997), pp10-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a history of the life of Caroline Chisholm, refer to Margaret Kiddle, *Caroline Chisholm* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1990) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration, 1915-1940. A Study of Desperate Hopes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p1 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For more on the history of the White Australia policy, see Gwenda Tavan, *The Slow, Long Death of White Australia* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Letters, Susannah May Nicholls, 1922-1929, MS 12127, MS Box 2604 /1-2, Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Tracey Grigg, ‘Health and Hygiene in Nineteenth Century England’, Museum Victoria Collections website, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/themes/1615/health-hygiene-in-nineteenth-century-england> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a history of quilts and quilt-making, refer to *Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories*, ed. Sue Pritchard (London: V&A Publishing, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)