



# SEMAPHORE

Newsletter of the Maritime Law

Association of Australia and New Zealand



## Book Review – *John Marshall: Shipowner, Lloyd's reformer and emigration agent*

A biography published last year by Melbourne-based historian Elizabeth Rushen will be of interest to many MLAANZ members. *John Marshall: Shipowner, Lloyd's reformer and emigration agent* is a publication of Anchor Books Australia.

Marshall (1787-1861), a Yorkshire man who made and lost three fortunes in his lifetime, was one of the major influences on early 19th Century emigration to Australia and New Zealand. His story exemplifies the public-spirited entrepreneurship of that era and showcases the many ways it was possible to accumulate great wealth by reading the undulations of shipping markets.

From obscure origins as a provincial English insurance broker, Marshall rose to be a key player in London's mercantile world. Between 1811 and 1838 he owned or part-owned more than 30 ships ranging in size from 146 to 436 tonnes. Marshall benefited from the lifting of the embargo on ships sailing eastward from the Cape of Good Hope when the East India Company lost its monopoly in Asia in 1813. Immediately afterward there was a 350-tonne restriction on ship size but intense lobbying from London shipowners and merchants led to an 1819 Act of Parliament which enabled shipping to trade between England and Australia without restriction. These developments, coinciding with the growth of the Australian colonies, enabled a surge in demand for British-produced consumer goods and allowed Sydney to become a main base for increased traffic in Pacific regions.

In the wake of the 1819 Act there was a boom in British imports to Australia, replacing imports from Bengal which had initially dominated Australian markets. Until then, shipping connections between Britain and Australia had been tenuous and sporadic, but trade developed rapidly during the 1820s, fed also by the removal of import duties. The numbers of ships leaving Britain for Australia, excluding convict vessels, jumped from nine in 1820 to 33 in 1822. Marshall-owned vessels ranged far and wide and in 1827 his brig the *Harmony* became the first ship to land New Zealand timber in London.

During the 1830s Marshall was to become the best-known and most-significant emigration agent in the Australian and New Zealand trades, capitalising on two major decisions of the British Government: the 1831 decision to fund female emigration from the sale of Crown land in the colonies (the Ripon Regulations) and the new Poor Law which came into effect in 1835. This provided the machinery for parish emigration by encouraging parish guardians to support applications from potential migrants. Marshall was perfectly positioned to take advantage of these developments and turned his attention to the conveyance of people. There was huge profit in sending ships full of people to the colonies – outgoing passenger freight was assured through Government contracts and ships could be back-filled on the return legs with wool, whale oil and seal fur.

Nearly 3000 women and over 1000 family members were assisted to migrate on 14 ships, but Marshall became mired in controversy, accused of being complicit in introducing immoral women and “the sweepings of the workhouses” to the colonies. There was objection to a perceived conflict of interest between being in a position to choose the recipients of Government bounties and the resulting financial benefits. Liz Rushen explores the incongruities of these controversies: female emigration was seen to be unnatural and not in accordance with ideals of feminine domesticity; not only were women emigrating independently without male guardians, but they had to work to support themselves; and their arrival was perceived as a threat to social order and the male-centredness of colonial society.

All of the ships Marshall secured for the trade were large and rated A1 by Lloyd's and he worked hard to improve the voyage experience for passengers, with a sharp focus on cleanliness. He assisted tens of thousands to migrate in the period between 1837 and 1842, and established Britain's first emigration depot, at Plymouth. In an era when many ships were lost to fire, shipwreck or other hazards, all Marshall-owned or chartered ships safely discharged their emigrants in Australia, with hardly any fatalities.

An Australian economic and financial crisis at the start of the 1840s, coupled with his own speculative over-investment, led to Marshall's undoing. He was declared bankrupt in 1842.

Marshall subsequently revived his fortunes with the formation of the Great Western Coal Company, which built up 40 outlets supplying coal throughout the south of England, until it too failed.

In another compelling chapter of his life, Marshall set in train a review of the system of classification of ships. He initiated the merger of Lloyd's red and green registers which published information for shipowners and underwriters respectively, and which had competed with one another. The combined register, which took effect in 1834, represented a new, ethical system of ship classification. The reforms Marshall agitated for stood the test of time – they remain the foundation of Lloyd's modern-day classification system, one of the underpinnings of Britain's standing as the world's leading commercial maritime power for more than a century.

This biography of John Marshall has been meticulously researched and is brilliantly written, displaying the author's passion for the subject matter. The book will be of great interest to history buffs, those with an interest in the commercial side of shipping and anyone with a family history connected to 19th Century immigration.

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