The convict ship *Hougoumont*: an appropriate charter?

The sailing ship *Hougoumont* in 1867-68 brought the last shipment of convicts, including 62 Irish political prisoners, to Western Australia. When the ship had been built in Burma, some sixteen years earlier, she was of a design already somewhat old-fashioned. This talk examines why such a ship was chartered to carry convicts, the ancestry of "East India country ships", and the unequalled reputation of Indian shipwrights in the first half of the 19th century.

Here in Western Australia, the ship *Hougoumont* is known for bringing the last shipment of convicts to the colony. The 280 convicts onboard famously included 62 Irish political prisoners – members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood or it's North American associate the Fenian Brotherhood who had been found guilty of taking part in the 1867 Fenian Rising against British rule. Seventeen of these Fenians had been serving with the British army and were classified as Military Fenians. One of them, John Boyle O'Reilly, escaped to America in 1869 on an American whaling ship. He made contact with the Clan na Gael organisation which purchased the whaling ship *Catalpa* that was fitted out to rescue some of the military Fenians from Western Australia. That adventure is one of the best known episodes in Western Australia's colonial history and will surely be the subject of a feature film sooner or later.

But the subject of this talk is the convict ship *Hougoumont*. Was she a suitable ship to be chartered to bring convicts, plus 44 pensioner guards and their wives and children, four prison guards and their families, and five passengers from England to Fremantle? The convict ships have a poor reputation. Basil Lubbock, who was arguably the great historian of the merchant ships that sailed to Australia and New Zealand, wrote of the emigrant ships of the 1840s: "The horrors of the long five-months' passage for the miserable landsmen, cooped-up on low, ill-ventilated and over-crowded tween decks, were fit to be compared with those of the convict ship." And he described them as "navigated by rum-soaked, illiterate, bear-like officers…" There are accounts of accommodation like loathsome dungeons, foul with rotting food and even people relieving themselves wherever they could. Straw mattresses that rotted as soon as they were wetted by seawater leaking through the decks, starvation and provisions stolen by the brutal thugs who ruled below decks.

Our ship, *Hougoumont*, was built in 1852, in Moulmein, Burma, almost certainly by Indian shipwrights. She wasn't a new ship, but was she cheaply chartered by a cynical British government – a decrepit, vermin-infested and ill-maintained product of a primitive foreign shipyard?

Unfortunately, if one is looking for evidence of the evil of the British Empire, *Hougoumont* was an example of the finest class of sailing ship of her time. The British Army greatly preferred Indian-built ships for the transport of troops because of their superior construction.

India is not now particularly famous as a maritime nation or the source of the most excellent ships. Some of you might doubt the claim I'm making about Indian-built ships, so let me take you on a quick trip through the history of Indian shipping and ship-building.

India is, of course, a large and populous country with many languages and ethnicities; various regions with different histories. In particular we shall look at the very northwest corner of India – Gujarat and the Gulfs of Kutch and Cambay. When European seafarers (Portuguese) first reached India at the end of the 15th century they immediately observed that the large ships of Gujarat were larger than almost all European ships, and that they were well-built.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish themselves as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean World. They arrived with ships devised to carry heavy artillery – "cannons" as we imprecisely call them – something which Asian shipping did not have although the Ottoman Empire introduced armed galleys to oppose the Portuguese. It was the broadsides of heavy guns that gave Europeans the edge. Even so, Portuguese maritime historian Nuno Rubim has said that the only big naval battles the Portuguese fought in the 16th century all took place on Asian seas.

In the 17th century the Portuguese experienced increasing competition from other European nations, particularly the Dutch, and Portugal's oldest ally England. In 1661, the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza married King Charles II recently restored to the monarchy of England, Scotland and Ireland. Her dowry included seven islands in northwest India, called Bombay or Mumbai. The English East India Company's stronghold in the region was then further north along the coast at the city of Surat in Gujarat. One of the advantages of Surat was the presence of Parsi shipwrights whom the East India Company could contract to repair their ships, and build ships for intra-Asian trade – the ships that came to be called "Country Ships". Parsis are people who migrated from Persia to escape the encroachment of Islam during the 8th to 10th centuries. They retain the Zoroastrian faith and Parsi language. To this day they are a major force in the heavy industry and engineering of India. Parsi ship builders were exceptionally skilled and had a superior way of building ships. Moving the East India Company's headquarters to Bombay was not worthwhile until a family of Parsi shipwrights or *Wadia* could be persuaded to move there in 1736. Loverji Wadia and his family set up a shipyard which became the famous Mazagon Dockyard of Bombay. It was always run exclusively by the Parsi Wadias.

The superiority of the Wadia built ships had been known and understood by the English since the mid-seventeenth century, perhaps earlier. A letter written by J.H. Grose in the mid-eighteenth century is quite explicit.

> "At Surat too they excel in the art of shipbuilding. If their models were as fine as English, of whom especially they prefer the imitation, there would be no exaggeration in averring, that they build incomparably the best ships in the world for duration, and that of any size, even to a thousand tons and upwards ... the reign of their ships is much longer than that of the European built ones; it is not uncommon for one of them to last a century, and that not owing to the commonly summer seas in those parts, as to the solidity of the workmanship, and the nature of the wood they employ.
> "As to the first, their bottom and sides are composed of planks let into one another, in the nature ... of rabbit [rabbet or rebate] work, so that seams are impenetrable.." (Grose 1772:142-3)

The timber used was teak. The "models" or designs of the Wadia were not to Grose's taste, but some of their design features were later adopted by British shipwrights, notably the so-called "Aberdeen bow" and hailed as technological advance. The "rabbit work" that Grose mentioned was explained in the early 19th century by a Mr Maconachie. He makes it clear that it was superior engineering – the ships were not heavily built with massive strong timbers:

> "The bottoms of these ships are half as thick as those of the same kind built in England, the planks are rabbetted to the second or third plank above the bands [wales]. In the rabbet joint or seam is poured boiling hot dammer [dammar], a kind of pitch, then a covering of fine, clean cotton wool, and when the bottom of the ship is planed, it is difficult to perceive any seam. They are, of course, never caulked. The bolts are mostly square, and over the heads are laid a sort of composition to make the surface smooth:

then a coat of chunam or lime mixed with hair[,] over that [a] sheathing of teak plank then the blankets boiled in dammer or tar and over all copper." (Quoted in *Wadia* 1957:189)

By the late-18th century, the Mazagon yard was happy to build any design a client required. The monopoly charter of the Honourable East India Company, and the Navigation Act, prevented the use of ships built anywhere other than England to carry cargoes from India to England. The Mazagon yard built for the intra-Asian trade of the Company: trade with China, Southeast Asia, Mauritius and elsewhere; and they also built for Asian merchants. They built western designs, and they built regional designs – the biggest and best Arab dhows were built at Bombay, Surat and Cochin. Aside from these large dhows or bagalla, the several warships ordered by the Sultan of Muscat and Zanzibar, including a 74-gun ship, were built to Royal Navy designs at Bombay.

They built hybrid designs – Asian hull shapes rigged with western square rig – sometimes called "grab barques" or "grab ships". The "grab" bow was like that of the Ottoman *ghurab* or galleys.

There was a grab barque with an interesting Western Australian connection. Down near Donnybrook there is a winery called Byramgou Park, named for the ship of vigneron Richard Crockett-Knox' great-great grandfather Captain Crockett. The vineyard's label exhibits a magnificent gold cup, embellished with grape vine motifs, and inscribed:

Presented
to Captain Crocket
by Major General Smith, C.B.
and the Officers of his Staff
Passengers on board the Byramgou
during the Expedition to Arabia in 1821
as a mark of their Esteem.

The captain's name is spelt wrongly, as is the name of the ship, which was actually *Shah Byramgore*. She was a "Country Ship" and a grab barque, named for Shah Byramgore, the 14th Sassanid king of Persia, and she was owned by the Parsi businessman Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, later Baronet Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy. The expedition to sack Bilad Bani Bu Ali, in what is now Oman, was transported by sixteen ships, of which *Shah Byramgore* was the largest, and eleven bagallas (large "dhows). The British forces were in alliance with the Sultan or Imaum of Muscat and Zanzibar, and they fought an extraordinary battle, but their evident satisfaction with sailing on the *Shah Byramgore* is more relevant to the *Hougoumont* story.

The Napoleonic wars severely strained Britain's ability to build all the ships required by the Royal Navy and the merchant navy. This led to a relaxing of the prohibition on Indian-built ships sailing to Britain and to the Royal Navy ordering ships from the Bombay yard. (One of them, HMS *Trincomalee* is still afloat and others remained sound for more than a century, notably HMS *Cornwallis* and HMS *Worcester*.) The large East Indiamen that traded between Britain and India were magnificent ships almost as heavily armed as Royal Navy frigates and the two-deck ships which they closely resembled. The Bombay yard started building such ships. But the East India Company also continued to build East Indiamen at its yard at Blackwall on the Thames, London.

In 1833 the East India Company's monopoly was ended and the Company was much diminished. Most of their ships were sold, many were scrapped, but the Indian-built ships were sold at high prices. These included the first of the largest class of Indiaman built at Bombay: *Earl Balcarras* (1811) and *Hertfordshire* (1813). *Hertfordshire* was often chartered to transport troops. She was inspected by government and insurance

surveyors when forty-years old and “found in every respect to be as perfectly sound as if she had only been launched a twelvemonth” (MacGregor 1985:206). The following year *Earl Balcarras* carrying troops survived a terrible cyclone off Madagascar. She was completely dismasted, deck houses and galleries were smashed and washed away, but the hull did not strain or distort. It was believed that almost any other ship would have foundered. However, it was not just the strength and seaworthiness that were esteemed by the Army. The Indian ships were found to be so carefully built, and built from such stable timber, that there were internally no gaps or cracks in the woodwork in which vermin such as bedbugs could hide. They were, because of the excellence of their build. more salubrious or sanitary.

The Bombay yard continued to do good business after the ending of the Company’s monopoly. In truth they had always built more large ships for Indian Parsi merchants than they built for the Company. An 1840 parliamentary Select Committee reported that a group of Parsi shipwrights from Bombay were on a study tour of yards in Britain and Europe. By that time Bombay had much competition from yards set up at ports around the Indian coast, particularly at Calcutta. And to take advantage of the excellent Burmese teak, a yard was established at Moulmein, Burma … which brings us to *Hougoumont*, built there in 1852 for Duncan Dunbar & Company, a highly respected shipping line whose ships were intended to carry both cargoes and passengers in safety and comfort. Duncan Dunbar and Co. owned the shipyard at Moulmein. It has been said that Duncan Dunbar owned the largest fleet in the world in the mid-19th century. He was certainly one of the shrewdest ship-owners and his ships were known to be of the highest quality.

Duncan Dunbar was an interesting character. His name obviously denotes Scottish ancestry, but he was born at Limehouse, London where his father was a brewer. He was sent north to the relatives in Morayshire for his schooling, but at the age of 12 was taken from the school, where he had learned all they could teach, for private tuition. He was a child prodigy and at 13 years old went to Aberdeen University! Back in London, following his father’s death, he took over the family business at the age of 22. Three years later, 1827, he made his first foray into ship ownership, buying a 50% share of a new barque built for the Indian Ocean trade. Between 1835 and 1841 he bought eight second-hand ships and ordered three new ones. From 1842 till his death twenty years later, he ordered or built at least one ship a year, sometimes as many as three, and bought up good quality ships when they were available. It can be argued that Dunbar, along with Joseph Somes and one or two other ship-owners, pushed English shipbuilders to emulate the quality of Indian-built ships, particularly Laing of Sunderland from whom he ordered several much-admired ships. For migrants to Australia, Dunbar’s ships were the ships of choice. For the British army sending troops to India or Hong Kong the same applied, and the navy often sent invalids home in Dunbar’s ships. Despite the terrible reputation of the early convict ships, by the 1840s better shipping was required for convicts. Dunbar’s ships were chartered for 37 convict carrying voyages.

When the Crimean War started there was a sudden need for many troop transports. Dunbar’s ships were immediately chartered, both by the British and French armies, and he bought up more Indian-built ships for the war effort. Dunbar profited very much better from the Crimean War than the Light Brigade did.

As far as I can determine, none of Dunbar’s many ships were built at Blackwall on the Thames where the East India Company’s yard had been, but they were styled like the East India Company’s ships and naval frigates and so could be referred to as “Blackwall frigates”. They retained the quarter galleries of frigates and were painted with false gunports. Below the waterline they reflected more modern naval architecture and the beginning of the clipper ship era.

The only known photograph of *Hougoumont*, taken at the end of her life, shows a poop deck that extends almost to the mainmast. The first class passenger cabins and saloons were under the long poop deck. If she were chartered to carry troops, the officers would be comfortably accommodated. Another of Dunbar's ships, built one year after *Hougoumont*, on the Ganges near Calcutta, was the *Edwin Fox*. She still survives and is being restored in New Zealand. She too carried troops to the Crimea, and frequently to India. And she also carried convicts to Fremantle. The two ships would have been similar in appearance, and both were rather modern by Dunbar's standards in that they lacked quarter galleries. When the restoration is complete you will be able to get a very good idea of *Hougoumont*'s appearance by visiting Picton, New Zealand.

A ship carrying passengers, troops or convicts would necessarily carry a surgeon – a Surgeon Superintendent to give the proper title. The position of Surgeon-Superintendent on a convict ship was considered a useful step in the career of an ambitious young surgeon. Ashore, there were few opportunities for an inexperienced young man to operate on patients or dissect cadavers. On a convict ship, where the Surgeon-Superintendent had some authority to accept or reject convicts for the voyage, it was useful to select mainly healthy convicts and a small number of obvious candidates for surgery or posthumous dissection. Only one man, Thomas Cochrane, died on *Hougoumont*'s voyage to Fremantle. Another duty of the ship's surgeon on voyages to Australia was maintaining a small coterie of infectious cowpox sufferers so that the active ingredient of smallpox vaccine could be got from their pustules on arrival in Australia. The *Hougoumont* Surgeon's name is given variously as William Smith or William Brownlow.

What's in a name? Given her name, *Hougoumont*, it is surprising that she was chartered to carry French Army troops during the Crimean War. The Chateau d'Hougoumont for which she was named, was the site of some of the fiercest attacks, defence and counter-attacks in the Battle known to the English as the Battle of Waterloo (which didn't go well for the French). During her French charter to the French army her name was changed to *Baraguey d'Hilliers* – the name of a then-serving French General. Dunbar was a patriotic Victorian and named about half of his ships after battles and noted commanders of the British Army and Navy.

As said above, there is only one known photograph of our *Hougoumont*. There are plenty of photographs of a later sailing ship of the same name which continued sailing till 1932 when she was hulked at Stenhouse Bay, South Australia. Often photographs and a painting of that ship are mistaken for our *Hougoumont.* But the two ships are easily distinguished. Our *Hougoumont* had three mast. The steel-hulled four-mast barque *Hougoumont* had four masts. In the photograph of our *Hougoumont* only the lower masts remain standing. She was employed then (1885) as a store ship during the construction of the Forth of Firth rail bridge. We can get some idea of how she was originally rigged by looking at sail plans and photographs of Dunbar's ships built in the early 1850s.

She would have been a fine looking ship and far from the worst vehicle for the voyage to Fremantle. She made the voyage in 89 days, which was no clipper ship record run, but no disgrace either.

In conclusion, to step back from the details of a particular ship and voyage … to get a little bit political and consider a history of oppression and injustice. About 2,000 years ago one of the tribes or peoples of Ireland, the Scoti or the Scots invaded what is now Scotland, and to a greater or lesser extent suppressed the indigenous Celtic people. To what extent that quintessential Victorian patriot Duncan Dunbar, owner of *Hougoumont*, was descended from the Scots invaders and to what extent from the indigenous Celts, we will never know, but he had a fine Scottish name of Gaelic origin meaning hilltop fort.

Fast forward a thousand years from the Scots invasion: frenchified Scandinavians, the Normans, invaded England and then Ireland, cementing rule from London – something to which the Irish understandably objected, and over the following centuries plenty of specific reasons to object and resent were piled on. Which is how we get to the Fenians and the 19th century. Britannia ruled the waves and a significant swath of lands. Unscientific notions of racial superiority and inferiority were deeply entrenched. But business is business, and rational judgement is useful. The superiority of Indian-built ships, and Indian ship-building techniques, were recognised by shrewd ship-owners (and the British Army).

The English have treasured the image of themselves as the great seafaring people – descendants of Drake (though he was of Celtic West-Country descent). It was the wooden walls of Nelson's navy that had made unassailable Britains naval pre-eminence (if you ignore inconvenient details such as the War of 1812 for example). But the wooden walls of old England that survived longest, and most intact, had not hearts of oak, but Indian teak!

And now, most of Ireland is an independent nation. Eire's current prime minister or *Taoiseach*, Leo Varadkar, is a gentleman of part Indian descent, who with impeccable manners is gently wringing the scrawny neck of the United Kingdom's prime minister in Brexit negotiations.

The cycles of history: who is in a position to oppress others at any time in history has little to do with innate superiority, and even less connection with justice … but the sailing ship *Hougoumont* was a superior ship and the product of a superior ship building tradition.