

## The System of “Safe Passage” in the Female Emigration Movement of the Victorian Era

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**Abstract** In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the British project of imperial consolidation attached a great importance to emigration, including female emigration, to white settler colonies of Great Britain. Emigrants ensured close connection between dominions and the mother country; they spread British values and British style of life. Therefore high morality of migrant women acquired a special significance. The process of crossing the ocean on the ship, which took some months, was the greatest danger for virtue and respectability of female emigrants. The efforts of British government and female emigration organizations to secure safe and respectable passage of female emigrants to the new homeland are investigated in this article.

**Keywords** ship, assisted emigration, safety, control

The emigration was an important means of regulation of social relationships and decision of social problems in Victorian England. It helped to get rid of all “unnecessary.” The ships loaded with convicts went to the Australian shores, hundreds thousand hungry Irish directed to North America, and ruined English farmers searched the application for their forces in Canada. Initially female emigration was also regarded as export of “surpluses”, which failed to carry out “the main female mission” as wives and mothers. In general those who have emigrated were people failed to find their own place in the society and were not regarded as respectable members of society. Generally the emigration of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was associated with drunkenness, fights, raging. The colonies accused metropolitan of bringing on their shores “the hordes of wild Irish and fast young ladies.”<sup>1</sup>

Since 1840s there was an aspiration to transform emigration in moral enterprise. It was connected with general increase of interest in morals both in politics and econ-

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<sup>1</sup> Myers J. C., 2001. *Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement*, Victorian Literature and Culture, 2001.V.1, P. 130.

omy and everyday life. Observance of moral norms meant respectability in Victorian culture, and this category did not confine only the well-off but at least theoretically it extended on inferior social strata – so called “respectable poor”, who were sober, industrious and thrifty. Because morals first of all associated with sexual abstinence in Victorian mentality, especially in respect of women, this aspect of female emigration gained special attention. As a whole the fight for respectability of emigration was within the limits of general anti-vice campaigns.

The interest to moral aspects of female emigration had considerably increased by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with spreading of new conception of imperial consolidation. This conception appreciated civilizing and maternal female mission as “the builders of Empire”. Due to their ability to moral and religious influence, to philanthropy, women had to transform future of the places “where semi-barbarism, retrogression and ignorance for years have reigned supreme” into “an era of Civilization, of Progress, and of Illumination.”<sup>2</sup> Women gave birth to white children and raised them as real British capable to become soldiers and new mothers. Thus female emigrants became “agents” of cultural influence of mother country, who spread British style of life and British values in the colonies. That is why they had to have great moral purity.<sup>3</sup>

Great Britain’s interests coincided with the requirements of the colonies. There was a great need in the young women who one can employ as a servant in the respectable house. A number of colonies aided to organize the passage of unmarried female servants corresponding to certain criteria.<sup>4</sup> As a rule they sought women who were able to endure hard colonial life and had high moral qualities, helping them to overcome various temptations of masculine surroundings of the colonies.

British migratory agents and colonial commissioners on immigration checked up every woman asking for help. It included detailed scrutiny of the letters of recommendation and individual interviews. Personal contacts were necessary for investigation of the potential emigrants’ motives and their features. As a rule emigrants did not allow the women from workhouses, orphanages and reformatories to emigrate. Women who had illegitimate children were refused immediately.

Despite of the strict criteria of selection it could not give assurance of arrival exclusively those women who had a good reputation. The process of passage became another test of morals. Railway trips where women became the objects of special and sometimes dangerous attention, railway changes and stay at railway stations, which were considered “the places of vice,” caused strong fears. However the passage through the ocean caused the greatest concern. It threatened both personal security and respectability of the travelers. Maria Rye, the leader of the Middle Class Emigration Society, noted that women had most of all temptations on boards the ships.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bush J., 1994. “*The Right Sort of Woman*”: *Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890-1910*, *Women’s History Review*, 1994. V.3. №3, P. 400.

<sup>3</sup> Абрамс Л., 2011. *Формирование европейской женщины новой эпохи, 1789-1918*, М.: Изд. Дом Гос. ун-та – Высшей школы экономики. С. 289.

<sup>4</sup> Зудов Н. Е., 2008. *Регламентирование внутриимперской эмиграции в австралийские и новозеландские колонии Великобритании в 60-е гг. XIX в.* / Британия: история. Культура, образование. Тезисы докладов международной научной конференции. Ярославль: Изд-во ЯГПУ. С. 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> Krogulski. S., *Turning a Curse into a Blessing: Propaganda and the Emigration of British Single Women*, *CONCEPT – An Interdisciplinary Journal of Graduate Studies Villanova University* // <http://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/328>.

The ship crossing the ocean represented the special space in which transition state “between two worlds and two lives” was strongly felt.<sup>6</sup> The action of rules and laws that regulated social life on the land inevitably weakened in this space. Public opinion lost its significance as the main instrument of social control and regulator of behavior, because “society” could exist during only limited period of time, and probability of meeting of these people on the new homeland was not high. The compelled long idleness, boredom, absence of events created a strong wish to vary their life and acquaintances on the shipboard. It is necessary to add an exciting feeling of freedom, acquired by the emigrants, increased emotionality, connected with homesickness and exaltation from approach to the new life, which was expected and feared simultaneously. The situation became complicated with the problem of closeness of male and female accommodations: “men and women who were strangers to each other [and who were] not infrequently berthed together in a space only a yard wide.”<sup>7</sup> Emigrants were often transported on the ships loaded with alcohol, especially whisky and brandy, and unguarded. In general Victorians had the grounds to regard the ship as the “unsafe” public space.

“Fearful tales are told of the immoralities committed on board emigrant ships. I believe these tales are true...”, wrote Maria Rye.<sup>8</sup> In letters sent from colonies to the mother country, it was told about shocking cases of seducing women by sailors and officers, about love stories being the cause of non-arrival of women to their employers, who paid for women’s passage, about pregnancy cases, that were found out during the work for the employers.<sup>9</sup>

Before the 1880s public attention was paid to the problem of “the fall” of women and of prostitution, while perils from separate seducers (passengers or crewmen) were in the focus of attention. In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, there were not individuals but transatlantic networks of dealers making profit on sale of women in brothels, who attracted general attention. It was rumored in society “...that by drugs, by false messages, by feigned sickness, by offers of or requests for help and assistance, girls were spirited away and never heard of again; that these missing girls, often quite young children, were carried off to flats and houses of ill-fame, there outraged and beaten, and finally transported abroad to foreign brothels under the control of large vice syndicates.”<sup>10</sup> The danger had foundation, but it was swelled to the size of national disaster. The conferences devoted to the problem of “white slavery” were held in different cities of the world, including London; amendments to the law were developed. At the same time the danger of Mormons was discussed. Interest to this problem was increased with Arthur Conan Doyle’s popular novel “Study in Scarlet” published in 1887. Newspapers published reports about hundreds of “converts” directed to the harems of Utah, many of which got under Mormons influence on board the ships. These women, as was reported, were lost not only for the British Empire because they did not fulfill their mission as

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<sup>6</sup> Hassam A., 1994. *Sailing to Australia: shipboard diaries by nineteenth-century British emigrants*, Manchester: Manchester Un-ty Press. P. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kranidis R. S., 1999. *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects*, New York: St. Martin’s Press. P. 163.

<sup>8</sup> *Miss Rye’s letter to the Times*. 1863, Otago Witness, 1863.№ 614, P. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Bush J., “*The Right Sort of Woman*” ... P. 396.

<sup>10</sup> Billington-Greig T., 1913. *The Truth About White Slavery*, The English Review, 1913. June, P. 428.

"wives and mothers of British race," but they were lost as Christians deceived with false ideas.<sup>11</sup>

All this entailed consideration of independent emigration as absurd enterprise, leading to fearful consequences: "To send out a single and unprotected female in a mixed ship, is an actual sin. The chances are strongly in favour of her ruin."<sup>12</sup> Even if a girl safely reached her destination, her reputation could be damaged in case of independent emigration and she was treated with more suspicion than in case of organized, assisted emigration. Only the latter could give the guarantee of respectability of emigrant. It was highlighted in emigration propaganda of the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Similar stories about the girl, who ventured to cross the ocean in search of new life, were popularized. Numerous perils and temptations waited her in the way. Despite of the fact that emigrants differed in age, social status and nature in real life, they were amazingly uniform in the texts. The main heroine was always inexperienced and innocent, she had never heard about vices of the world, she wasn't able to care about herself and needed in support and protection. Men who were near her could not give her any help because of their negligence and inability. Only professional emigrators were able to protect her from villains. Wise, experienced, well knowing real life they immediately found potential rascal even if he was well masked. They were informed of the methods of women's traders and knew how to prevent it. In the 1880s, when the public enthusiasm to discussing moral problems was revived, such literature was framed in certain genre of "safe passage" narratives.<sup>13</sup> These stories were both advertisements of emigration organizations and instruction of young women at the same time.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century numerous manuals for female emigrants, including those who risked going to independent travel, were published. Besides various pieces of practical information they contained councils about behavior of girls, who did not want to get in "nasty situation". Recommendations were resolved as follows. The strictest code of behavior was the best means to help themselves. It was necessary to watch each step and gesture. The best way was to keep maximal distance. Young woman should not enter into conversations about herself and her plans with any stranger, a man or a woman, should not allow herself to be treated to any refreshment. There should be nothing remarkable in her dress, nothing in appearance or manner that could call attention to her. There was a rule on the shipboard "That the greater the freedom of action that is allowed to women, the smaller the freedom of manner that they should allow to themselves."<sup>14</sup>

It was highlighted that women "ruined" during the voyage were not necessarily bad and inclined to profligacy. Most likely they were insufficiently prepared to decide what company they need to adhere. Such inexperienced girls were given the advices such as follows: "We will suppose a young man is paying you attention, and wishes you to give him your company—you, perhaps, feel inclined to do this; but wait a little, and be on your guard. If he urges you to be with him, at such times as he knows, and

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<sup>11</sup> Chilton L., 2007. *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860-1930*, Toronto-Buffalo-London: Un-ty of Toronto Press Inc. P. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Heywood B. A., 1863. *A Vacation Tour at the Antipodes, through Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland, and New Zealand, in 1861-1862*, L.: Longman. P. 246.

<sup>13</sup> Chilton L., Op.cit. P. 42-47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 46.

you know, that you ought to be at your duties, you may be quite sure that he is not a person to whom it would be safe for you to give your company".<sup>15</sup>

Girls from so called "class of servants", especially from countryside, caused the most serious anxiety. They lacked education, knowledge of society, common sense and restrained manners, which helped girls from "the better classes" to protect themselves from undesirable contacts. Rural girls were the main addressee of the warnings. Gentle, though impoverished ladies caused less anxiety. However they were waited with perils, connected with the loss of social status, because of close mixture of classes on the shipboard. Persons who were assisted to emigrate were compelled on financial reasons to divide their voyage with workers from the second class and even with poor steerage passengers. Maintenance of distance in relationships was considered as the best preventive measure against the threat.<sup>16</sup>

The problem of guaranteeing "safe passage" became one of the central problems in the organization of emigration. In the middle of the 19th century the government offered a new system of passengers' passage on the special emigrant ships, provided with staff of personnel securing comfort and order in the process of the passage. Every aspect of life on the shipboard was regulated by surgeon-superintendent who was responsible not only for health services and hygiene but for providing with meal and drinks, furniture, entertainments and order on the ship. Finally he was responsible for securing female safety on the territory of the ship. "The Surgeon should bear in mind that one of his most important duties is the care of the morals and the protection of the single women, and he should prevent the association of single men and women who are not immediate members of the same family," as can be read in the "Instructions to Surgeons Superintendents of Government Emigrant Ships."<sup>17</sup> Direct supervision for single women was carried out by matron. She announced necessary norms of behavior on the shipboard to women and was responsible for its observance. It was a part of her functions to watch their associates, including both passengers and the crew, and to stop intercourse considered undesirable. Sometimes but not always matron had assistants. The captain and his mates supervised behavior of the crew. Constables appointed on the emigrant ship took their part in establishing order.

Strict discipline had to be maintained on the ship. It was highlighted that it had to be stricter than on the land, taking into account unusual emotional state of people during the voyage. Gambling, betting, smoking in certain parts of the ship was prohibited. Relations between the crew and female emigrants ought to be minimized. Matrons had a right to lock doors of female apartments and to keep the keys. Though, physical movement of women became extremely restricted. Their manners, gestures, words were exposed to control. Disciplinary measures included wide variety of actions even penalties and imprisonment till 1 month (there were often premises arranged for the prison, which were uncomfortable, sometimes without any chair or bench, on the emigrant ships). Only physical punishments and food deprivation were forbidden.<sup>18</sup>

Attempts to diversify tedious life on board the ships were undertaken. Entertainments were framed with Victorian ideology of "rational" leisure; they should be useful for body and mind. Walks in the open air, musical concerts and dancing (officers and sailors were forbidden to dance with unmarried women) were regarded as

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<sup>15</sup> Servio, 1850. *The Voyage Companion: A Parting Gift to Female Emigrants*, L.: Charles Gilpin. P. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Myers J. C., Op. cit. P. 129-131.

<sup>17</sup> *Instructions to Surgeons Superintendents of Government Emigrant Ships*, 1866. L.: George E. Eyre & William Spottiswoode. P. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P. 12-18.

useful "means of promoting cheerfulness and preventing lassitude and ennui amongst the Emigrants."<sup>19</sup> There were employed by Emigration Commission teacher and / or priest who were responsible for intellectual and spiritual development of emigrants. They gave information necessary for emigrants, religious instructions and hold services. There were small libraries where books, giving "useful knowledge", were kept. Reading classes where emigrants read aloud were often organized. Instruction of "female" pursuits, such as needlework, was conducted. Training and employment of young women, a supply of materials for work were under charge of matrons. Thus all possible means to dispel boredom, "to give as far as possible a profitable direction to their occupations and amusements,"<sup>20</sup> to distract from "immoral" thoughts were used.

On the whole English public opinion looked favourably upon the system of female emigration, offered by the government. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were many people, agreed with opinion of much travelling Cambridge teacher B. A. Heywood that "under the Government Female Emigration System, where a Surgeon-Superintendent is vested with the authority, I believe, of a Dictator, proper order and strict discipline is kept."<sup>21</sup> Manuals for emigrants urged women that this system "with some decent provision for the spiritual wants of the passengers, in the person of a conscientious chaplain, and in the person of a respectable matron - some security against those indolent and disorderly habits being contracted during the voyage, which might prove your bane at the termination of it."<sup>22</sup>

However in reality governmental system was far from perfection because its normal functioning depended on co-ordination of actions of emigrators and the captain and the crew, and, of course, on tempers of emigrants themselves. In 1858 "Sydney Morning Herald" published the report of the Immigration Board on the Irregularities which occurred on the ship "Stebonheath", transporting emigrants from Great Britain to Australia. In the course of hearings it was found out that it was not possible to secure the order despite of all reasonable efforts undertaken by the surgeon-superintendent and matron. The cause was in the fact that the captain and his mates did not consider it necessary to supervise behavior of the crew. From all officers only the chief officer tried to restrain the crew; that is why he was obliged to carry a pistol with him for self-preservation during his watch. Other officers either ignored offences of the rules or violated them with other sailors. Sometimes emigrants came into correspondence with sailors, secretly met with them. It the confusion during the gale, began soon after departure of the ship, many sailors and some officers instead of saving the ship went straight to female apartments. The surgeon-superintendent and matron had to use handcuffs and imprisonment. However they might apply these measures only to "guilty" women, but not to the crew.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of imperfection of governmental system of female emigration was discussed with non-governmental female emigration organizations. These organizations began to spread in Great Britain from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and became numerous and various at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. They included both societies, focusing exceptionally on the organization of emigration ("Female Middle Class Emigration Society", "British Women's Emigration Association", "South African Colonization Society"), and organization, engaged in the prob-

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Heywood B.A., Op.cit. P. 246.

<sup>22</sup> Servio, Op.cit. P. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Emigrant Ship Stebonheath. Report of the Immigration Board on the Irregularities, 1858*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 1858. 22 April, P. 8.

lems of emigration, together with decision of other tasks of helping women (“Girls’ Friendly Society”, “Travellers’ Aid Society”, “Young Women’s Christian Association”). Female societies stressed the importance of organization of emigration “by women for women”. They stated that only women were able to understand various difficulties of single female emigrants during the passage. Men, who were unable to understand extent of risk, often let down, broke arrangements, forgot to meet women at their destination or were late, thereby exposing women to additional danger. In 1860-s Maria Rye criticized excessive selfishness of male authorities. She was filled with indignation by their unwillingness to pay expenses for ensuring of female security, in particular their desire to employ high-quality matrons for less than the cost of hiring the lowest cabin-boy on deck.<sup>24</sup>

On the whole, female organizations declared the same purpose as governmental schemes—comfort and security for female emigrants during their passage. Their officials cared about choice of vessel for emigrants, specified needs of single young women. They negotiated about male and female apartments to be situated further from each other. The quality of accommodation, food, security aspects was evaluated. The contracts were signed only with those campaigns, which were recognized as worthy.

Girls were assisted to avoid unnecessary turmoil and disorder, usually accompanying the departure of emigrants. They were directed to the apartments designed for them. As a rule their accommodations were well equipped. Often the officials of emigration societies agreed with trustworthy families of emigrants to look after girls. Such practice was widespread in the middle and in the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Warnings about traps for young women, advices how to avoid traps, advertisements with addresses of branches of emigration societies in the colonies and addresses of approved hostels were distributed on the passenger ships. “Travellers’ Aid Society” secured the cooperation of the pioneer tour operator, Thomas Cook; in 1889 Annual report thanked the company “for allowing their interpreters...to give cards, with addresses of two homes for young women...to any girls or young women travelling alone.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite of many female emigration organizations shared feminist ideas of women rights, at the same time they were very conservative with respect to morals. Their leaders shared current opinion that supervision was the best way to protect morals. Thus they did not have any doubts about necessity of personal escort. Maria Rye believed that good order and morals of passengers first of all depended on the competence of the matrons accompanying the groups of female emigrants on the ships.<sup>26</sup>

While in governmental system of female emigration sometimes matrons were appointed by Emigration Commission, sometimes were chosen from the passengers by surgeon-superintendents, female emigration organizations guaranteed professionalism of the chaperones. The latter were passed through the strictest selection, were vetted for character and suitability. Emigration societies sought verbal references through their networks of personal contacts and, where individuals were unknown, they conducted interviews.<sup>27</sup> The societies preferred to hire educated, respectable, middle-aged ladies from middle classes, whose age and social status gave them influence and respect. In contrast with volunteer emigrators, matrons got salaries. Some-

<sup>24</sup> Chilton L., Op.cit. P. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips R., *Unsexy Geographies: Heterosexuality, Respectability and the Travellers’ Aid Society*, ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies, 5 (2), P. 180.

<sup>26</sup> Miss Rye’s letter to the Times... P. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips R., Op.cit. P. 170.

times ladies, leading societies, could act as chaperones. Matrons' shipboard work was carefully vetted and discussed. They were obliged to give detailed reports about voyage, their work with the migrants, about every incident, connected with the passengers under their care.

Emigration organizations tried hard to empower matrons as much as possible, they attempted to make governments to recognize officially their work, they worked to solidify matrons' authority and status on the shipping lines. Several of the organizations required that the women, who travelled under their care, to sign forms, committing themselves to obedience to the matron; other organizations gave oral recommendations about matrons' authority and relationships with them before emigrants embarked upon the ships. It was important because matrons did not have any official assistant. Actions towards violent passengers required the support of the vessels' captain and crews. They had little power to force a good behavior in their charges beyond the threat of unfavourable reports to prospective employers. Nevertheless matrons were seldom faced obstacles to effective realization of their work. They legitimately represented respectable organizations, symbolized morals and good order, dignity and competence, that is why generally both the passengers and the crew showed respect due to them. Besides, by positioning themselves as maternal personas, caring about their foster-children, matrons acquired high status and estimation on the ship.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion it is necessary to stress that the system of securing "safe passage" had great importance for every involved side. It gave opportunities to carry out traditionally male function as protector to female emigration organizations, thus it enhanced the status of these organizations, gave them more power and authority. This system was very important for British government, because the success of imperial project in great extent depended on respectability of arriving female immigrants. For colonies the protection of morals signified first of all advantages for middle classes. Officials and employers tried to guard female against presence of presumably aggressive men for guaranteeing capacity for work to new groups of domestics.

The system of the emigrants' protection influenced those for whom it had been created. On the one hand it helped single women, ensured them with necessary comfort, security, gave them guarantee of respectability. On the other hand it extremely restricted the women, forced them to regard themselves as children, who were under vigilant parental control and feared of parental punishment. It is not surprising that not all women agreed to move under such conditions. Many women continued to emigrate independent. In the course of time the number of such women was increasing. The idea of female protection dominated in the discourse of female emigration till the Great War. After the War, when female independence and self-reliance considerably increased, this idea was displaced with the emphasis on social and financial advantages of organized emigration.

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<sup>28</sup> Chilton L., *Op.cit.* P. 57.