Chapter 11

Edmund Ambrose Riches

In the early half of the nineteenth century, young people who were destitute, homeless or otherwise suffering from the entrenched poverty in Britain, were shipped out to the colonies, unprepared for an unknown future and little better off than convicts. Towards the middle of the century the practice was changed to 'assisted passage', where men and women under the age of forty paid £2 for their passage, and over that age were required to pay £5. Those who had availed themselves recently of charity were excluded. Thus, a better type of migrant was attracted, capable of making a way for themselves. The pay for a pastoral worker in the colonies was about £50 per year plus keep – this was almost three times what rural workers were earning in the home country.

With the closing of transportation to the colony of New South Wales, labour became scarce. Squatters agitated for the return of convict labour and, in one case, prominent squatter Neil Black arranged for the supply of coolie labour from India, indentured for four years. Also, thirty squatters indented over 200 (mainly Chinese) from Singapore; they were paid £14 p.a. With gaols filling up in Britain, the home government decided that the demand was to be met by the transportation of prisoners who, with two years good behaviour in the new model prison, Pentonville, and with a good dose of the Bible, were considered ready for release. They were referred to as exiles or Pentonvillians – their return to Britain was prevented until they had served their full term, but wives were permitted to join them. They were not incarcerated, but were left to obtain a living the best way they could; employers were only required to provide rations and keep. It was the system that had been used by Britain to populate the American Colonies. Councillor Fawkner was one who was bitterly opposed to "the pestiferous contagion". He warned that the free workers would have their wages reduced to five shillings a week, as, he said, was applying in the poverty-stricken rural areas of the mother country (this seems a typical 'Fawkner exaggeration'). In a speech at a council meeting, Fawkner concluded, "Men who have suffered the horrors of transportation are better than those kept in gaol at home and then let loose without knowing the punishment of it."

On 15th May 1848, young James Riches, aged twenty-two, arrived in Port Phillip on the *William Stewart* with his older brother Thomas and Thomas' family: wife Sarah, and three sons. They came as assisted passengers. A fellow passenger wrote home, "We had a good passage a good Captain a doctor & officers with Temperate sailors." Further, she wrote, "there was some Children died but none of the old people died it would have been a great deal worse if their [sic] had been but the Children were never much minded." – an insight into the attitudes of the day! On arrival, the Immigration Board expressed concern that there were so many families with large numbers of children on board. They stated that "inhabitants of the town or settlers of the interior will not, cannot, afford to saddle