Rewriting Quarantine: Pacific History at Australia’s Edge

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There is no doubt that the historical geographies of quarantine and racial nationalism overlapped at Sydney’s North Head Quarantine Station. To conflate these practices into a single narrative of immigration restriction, however, obscures other stories and agendas. Drawing upon inscriptions left in the Sydney sandstone by those detained at North Head, we argue that for many Pacific voyagers, quarantine was merely a temporary interruption rather than an exclusionary endpoint or affront. Citing the shuttling trade of ships and crews from New Zealand, Japan and China, this article re-locates North Head from a continental gateway to a Pacific outpost.

Quarantine and Australian racial nationalism have had a close relationship, one that has drawn Pacific and Australian pasts together, historically and historiographically. Certainly—as argued a decade ago—there is much in the thick archives of quarantine to align defence against disease with a Federation impulse to construct the new Australian nation as both clean and aspirationally white.¹ But in the context of a more recent historical focus on active Chinese responses and presences within an apparently white Australia, novel sources have prompted us to challenge the straightforward conflation of anti-Chinese activity and quarantine.

First gazetted as a Quarantine Ground in 1832, by the early 1850s Sydney’s North Head housed a permanent Quarantine Station. It was, however, far from an obligatory
point of call or a processing centre for all maritime arrivals in the Colony of New South Wales. Rather, ships and their complements were generally interned only if they declared an infectious disease aboard, or if the Port Health Officer considered the vessel suspect. In 1893, for instance, of 427 ships boarded and examined in Port Jackson, 121 vessels were detained for sanitary inspection and cleansing, but only three landed a portion of their passengers and crew into quarantine. Conversely, in epidemic years such as 1881, 1900 or 1919, the number of vessels and persons detained could escalate dramatically.

Quarantine and immigration restriction have often been considered as historically twinned. Yet the history of North Head is not entirely well served by historiographies centred on the white Australia policy. On occasion—as in Sydney’s smallpox epidemic of 1881—Chinese residents were compulsorily detained. As a rule, however, the incarceration of Chinese passengers and crew was not mandatory. Nor, in line with recent scholarship, should we have expected it to be. As Kate Bagnall details, attempts to limit the movement of Chinese and Anglo-Chinese Australians required nuanced negotiation of confluent racial, cultural, geographic, political and bureaucratic boundaries.

Moreover, writes Mei-Fen Kuo, Chinese communities throughout the Pacific were defined not by racial criteria, but by the cultural ties of language, family, trade and mobility. Perhaps, to appropriate Paul Macgregor’s insightful rendering of the continent’s north, Sydney’s Quarantine Station might also ‘gain much from being seen less as part of Australia and more as primarily part of a wider, fluid, multicultural interaction zone which crossed sovereign borders’.

Critical re-evaluations of quarantine may also be furthered by a closer engagement with North Head as a mnemonic landscape, rich with site-bound meanings.
This tilted headland is engraved with more than 1,400 historic inscriptions, carved into and painted onto the soft Sydney sandstone, including approximately 100 in Chinese and Japanese scripts. The earliest, recently rediscovered, dates from 1835; the latest iteration of this tradition-in-place was added in 2014. Integrating history and archaeology, this article elaborates our insights from ‘Stories from the Sandstone’, an interdisciplinary project that records, analyses and interprets these inscriptions. Quite literally written in stone, they remain in situ as an enduring epigraphic archive, both as objects of biography and as objects with a biography. Thus they are not ‘movable heritage’ in the same sense as the written documents, ephemera and artefacts that constitute the official, intellectual and expressive archives normally drawn upon by historians. It is precisely these records of Chinese Australia, notes Sophie Loy-Wilson, that have suffered from their very mobility, sliding in and out of visibility with shifting family fortunes, corporate memories and physical decay.

If Sydney’s shores are a charged landscape, ‘where histories meet’, North Head marks a dramatic edge of inclusion and exclusion. It offers both a key entry point from the Pacific into continental territory, and an entrée to national history. Accordingly, we argue that much about the Pacific history of the Quarantine Station is explained better by an oceanic history of mobility, than a national history of migration. The historical landscape of North Head’s Quarantine Station is at least as much about seamen constantly circling the maritime Pacific, as migrants entering or being excluded from national territory. Each inscription therefore offers a portal into the stories of the vessels, diseases and people who voyaged across oceans in a maritime world. Here we focus on sets of inscriptions that link North Head to the Pacific, specifically to Aotearoa/New
Zealand, China and Japan. Etched in stone, they deliquesce into fluid forms of personal, cultural and national identity within a network of Pacific mobilities.

**New Zealand Connections: the Aorangi**

One of the smaller and more delicate inscriptions on North Head is a tiki [Figure 1]. A welcoming, if eroded, ‘KIA-ORA’ is carved above the figure, ‘AORANGI’ to its right. This tiki is a significant material connection between Australia and New Zealand, but histories meet strangely here. The Quarantine Station’s sandstone inscriptions may have been originally inspired by Aboriginal carvings, common across Sydney’s coastal landscape, although sparse on North Head itself. Moreover, they are all inscribed into and onto Aboriginal land.\textsuperscript{14} The carved tiki and kia ora brought Māori culture and greeting, however mediated or direct, to Car-ran-gels country. Moreover, it might be traced and understood within a material genealogy of exchange and mobility of Maori objects, across Polynesian, Aboriginal and British maritime worlds, beginning with James Cook’s presentation of his own gifted hei tiki to King George III in 1771.\textsuperscript{15}

** Insert Figure 1 close to here **

North Head’s carved tiki, from another place and time, is an enduring and enigmatic link, whose fading kia ora now greets the very occasional observer who ventures into the dense scrub. Here, ‘Aorangi’ does not mean ‘cloud scraper’, given both to a mountain range in New Zealand’s North Island and to Mount Cook in the South Island. Rather, it refers to a popular ocean liner built in 1924 for the Sydney-Vancouver line. Owned by the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand and then by the London-based Canadian Australasian Line, it voyaged routinely between Sydney, Auckland,
Suva, Honolulu and Vancouver; San Francisco was later added as an alternative to this ‘all red’ imperial route.

The *Aorangi*, its cargo, passengers and crew, were thus part of the thriving steamship culture and infrastructure that brought tourists, goods, and letters across the Pacific, as Frances Steel has shown.\(^{16}\) Indeed, surrounding this particular inscription are Greek, Finnish and Japanese etchings, weathered reminders that North Head sat at the confluence of three maritime routes: ships hailing from Australia’s west, from the Mediterranean and the UK; from Australia’s east, across the Pacific; and from Australia’s north, linking east-coast ports with Yokohama, Hong Kong, Singapore and Batavia.\(^{17}\)

We do not know who carved the *tiki*, whether a passenger or crew member, Māori or Pākehā. As the design is slightly naïve, it may be an appropriated Pākehā nationalist symbol.\(^{18}\) Quarantined in Sydney on four occasions—in 1926, 1929, 1930 and 1935—over 2,600 *Aorangi* passengers and crew were detained at North Head. None of their names were characteristically Polynesian, besides a party of 10 missionaries en route from British Samoa to Papua in 1930.\(^{19}\) By the time the ship was next quarantined in 1935, a group of Papuans—‘missionaries’ of a different kind—resided at North Head while studying at the University of Sydney’s School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.\(^ {20}\)

If health was the nexus through which Melanesia and Polynesia crossed on this Sydney headland, race was never absent. It was, however, often confused. In February 1930 the *Aorangi* was Sydney-bound when a case of smallpox was diagnosed between Suva and Auckland. Permitted onward passage from New Zealand, the ship was quarantined in Sydney, netting champion American golfer Walter Hagen and his Sydney-
born touring partner, Joe Kirkwood. While Hagen was scathing about North Head’s
deficient and antiquated facilities, Kirkwood’s views were more coloured. ‘I was born in
Australia, and I always thought this was a white country’, he blasted, ‘but when I have
seen Chinamen, Indians, and Fijians with the same bathing and toilet facilities as white
men in this quarantine station I cannot help having a feeling of disgust’. 21

The point here goes beyond Kirkwood’s blatant racism. Perhaps more tellingly,
his attack was targeted at the Quarantine Station staff who permitted such indiscriminate
mingling. Indeed, by the 1930s, the formalised hierarchies of social and racial
separation—built literally into the site’s architecture of classed compounds and
Federation-era ‘Asiatic’ quarters—appeared increasingly anachronistic. Despite the
snippy comments of several first-class passengers, successive Aorangi quarantines over
1926–35 revealed the egalitarian impact of rising social expectations among those
awaiting release: spared draconian regulations, travellers of all walks shared swimming,
fishing, conversing and reading while awaiting release. ‘As passenger traffic is growing
and the old steerage class of passenger has disappeared’, remarked Arthur Metcalfe,
Chief Quarantine Officer for New South Wales in 1935, ‘the Quarantine Station is not
suited for modern passenger traffic’. 22

Racial divisions, as Kirkwood’s invective highlighted, were also proving
problematic to police. ‘Chinese passengers arriving in Australia’, Metcalfe wrote in 1934,
‘are in the great majority Australian residents returning from a holiday trip to China or
passengers for transhipment to New Zealand, Fiji, etc.’. 23 When quarantined the
following year, the Aorangi was conveying 27 Fijian-Indian merchants and their families
home to India, plus a visiting Indian medical doctor and his Syrian wife. There were also
71 tourists from Fiji, with names ranging from Crawford and Farquhar to Rogers and White, whose race was defined not as ‘British’, but as ‘Fiji’. Yet across all four quarantined Aorangi voyages, not one person was identified as ‘Māori’, nor as ‘Pacific Islander’ – the formal category spelled out in the instructions for completing manifests. 24

The massive ocean liner, nevertheless, forged a multinational generation of seafarers who chose to pursue a trans-Pacific life. During its third sojourn at North Head in February 1930, Metcalfe noted that ‘[a]s the “Aorangi” had been quarantined in June 1929 most of the crew were vaccinated then and by searching our records we were able to prepare a list of the crew eligible for immediate release’. 25 Indicative of the vessel’s esprit de corps, many of those detained in 1930 had re-joined the ship’s company after being forced to sign off when it docked for a major overhaul after the 1929 quarantine. 26 Although its captain had changed by 1935, one of the crew members responsible for the ship’s fourth and final quarantine that year was a second-class steward diagnosed with smallpox, despite ostensibly being ‘successfully vaccinated five years ago, on board the “Aorangi” during the last quarantine’. 27

Two further inscriptions at North Head illustrate this loyalty. Dated March 1930, a sloppily painted list records a group of providores from the Aorangi. Emblazoned beside its name is New Zealand’s Southern Cross, featuring four stars. Responsible for provisions below decks, these men belonged equally to their ship and the southern seas it traversed. Far more striking is an elaborately carved albatross, embellished with grey and white tones [Figure 2]. Above it, the name ‘AORANGI’ and date 1930 are skilfully etched into the sandstone. Below, noticeably less adroitly, the return date of 1935 has been added. Incised during the interruption imposed by quarantine, the albatross signifies
the ship’s peripatetic journeying. Captured in flight, it mirrors the Canadian Australasian line’s interwar publicity materials. More deeply, this avian epigraph evokes the ancient mariner’s avatar, ever moving, never settling, at home above a painted ocean.

** Insert Figure 2 close to this section **

**China and Sydney’s North Head**

John Wu is a Chinese-Australian philosopher who spends a great deal of time on North Head, thinking through quarantine history and the Chinese inscriptions, seeking to raise awareness of the race story of the site. ‘Quarantine as white power’, declares his blog.28 In many ways the history of Chinese people at the Quarantine Station does accord with the conventional segregative history of race and the Australian nation. Chinese residents in Sydney were certainly quarantined in times of epidemic because of their race, not their disease status. Epidemics of smallpox in particular were directly tied to early colonial Chinese exclusion bills. After 1881, local and national health authorities imagined the North Head cliffs of the Quarantine Station as the edge of white Australia, the point of racial defence. Indeed far from being ignored, this forms the conventional historiography of quarantine in Australia.29

The Chinese poetry and calligraphy in the North Head landscape are important parts of the assemblage. Whereas inscriptions in English tend to assert identity in relation to a voyage or ship, those in Chinese are often conventional poems in which landscape features poetically signify inner states. Painted in traditional characters, one movingly invokes the phrase ‘smallpox hill’, a common referent for quarantine stations:

Trapped on the ‘smallpox hill,’ a day is like a year
I drink my tears in this sad place, listening to the cuckoo
I ask: When will I find a soul mate?
Looking at the moon, I write poems …
Remembering the past, I compare it with the present
My homeland is far away, my parents abandoned
For many years they cared for me; yet I have not reciprocated their kindness
Barbaric nation(s) …

‘Barbaric nations’ was a characteristic Chinese descriptor for the generic west, and certainly some of the Chinese inscriptions at North Head fall within a genre of protest. But should the Chinese inscriptions at North Head be interpreted within the wider Pacific history of the compulsory detention, medical screening and deportation of Chinese migrants? This is the story that enfolds Canada’s D’Arcy Island on the maritime approach to Vancouver, or Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, which boasts its own assemblage of carved and painted epigrams. What is missing if we read the Chinese messages solely within the framework of Australia’s racist immigration past, or the broader Pacific colour line? We miss the sense in which, for some Chinese voyagers—especially seamen who crewed the steamships that constantly plied the Pacific—territorial Australia was irrelevant. They harboured neither ambition nor interest in settling. Theirs was a history of mobility, not migration.

Several of the Chinese inscriptions ignore Australia—and its policies—altogether. They address China, fixed firmly on the dramatic domestic politics of the early twentieth century. One laconically comments on the downfall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic: ‘The Three People’s Principles’. Even if translated, the message may have remained opaque to many in white Australia, yet its brevity invoked
the revolutionary pillars advanced by Sun Yat-sen from 1905: nationalism, democracy and the people’s livelihood. Another inscription, likely from 1917, refers to the brief Manchu restoration: ‘Down with imperialism Republic of China’. 35

Many Chinese inscriptions on North Head date from the early- to mid-twentieth century, squarely evincing the exclusionary ‘white Australia’ moment. Yet a closer reading of these epigraphs warns against a too-easy conflation of quarantine and immigration histories: North Head was not an immigration screening centre equivalent to the USA’s Ellis or Angel Islands. The inscriptions were as likely carved by Chinese crewmen unconcerned with entering Australia, notwithstanding their brief tenure in quarantine. These historic inscriptions therefore resist the tendency in Australian history to conflate constraints on the movement of Chinese with the white Australia policy.36

**Merchant Mariners: Pacific Transits and Alliances**

Many of the inscriptions at North Head were carved and painted by merchant seamen: a classic group of transnational historical actors. From their perspective, it makes more sense to comprehend Sydney’s Quarantine Station not as a gateway to Australia, but as part of a Pacific maritime circuit. It was one ‘island’ in the archipelago of connected quarantine ports that bore a far stronger relation to the Pacific Ocean, than to continental hinterlands.

On one level, the inscriptions left at North Head from 1835 offered a vernacular legible to all mariners. Etched, brushed or occasionally effaced, this mark-making tradition served as a lithic Esperanto. Just as Chinese speakers engaged with Republican
exhortations, European immigrants identified with—and replicated—familiar forms and motifs, from mortuary filigrees to Masonic symbols. Spanning erstwhile regional divides, however, the most consistent iconography across the headland is nautical: flags, pennants, life rings, anchors, chains, ropes and—although surprisingly rare—watercraft. Within this repertoire, nominally ‘national’ or ‘racial’ divisions recede before the visual language of the sea.

This is not to overlook the conjunctions between imagery, text and history. Detained in 1971 because her young son was not vaccinated, Japanese interpreter Masako Endo spent a fortnight at North Head. Gradually permitted freedom to explore the landscape, Endo was surprised to find several Japanese carvings. Although ‘somewhat poor in workmanship’, they included the national flag or Hinomaru, and the name of a ship, Nikko Maru. That these works survived a five-year Australian military occupation of the site over 1940–45 seems remarkable enough, but Endo was delighted when a quarantine official led her to the ocean-facing region known as Old Man’s Hat. There she identified numerous, elaborate Japanese maritime inscriptions, many of which still survive, commemorating visits by the Yawata Maru in 1912, Nikko Maru in 1916 and Ishikari Maru in 1921.

Operated by the Nippon Yusen Kabushiki Kaisha (NYK; Japan Mail Steamship Company), from 1898 these Mitsubishi-built vessels hauled freight and passengers between Nagasaki, Yokohama and Australian ports, berthing in Hong Kong and the Philippines en route. ‘The Jap [sic] is a live man, and the Nippon Yusen is a very live company’, enthused Sydney’s Daily Commercial News and Shipping List in 1903. ‘Both
are welcome to this country. In the Jap we have a worthy ally, and in the company's steamers worthy specimens of the shipbuilding art’. 38

Although Australian optimism towards Japanese maritime enterprise cooled rapidly after the Russo-Japanese War—during which NYK steamers were requisitioned as troopships—by 1915 Nippon Yusen announced plans to introduce a further circuit encompassing Japan, Fiji and New Zealand. Such ostensibly commercial ambitions were endorsed by the Japanese company’s long-standing trading partner, the equally acquisitive Australian operation, Burns Philp. Both businesses spent the First World War with one eye on trading opportunities in former German possessions, and another on strategic national interests across the Pacific. Despite gentlemanly negotiations toward mutual benefit, when NYK proposed in 1918 to include Rabaul in their Pacific network, both Burns Philp and the Australian Government recoiled at the commercial and defence implications. 39

Notwithstanding these neo-imperial manoeuvres troubling western Pacific waters, NYK’s workhorses steamed north-south for decades. Manned almost exclusively by Japanese, from the captain to the barber, each crew counted just a handful of Chinese as waiters or cooks. Indeed, for the monied whites and Japanese who could afford cabin accommodation—such as Ida Lockington, who sailed from Melbourne to Japan on the Nikko Maru in 1913—onboard encounters could prove both exotic and intimate. After inviting passengers into his cabin to share family photographs, the captain donned ‘ancient court dress’ and offered a ‘fancy’ afternoon tea decorated with wisteria and cherry blossoms. 40 Gilt-edged menus reflected NYK’s aspirational melange of passengers

A far more representative collection, however, were the passengers who travelled below—or upon—the decks of NYK ships. Almost all were Chinese for whom geopolitics carried little import in their lives of mobile labour. For example, on 1 November 1916, in the middle of the First World War, the Nikko Maru was quarantined in Sydney under suspicion of smallpox [Figure 3]. Promulgating commerce between the two Allied nations—Australia and Japan—the ship’s 114 Japanese crew and 4 Chinese cooks hosted 29 white Australian and 4 Japanese merchants and managers. The remaining 111 passengers were Chinese, travelling in open-plan or open-deck ‘steerage’ accommodation. With the exception of troopships to the Boxer Rebellion and the South African, Russo-Japanese and First World Wars, such communal conditions were being increasingly eschewed by European and Japanese travellers alike as unhealthy and ‘uncivilised’.  

* insert Figure 3 somewhere close to this section *

There was no doubt that the Nikko Maru’s Chinese wards were largely plebeian; almost all were ‘grocers’—market gardeners. The two exceptions were ‘planters’, including 48-year-old Sam War, born in Canton (Guangdong) but long since permanently resident in the Queensland town of Warwick. Having departed Brisbane for China on the Nikko Maru less than three months earlier, he was released from quarantine in Sydney on 13 November 1916, whereafter his credentials were checked by Customs officers. Asked why he had returned so soon, War replied that ‘owing to the disturbed state of China he was glad to return to the Com’wealth immediately he had transacted his business’.  

* insert Figure 3 somewhere close to this section *
Perhaps more typical of NYK’s Chinese clientele was another *Nikko Maru* passenger interviewed that same day. Born in Canton but residing since 1900 in Cairns and then Brisbane, 30-year-old market gardener Yet Quhen had been characterised as ‘an industrious hardworking chinaman [sic]’ by a local police constable. Further attesting to his productive residency in the district, John O’Brien claimed a six-year familiarity with Quhen as ‘a respectable honest & peaceful man’, while saddler Charles Reynolds depicted his Chinese neighbour, whom he had known since 1906, as ‘a real straight forward man most restpectful [sic] and straight forward in business and out of it’.

This collage of official and personal testimonies was gathered for the process of reluctantly exempting ‘aliens’ from having to undergo the notorious dictation test required upon entering the Commonwealth by Section 3 of the *Immigration Act* 1901–02. Nominally facilitating rather than impeding movement, exemption certificates were endorsed when foreign-born residents departed Australia, to be scrutinised upon their return. Despite this apparent officiousness—often resented by Chinese Australians—these small dossiers remain paradoxically human documents, assembling statements of identity and character, plus signed photographs and a left handprint. They were certainly more revealing than passports, instituted in the same Federation moment, but only becoming mandatory in the wartime security climate of 1916. Indeed, calling at Manila in 1913, Ida Lockington was bemused when the *Nikko Maru*’s Chinese passengers were required to hand passports to US Customs officials, remarking that it was ‘funny to see the officer studying the photo & then the Chinese’.

The vast majority of exemption certificates were granted to Chinese-born workers and their families, usually permitting travel outside of the Commonwealth for up to three
years. Whether for work, education or family reasons, such opportunities were regularly taken. Arriving in Australia aged 14, Quhen returned to China in 1912 for an 8-month visit, voyaging there and back aboard the SS *Eastern*. In February 1916 he boarded the SS *St Albans* in Brisbane, bound for another 9 months in China before his return on the *Nikko Maru*. Other regular steamers on the Australia-Asia run included the *Changsha*, *Taiyuan*, *Aldenham* and *Empire*. Seemingly oblivious to Europe’s ‘World War’—or indeed to the Australian-Japanese ‘Cold War’ in the Pacific—this flotilla conducted an endless, shuttling trade.

Largely owned by British interests and officered by British crews, on the one hand these vessels manifested the Eurocentric technological imperialism of the late nineteenth century. Into the interwar period, as Loy-Wilson has elaborated, they also assisted Australians seeking legal or illicit trade in Chinese treaty ports. On the other hand, they offered affordable vehicles for the translocation of Chinese workers, whether born or resident in Australia, or not. These vessels promised steady employment for their Chinese crews, primarily from the southern provinces of Canton and Hainan. These were the men, and rarely the women, who passed through and inscribed messages to each other at North Head, perpetuating a local tradition while largely disdaining local audiences.

In this sense, the detention of Chinese crews at Sydney’s Quarantine Station should be read less as a racist gesture than a momentary interruption in the larger circuits typifying maritime commerce throughout the Asian Pacific. This is not to dismiss the fervent anti-Chinese sentiment manifested in the vexatious embargoes and detention of an earlier generation of Chinese-crewed ships that plied the same route in the 1880s.
Memorials to the SS *Tsinan* and *Menmuir*, for instance, are inscribed in both English and Chinese at North Head. Furthermore, after Federation, medical officers of the Commonwealth Quarantine Service could be called in to assist Customs inspectors in adjudicating on cases of racial identity and parentage.\(^{55}\)

Yet even when impeded by epidemic scares—whether the bubonic plague from 1894 to 1924, smallpox in 1913–14, or pneumonic influenza over 1918–19—this Pacific traffic persisted, within and around nominally national or medical borders.\(^{56}\) Indeed, by the *fin de siècle* the prevailing disease climate throughout much of south Asia and India was against segregation or isolation, focusing instead on intimacy, decency, care and community.\(^{57}\) In rejecting this domestic tradition for a vigorous maritime quarantine policy, we should not be surprised that the new Commonwealth’s closest ally—in the moment of Federation and the white Australia policy—was the rising empire of Japan.\(^{58}\)

**Immigration Stories**

Ironically, perhaps, it was not in the ‘white Australia’ era that the Quarantine Station most embodied racialised immigration restriction, but rather the much later moment of multiculturalism. It was only in the late 1950s that North Head’s use fell strictly within immigration policy and governance, employed for two decades to accommodate both refugees and illegal entrants.

There are two relevant stories here: one nominally of inclusion, the other of overt detention and return. The inclusion story saw the largely empty Quarantine Station accommodating Vietnamese orphans. Delivered via Operation Babylift in April 1975, these refugees were photographed in front of the old quarantine carvings [Figure 4].
Although ostensibly a signature humanitarian event staged by the Whitlam government, the transposition of refugees into a site of detention was telling. If the airlift itself represented ‘a miserly response’ to the impending political and humanitarian crisis in South Vietnam, Gough Whitlam himself decreed that any future maritime arrivals from South-East Asia should be steered directly into custody.\(^{59}\)

**Insert Figure 4 somewhere close to this section**

The frank exclusion story is the contemporaneous use of North Head to accommodate stowaways and those overstaying their visas. Thus it joined the historic carceral archipelago of immigrant hostels and detention centres from Bonegilla to Woomera to Nauru. Detainees, mainly from Fiji, Tonga, Indonesia and Hong Kong, left a rich graffiti record on the inside walls of the building in which they were housed, known locally as A20. Arriving like the Beatles on a British Overseas Airways Corporation airliner in 1964, Hong Kong resident Mak Shing used a ballpoint pen to write in traditional Chinese:

Alas, I … flew across oceans and went to Australia.

Despite my talents, my courage, resilience and wit, I was betrayed by my landlord. But I could not get out of it. My loyalty to my friends had me trapped: I was caught …

I am too kind and a man of my word … \(^{60}\)

Some jottings are crudely poetic. A Javanese deportee was resigned, forgiving rather than resenting Australian authorities carrying out their duty. He gestured to ‘IMMIGRATION’ in both the substance and the form of his acrostic graffiti [Figure 5].
I was very bad luck [unlucky] mate
Late at night came home from work
It was people in suits
Because my visa was expired
They all took part in arresting me
What could I say if that was what fate had in store
God is the one who decides all that
Immigration just carrying out its duty
Okay then going home it is
Later I swap my amulet and come back again if I can.61

* Insert Figure 5 somewhere close to this section *

Thus it was in its final phase of Commonwealth ownership that Sydney’s Quarantine Station fitted most squarely into Australia’s immigration history. While disease inspections and the fumigation of ships had been known to identify—and even to inadvertently cause the deaths of—Chinese seeking to enter Australia undetected,62 it was only after the Second World War that formal detention of ‘illegal’ arrivals was superadded to North Head’s quarantine function. As early as 1950 it was proposed to employ the site as ‘a holding or detaining centre for persons about to be deported or repatriated from Australia’.63 Amid receding pandemic threats, such ‘non-criminal deportees’ were caught within migration rules and regulations, and increasingly complex visa systems. Ironically, perhaps, the very final proposal to repurpose A20, the ‘old detention block’, emerged within a 1979–80 plan to rework North Head as a temporary hostel and processing centre for migrants and refugees, particularly ‘boat people’ arriving from South-East Asia.64
Permanent marks and movable heritage

Oral historians, curators and genealogists are often adept at suturing fragments of the remembered or material past into meaningful narratives. Likewise, our archaeological collaborators came to ‘Stories from the Sandstone’ via long experience in interpreting Indigenous rock art and depictions of Aboriginal contact with Maccassan, Chinese and European wayfarers along Australia’s northern coast. They brought with them a phenomenological ethos that insists not only on seeing places, but on ‘being’ in them – empathetically (re)imagining the circumstances that occasioned the creation of the quarantine inscriptions. This interpretive sensibility is furthermore suffused with insights from the ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’ – a willingness to embrace the endless making and remaking of meaning at a locality up to the present moment, whether through landscape, architecture, dereliction, commemoration or graffiti.65

Unlike the static records that historians traditionally draw upon—sequestered in archives, libraries or museums—the historic inscriptions at North Head are more akin to the protean memory processes that beguile and bedevil practitioners of oral history.66 Etched into or inked onto its sandstone outcrops and Masonite walls, the Quarantine Station’s epigraphs remain a tangible connection to the site’s layered past. Yet, like North Head itself, their uses and meanings are not immobile. They fade in and out of visibility with shifts in vegetation, site use and the linguistic and cultural literacy of those who pause to read them. Indeed they are, in a curious manner, ‘movable heritage’, conducting a conversation-in-place with each other, with the landscape, with its institutional fortunes,
and especially with the visitors who regularly seek for meaning in these permanent marks made in transit.\textsuperscript{67}

Little wonder, then, that the Quarantine Station’s inscriptions continue to capture powerful connections across the mobile lives that moored North Head to the edge of the Pacific Ocean. While earlier inscriptions from detainees were sometimes made by ‘Pacific’ people seeking to enter Australia, at least as often they were made by crew, who sought only to turn around for the return journey. Only intermittently an ‘immigration’ landscape that distils a history of exclusive white Australia or inclusive multicultural Australia, North Head was at least as much a site at which Pacific maritime lives became momentarily territorial.

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\textbf{Endnotes}
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3 Edmund Sager, Vessels Arriving At and Leaving Ports of New South Wales (Returns Respecting, for 1893) (Sydney: New South Wales Legislative Assembly, 1894), 1–11.


9 Anne Clarke, Ursula Frederick and Anna Williams, ‘“Wish You Were Here”: Historic Inscriptions From the North Head Quarantine Station, Manly, NSW’, *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 28 (2010): 77–84.


While tikis have been adopted in Samoa, ‘kia ora’ is a Māori term of greeting, recognised across Australasia as a distinctly New Zealand usage by the First World War.

A.J. Metcalfe to J.H.L. Cumpston, 14 February 1935, Quarantine Station North Head General Section 1, series A1928, control 876/1, SECTION 1, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra.


A.J. Metcalfe to J.H.L. Cumpston, 27 March 1935, A1928, 876/1, SECTION 1, NAA, Canberra.

A.J. Metcalfe to J.H.L. Cumpston, 26 June 1934, A1928, 876/1, SECTION 1, 5, NAA, Canberra.

See the ‘Incoming passenger list’ for each voyage, held at Series A907, NAA, and the corresponding ‘List or manifest of aliens employed on the vessel as members of crew’ at Honolulu, Hawaii, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1900–1959, Ancestry.com.

26 A.J. Metcalfe to J.H.L. Cumpston, 27 June 1929, Diseases on Vessels – ‘Aorangi’ 
Smallpox June 1929, A1928, 260/36, 5, NAA, Canberra.

27 A.J. Metcalfe to J.H.L Cumpston, 5 February 1935, Diseases on Vessels: Smallpox – 


29 Bashford, Imperial Hygiene, 39–58.

30 Translated by Maria Sin for the Quarantine Project, 2013. The inscription itself is incompletely preserved.


35 Ibid.

36 See for instance Charles A. Price, The Great White Walls Are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia 1836–1888 (Canberra: Australian Institute of International Affairs in association with Australian National University Press,


38 ‘Additions to the Japan Mail Line’, *Daily Commercial News and Shipping List*, 8 August 1903, 5.


40 Ida Lockington diary, 21–30 March 1913, MS 14260, State Library of Victoria (hereafter SLV), Melbourne.

41 *Nikko Maru* menus, 16–22 March 1913, John Patrick Hennelly Papers, MLMSS 4124, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

Australian and New Zealand Troop Convoys from 1865 Through Two World Wars to Korea and Vietnam (Sydney: Rosenberg, 2003), 18–34.

43 Annotation on certificate of identity, 13 November 1916, Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT) – Name: Sam War (of Warwick) J2483, 219/28, NAA, Brisbane.

44 KL Smith, Report by Police or Customs Officer on within Application, 25 January 1916, Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT) – Name: Yet Quhen (of Brisbane). J2483, 192/10, NAA, Brisbane.


48 MS 14260, 4 April 1913, SLV.

49 Bagnall, 204–5.


53 See for example Chinese Passengers for Melbourne per S.S. ‘St Albans’, 1922, B13, 1922/20067, NAA, Melbourne.


55 Bagnall, 226.


60 Translated by Maria Sin for the Quarantine Project, 2013. See also Mak, King Shing [Chinese - (1) arrived Sydney per SS ANSHUN on 1 Jan 1962; (2) arrived per aircraft GAPDE on 18 Feb 1964. Box 3], SP682/2, 2059, NAA, Sydney.

61 Translated by Vannessa Hearman for the Quarantine Project, 2014.


63 A.J. Metcalfe to the Minister for Health, 1 March 1950, Immigration Restriction Act – General – Isolation Hospital – North Head, A1658, 556/2/6 PART 1, NAA, Canberra; THE Heyes to the Director-General of Health, 26 November 1958, Quarantine – General – Quarantine Stations – North Head – General, A1658, 874/9/1 PART 1, 1, NAA, Canberra.

64 North Head Quarantine Station – Proposal to Use as a Migrant Centre, A446, 1975/81482, NAA, Canberra.

65 Ursula K. Frederick and Anne Clarke, ‘Signs of the Times: Archaeological Approaches to Historical and Contemporary Graffiti’, Australian Archaeology 78 (2014): 54–7. For influential works on phenomenology and archaeologies of the contemporary past, see for
