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Paper proposal for German Association for Australian Studies, Biennial Conference “Australian Mobilities”, 19-22 October 2023

Nineteenth-Century Maritime Mobility and Texts in Transit across the Pacific

During his voyage from London to Sydney on board the *Tiptree* in late 1860 and early 1861, emigrant John Clapham kept a diary, recording in brief entries his experiences and activities on board, events taking place, observations about fellow passengers, about the weather, encounters with sea animals, wind direction, sailing speed and distance covered. The Clapham diary is one of many such personal documents composed in the nineteenth century on voyages of migration from Britain to the Australasian colonies, suggesting the significance of the practice of writing for recording and mediating experiences of maritime mobility. Seaborne writing often gave structure and rhythm to time spent at sea, and rendered unfamiliar oceanic spaces and experiences familiar by describing and inscribing them in time and place. Reading, too, offered ways of passing time and making sense of sea voyages that could last several weeks if not months, and passengers frequently noted their reading activities in diaries. Taking this shipboard diary as a starting point, this paper explores the interrelationship between literary practices, maritime mobility, and the oceanic environment in the second half of the nineteenth century. Shipboard diaries, as texts and objects, tell us much about how seafarers drew on literary practices to make sense of their transits. Yet, equally revealing are the traces and the ‘stains’ of the sea in the content, composition and materiality of these diaries, suggestive of the significance of the natural environment for the imaginative as well as practical realms of writing and reading, and for the experience of maritime mobility.

Keywords: ocean voyages, maritime mobility, reading, print culture, migration, Pacific

Biographical Note: Susann Liebich is Assistant Professor in Modern History at Heidelberg University, with research and teaching interests in book history, the history of the British Empire and oceanic history. She has published widely on reading cultures in New Zealand and the British empire, and on Australian and New Zealand popular magazines of the 1920s and 30s. Her current project investigates reading and writing at sea, with a focus on maritime mobility across the Pacific in the long nineteenth century. With Laurence Publicover, she is the co-editor of *Shipboard Literary Cultures: Reading, Writing and Performing at Sea* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).