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## Maritime Workers, Desertion, Racism, and Labour Mobility in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Australia

*Abstract:* Deserters – maritime workers who left their ships before the end of their contracts – make up the biggest group of ‘coloured immigrants’ who were known to have entered Australia without authorisation during the era of the White Australia Policy. Archival records show that some deserters sought to stay in Australia, while others soon left again as workers on different ships. Both of these forms of labour mobility went against Australian and global structures, including immigration and employment law, that regulated the mobility of non-white maritime workers. Immigration restriction and racially-specific employment contracts were interconnected; they worked together to facilitate and restrict Asian workers’ movements along circumscribed channels. Despite this, the records of desertion show traces of people who were able to enact forms of autonomous mobility.

### *Prologue*

#### *The Travels of H. Nagano*

In January 1914, H. Nagano, a 35-year-old Japanese national, was arrested while working as a cook at the Newmarket Hotel in Melbourne. Authorities had been tipped off by an informant that he was a prohibited immigrant.<sup>1</sup> While he initially told police that he had come to Melbourne after spending seven years in Western Australia, after questioning he admitted to having deserted from the ‘Canadian Transport’ at Adelaide in June of the previous year.

He gave a statement detailing an itinerant life of work in different countries and on ships that travelled between them. He was born in Yawatahama, a port city in southern Japan. When he was about 15, he left Japan for the USA, where he worked as a cook. He got a job on a steamer, went to London, and left the ship there. He worked on several other ships, before joining the ‘Canadian Transport’ at Calcutta as a second steward. The ‘Canadian Transport’ was a tramp steamer: it had no regular route, but took up cargo contracts wherever it was hired. In June 1913, when the ship arrived in Adelaide with a load of phosphate from Ocean Island (Banaba, Kiribati), Nagano jumped ship.<sup>2</sup> He went by train to Melbourne to stay with another Japanese person. While he relied on national connections for accommodation, he found work with the help of a registry office in the city, which sent him to a job at a boarding house.<sup>3</sup> When he left that job after a few months, he started working as a cook in a shearing shed in Gippsland, before coming back to work at a hotel in Melbourne, where he was arrested, working under the name Charlie Okado.

1 See H. Nagano – Japanese Deserter from the S.S. ‘Canadian Transport’.

2 See *Express and Telegraph*, 5 June 1913, p. 1 (Shipping News).

3 See Seamus O’Hanlon: “All Found” They Used to Call It.

He could speak English well, so officials gave him a dictation test in German, which he failed, in order to declare him a prohibited immigrant.<sup>4</sup> He told officials that he did not want to go back on the 'Canadian Transport' and would "sooner go to America".<sup>5</sup> Despite his request, Nagano was taken out of Australia on February 26, 1914, on the 'British Transport', another tramp steamer owned by the Empire Transport Company. He was signed on as a cabin boy at a salary of £2 per month – a demotion from his previous position as steward. The 'British Transport' left for Barcelona via Durban, carrying Australian wheat.<sup>6</sup>

## **Introduction**

### **Research Question and Methodology**

Nagano's case is unusual in that he left such a detailed narrative of his life in the archives of Australian immigration control; but the desertion itself was not so unusual. Deserters – that is, maritime workers who left their ships before the end of their contracts – make up the biggest group of 'coloured immigrants' who were known to have entered Australia without authorisation. Despite this, there is almost no mention of them in histories of immigration and the White Australia Policy.<sup>7</sup> This reflects a more general absence of work on histories of clandestine migration, especially for the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

I wondered if perhaps the lack of attention to deserters in Australian immigration history was due to the fact that they were not actually immigrants. After all, the statistics simply document entry: they do not show whether or not a person soon left again. As part of my wider research into immigration control techniques, which includes the question of how they were applied to maritime workers, I sought to answer this question of whether or not deserters stayed, or at least tried to stay, in Australia for some time. Were seamen deserting because they wanted to stay in Australia?<sup>9</sup> Was it perhaps a chosen method of migration, a way of avoiding the immigration restrictions that made it very difficult for anyone not white to buy a ticket for a ship to Australia, let alone be allowed to land on arrival? Was it a spontaneous decision, perhaps influenced by one of the

4 The dictation test was the means by which Australian officials legally made unwanted arrivals into prohibited immigrants. It was a legislative compromise between the Australian desire for racial exclusion and British demands for nominal racial neutrality, due to international treaties and pressure from India. Rather than explicitly excluding immigrants on racial grounds, the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act stated that any person could be given a dictation test of fifty words in any language. The test was then selectively applied: only travellers who were to be excluded were tested, and the test was given in a language that would ensure that they failed. For transnational histories of the dictation test as an instrument of racist exclusion, see Marilyn Lake: *From Mississippi to Melbourne via Natal*; Jeremy Martens: *Pioneering the Dictation Test*.

5 H. Nagano – Japanese Deserter from the S.S. 'Canadian Transport', p. 22.

6 See Geelong Advertiser, 27 February 1914, p. 2 (The Wheat Fleet).

7 An important exception is Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh, Lindi Todd: *Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire*.

8 Ruth Balint and Julie Kalman's recent book does an excellent job of challenging the demonisation of the figure of the 'people smuggler', but the cases collected start from WWII. Cf. Ruth Balint, Julie Kalman: *Smuggled*.

9 I have only encountered male maritime workers in the files.

nefarious labour recruiters who were said to trick sailors into desertion?<sup>10</sup> Or, were workers simply changing ships – perhaps to escape abuse, or in search of better conditions?

In this article, I outline how and why desertion was policed within the context of immigration control and the White Australia Policy. I then use files from the National Archives of Australia to provide a partial answer to the question of whether deserters were immigrants. I show that, while many deserters left Australia on a new ship soon after leaving their old one, a significant number of men established some kind of life in Australia after jumping ship; they should therefore be considered in migration history. To better understand the interconnection between controls on maritime workers and immigration restrictions, I draw on the theoretical framework of mobility. I argue that, whether maritime workers aimed to settle in Australia or not, immigration restrictions regulated their mobility, as one mechanism in a global web of regulation of the mobility of non-white labour.

This article draws on files from the National Archives of Australia. It is based on my visits to the Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra branches of the Archives as well as files that have been digitised and are available online.<sup>11</sup> The cataloging work of the Archives means that records can be searched by title, which allowed me to identify sources relating to ‘deserters’ and ‘desertion’. I was able to find other relevant sources by further searches for the names of people and ships mentioned in these records and in secondary literature. Most of the records I use come from the series A1, the correspondence files of the Department of External Affairs, the Federal department responsible, among other things, for immigration matters. I also use files from police, Collectors of Customs, who were responsible for overseeing the policing of ports on a state level, and the Governor General, who was responsible for communication with the Colonial Secretary and with other British colonies including Hong Kong and Singapore. Further shipping information comes from digitised newspapers available through the invaluable Trove database.

### ***Maritime Workers and Immigration Restriction***

Seafarers who were merely passing through Australian ports were explicitly exempt from immigration legislation but this did not mean that they could move freely. Legislative, bureaucratic and policing structures were developed by Australian officials who wanted to ensure that non-white workers kept moving and did not try to settle in ‘white Australia’.

10 For example, see Indian Deserters Budur Dean, Moota Fathaydean and Judda Elliabux – Correspondence of the Collector of Customs with the NSW Police Relating to Immigration Restrictions.

11 I am grateful to have been awarded a National Archives of Australia/Australian Historical Association Postgraduate Scholarship, which funded the digitisation of some necessary records.

### ***Non-White Workers and White Australia***

From Federation onwards, Australia enacted a racist prohibition on the immigration of people who were not classified as ‘white’.<sup>12</sup> Officials had the task of enforcing this: preventing people whose migration was considered undesirable from entering Australia, and tracking down and deporting anyone who managed to sneak in. Although immigration restrictions are often referred to as a ‘wall’,<sup>13</sup> the Australian border was never the hard line suggested by this metaphor. There were always various exceptions and exemptions. Some of these were negotiated, such as the measures Chinese residents of Australia took to enable the entry of family members.<sup>14</sup> Other exemptions were allowances for the temporary entry of certain categories of workers under the responsibility of an employer. These include the primarily Japanese pearl divers admitted to northern Australia on short-term contracts up to the 1970s,<sup>15</sup> and domestic servants and childcare workers, such as those accompanying colonial families from India, Ceylon, Singapore and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> While these workers were permitted to enter Australian territory, their mobility was limited and placed under the control of their employer, who was also entrusted with ensuring their eventual exit from Australia. Non-white workers on visiting ships were another such managed exception to White Australia.

There were some attempts to prevent non-white sailors from participating in the workforce in Australia. In particular, the 1901 Post and Telegraph Act pushed non-white seamen out of the domestic shipping trade, by legislating that mail contracts would be granted only to ships with white crews.<sup>17</sup> However, realistically, Australia, like the rest of the British Empire and the world, relied on the labour of non-white maritime workers, who staffed the ships that enabled global connections.

In the interwar years, around 50 000 South Asian seamen made up a quarter of the workforce on British merchant vessels.<sup>18</sup> They were commonly referred to as ‘lascars’, a term that had specific legal meaning in British law, and which was also used to indicate difference and inferior status.<sup>19</sup> They were employed under particular contracts, known as the lascar articles, with lower pay and harsher conditions than European sailors. There was no formal regulation of working hours, which meant not only that workers would be called on to work long shifts,

12 I deal with ‘race’ as a legal categorisation, using ‘white’ to refer to someone who would be classified by Australian officials as ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ to refer to someone who would not be. The question of how these categories were defined was never entirely stable, but it was nevertheless effective.

13 For example, Charles Archibald Price: *The Great White Walls Are Built*.

14 See Kate Bagnall: *Rewriting the History of Chinese Families in Nineteenth-Century Australia*; id.: *Potter v. Minahan*.

15 See Julia Martínez: *The End of Indenture*.

16 See the work being done by the ‘Ayahs and Amahs’ research project: for example, Avantika Binani, Claire Lowrie: “For Nannie”.

17 See Section 16, Post and Telegraph Act 1901 (Commonwealth).

18 See Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*.

19 See Gopal Balachandran: *Making Coolies, (Un)Making Workers*.

but also that they could be expected to be on call at all times.<sup>20</sup> A lascar could not be employed for a single journey, only for a fixed period of time or a round trip. Shipmasters could discharge lascars only at ports within British India: shipping companies were held responsible for the repatriation of any lascars left at a foreign port. This was ostensibly to protect the lascars from being abandoned and left destitute. However, it kept them tied to their ship, and meant they could not claim discharge in order to move from a particularly harsh ship or to sign on under the more favourable European articles for higher pay. The only way they could do this was by deserting – thus committing a criminal offence and forfeiting all payments due to them.<sup>21</sup> Many thousands more South Asian workers were employed by German and other European shipping companies, who also serviced the Australian routes.<sup>22</sup> As well as lascars, a large number of Chinese maritime workers were part of the global shipping industry – they were also employed on specific contracts, with worse pay and conditions than European workers.<sup>23</sup>

In general, the maritime workforce was racially segregated. Non-white seamen were typically part of coloured crews, who were managed and employed under specific contracts. However, there were exceptions – individuals who found work as part of largely white crews. Nagano, for example, told officials that he was the only Japanese person on board the ‘Canadian Transport’.<sup>24</sup> For the most part, although white and non-white workers did “the same work on deck, in engine rooms and saloons”, they did not do it “side by side on the same ships”.<sup>25</sup> Gopalan Balachandran describes this as “a racially and culturally modular structuring of work and the labour process on vessels”.<sup>26</sup> Ravi Ahuja asks why not more lascars deserted, given their mobility as workers and their unequal pay and treatment. He argues that their freedom of movement was restricted by three interlocking and overlapping fields of regulation: British and British Indian maritime labour law; immigration laws in Britain and the white settler colonies, and extra-legal structures of recruitment, containment and social connection.<sup>27</sup> This interconnected regulation can be seen in the ways in which Australian immigration law interacted with other forms of control as authorities sought to ensure that non-white maritime workers, who could not be entirely excluded from Australia, did not stay.

‘White Australia’ could never be a solid wall: non-white people entered Australian waters and set foot on Australian soil because their labour brought them there. They were simply meant to leave again. The concept of mobility and its regulation can be useful in thinking about the lives of people who moved for work and the ways in which their movement was channelled.

20 See Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*, pp. 116 f.

21 See *ibid.*, pp. 118 f.

22 See *ibid.*, p. 111.

23 See Lars Amenda: *Chinese Quarters*, p. 47.

24 See H. Nagano – Japanese Deserter from the S.S. ‘Canadian Transport.’

25 Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*, p. 140.

26 Gopal Balachandran: *Making Coolies, (Un)Making Workers*, p. 279.

27 See Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*.

## **Mobility and Regulation**

Mobility is a term used within Critical Border Studies to side-step the limits of the concepts of ‘migration’ and ‘the migrant’. Ann McNevin provides a useful summary of the “mobilities turn”.<sup>28</sup> Only certain people who move are understood as migrants: it is a categorisation connected to the borders of nation-states and to governmental classification. Thinking in terms of mobility allows for attention not just to arrival and departure but also to the processes of moving: “transit and motion and, conversely, stillness and waiting become objects of inquiry in themselves”. It also brings together movements on different scales, “mass and large scale movements alongside the micro and molecular”.<sup>29</sup>

McNevin also identifies risks and limitations of this approach: in particular, the risk of simply replacing a historical bias towards stasis with a bias towards mobility. In addition to this analytical problem, there is the danger of uncritically reproducing a vision of “mobility-as-freedom”, which bears the risk of supporting neoliberal arguments for “flexibility, adaptation and self-innovation” within a global labour market, ignoring the economic imperatives and other forms of violence that compel some forms of movement, while blocking others.<sup>30</sup> Maritime workers were highly mobile, but this did not necessarily mean that they were free.

Rather than, as McNevin fears, uncritically reproducing ideas about ‘mobility-as-freedom’, the framework of mobility enables attention to all forms of regulation, not just those enacted through immigration law. The regulation of coloured maritime labour involved both the facilitation of mobility and its restriction. In this, I follow Radhika Mongia’s important work, in which she argues that the British facilitation of Indian labour migration in the nineteenth century was itself a form of migration control, as well as constituting the cradle of the restrictive migration control of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Thinking broadly about the regulation of mobility helps explain the contrast that Ahuja identifies: while a sailor’s work involved “extraordinary mobility across territorial frontiers and cultural spheres”, this mobility did not equal freedom in a labour market structured by rigid and racist hierarchies.<sup>32</sup> In her history of the Suez Canal, Valeska Huber argues that the period around 1900 was neither a time of “unhampered acceleration” of movement nor simply a time of the imposition of harder borders and increased control of movement. It was, rather, “characterised by the *channelling* of mobility, or to be more precise, the differentiation, regulation and bureaucratisation of different kinds of movement”.<sup>33</sup> This concept of channelling meaningfully describes how authorities approached the mobility of maritime workers, particularly those who were not classified as white. Their mobility was essential, and was encouraged, but had to be contained and restricted to the necessary forms. The facilitation of mobility and its constraint were not opposed but

28 Anne McNevin: *Mobility and Its Discontents*, p. 2.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 9 (‘objects’, ‘movement’).

30 *Ibid.*

31 See Radhika Mongia: *Indian Migration and Empire*.

32 Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*, p. 112.

33 Valeska Huber: *Channelling Mobilities*, p. 3; emphasis in original.

connected. As Ahuja argues, the networks that facilitated mobility also worked to “exclude, insulate, and constrain the freedom of movement of seamen”.<sup>34</sup> I will now look at how maritime labour was regulated: specifically at how Australian immigration restriction also mobilised older forms of maritime authority and maritime labour law.

### ***Law and Policing of Desertion***

Legally, as long as a sailor remained connected to his ship, he was exempt from the Immigration Restriction Act. Hence, non-white sailors could travel from port to port, and exercise their customary right to shore leave: they were not treated as (prohibited) immigrants unless they were reported by a captain as absent without leave or as having deserted, or if their ship left without them. Captains, shipping agencies, customs officers and police all worked to prevent non-white seamen from becoming prohibited immigrants.

One of the main ways that Australian officials prevented prohibited immigrant deserters was by delegating responsibility for policing to shipping companies. Captains were required to have regular ‘musters’ of their non-white crew members, to ensure that no one got away. Shipping companies were then fined £100 for any prohibited immigrant deserter, as they were for any other prohibited immigrant who entered Australia from one of their ships. Significantly, a fine issued for a deserter was refunded, in whole or in part, if a ship’s agents could demonstrate that the man concerned had left the commonwealth. So shipping agents took on some of the work of tracking down deserters – offering rewards, putting out notices, and sometimes hiring private investigators – to ensure that they were deported. They also corresponded with shipping agents and captains around the world in search of evidence that a deserter had left on another ship, which would allow them to apply for a refund of the fine they had paid.

Australian customs officials and police also tracked down deserters. Unlike other clandestine immigrants, individual deserters were known to have entered. There was, at least, a name (from the ship’s articles). There was also a description, and commonly a photograph, and even fingerprints, because of the records of crew members kept by ships. Regulations requiring ships’ crew members to have identification cards served two purposes. Firstly, they provided a way for captains and customs officers to legally prevent sailors from disembarking. Secondly, the duplicate identification cards kept on board ships provided information, photographs and thumbprints to make it easier for police to track down and prosecute people who deserted.

In December 1912, the Immigration Restriction Act was amended to make policing easier. Crew members could be required to produce an identification card if an officer demanded it, before being allowed to land. From October 1913, this was enforced selectively: it was only applied to “*coloured* members of crews

34 Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*, p. 127.

in cases where the crews consist wholly or partly of Chinese".<sup>35</sup> Captains were encouraged to use this regulation to prevent crew members from landing during a stay at port, if they thought it was necessary.<sup>36</sup> In theory, a captain who wanted to keep seamen on the ship could refuse to issue the required documents. In practice, it was not always so smooth. Despite the differences in power, and the backing of the state, captains could not always control their crews.

The United Kingdom Mutual Steamship Assurance Association complained to the Colonial Office in London in June 1913 on behalf of shipowner members. Their letter raised the case of the 'Frankby', which had recently been fined £800 for the desertion of eight Chinese crew members. The captain had told the insurers that

he had watchmen on board from the shore and also European members of the crew specially told off to watch the Chinamen, but with extreme cunning and ingenuity the 8 Chinamen appear to have crawled past the watchmen on a dark night, and slid down a rope to a boat which had been brought for the purpose from the shore at Sydney.<sup>37</sup>

The captain said that authorities in Australian ports did not offer any assistance in preventing desertions, comparing this unfavourably with the US, where the authorities provided "special police or detectives" to stop Chinese sailors going ashore, and where ships were therefore fined much less often.<sup>38</sup> In August 1915, an amendment to the Immigration Regulations gave customs officers the power to prevent any crew member from coming ashore without first showing the required identification card.<sup>39</sup> This was in response to difficulties officers had faced with Chinese crews who "persist in landing without authority during the vessel's stay in port". It made coming ashore without identification an offence in itself, and meant that officers did not have to prosecute them as prohibited immigrants, or ask a captain to report them as absent without leave, which "would probably cause him trouble with the crew".<sup>40</sup> These measures reflect the difficulties authorities faced in restricting maritime workers' customary right to shore leave while in port.

While sailors' identification cards were only partially successful in preventing crew members from going ashore, they did provide details that could be used to help track down anyone who deserted. Descriptions of deserters were circulated in the 'Police Gazette', on publicly distributed 'wanted' posters, and on Prohibited Immigrant (PI) Lists, which were distributed regularly to police stations across the country. Each contained a brief description of prohibited immigrants who had recently entered the county, usually with a photograph and sometimes a thumbprint. At the bottom of the list, information was given about previously featured migrants who had been captured and any increase of the reward offered by the shipping agents. The PI List stated that a reward of £10 would be given for

35 Desertion of Chinese Seamen in Australian Ports, p. 15.

36 See *ibid.*, p. 12.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 4 f.

39 See Regulation Under Immigration Act – Members of Crews Not Producing Identification Cards.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 38 ('authority', 'trouble').



information leading to the arrest of any prohibited immigrant on the list. By July 1931 428 people had been listed.<sup>41</sup>

Immigration law was not the only legislation that applied to deserters. In most cases involving a prohibited immigrant deserter, a warrant was first issued for the crime of desertion. On his arrest, the desertion charge was dropped and he was charged with being a prohibited immigrant. Around the world, there were laws against desertion well before immigration restrictions came into the picture.<sup>42</sup> The maritime workforce was policed through criminal law in ways that had largely been phased out for terrestrial workers. This was enforced through reciprocal treaties: in return for assistance from other regimes in apprehending British deserters, British, and thus Australian, authorities tracked down foreign deserters in their territories.<sup>43</sup> The criminalisation of desertion had long been a reality for all maritime workers (except in US ports, where trade unions of white workers successfully fought against it).<sup>44</sup> Even stricter controls were imposed on the movement of non-white seamen employed under the lascar articles or other racially specific contracts. The way in which immigration restrictions and the enforcement of maritime authority through criminal law were used together can be seen in the case of the strike in 1923 by lascars on the 'City of Batavia'. Eight Indian men, who had gone on strike in protest of a breach of their agreement, were first imprisoned for disobeying the ship's master, before being charged with being prohibited immigrants and deported.<sup>45</sup> Control over the movement of sailors through maritime labour law, as well as extra-legal customs of shipboard authority, interacted with controls over the movement of particular workers through immigration law. The latter, as well as the financial and criminal penalties backing up their contracts, was mobilised to stop non-white sailors from jumping ship to get work under better conditions.

### ***Were Deserters Immigrants?***

The framework of mobility is a useful way of thinking about the various mechanisms that regulated how maritime workers moved around the world, and the possibilities that were available to them to change workplace, to keep moving, and to stay still. 'Mobility' works with a strategically broad definition, in order to think about a broad range of human (and non-human) movement through a single term. By stepping momentarily away from focusing only on immigration and immigration law, I have shown that the mobility of non-white maritime workers was restricted on various scales by interconnected forms of regulation, and that this applied whether sailors wanted to stay in Australia, change ships, or simply take shore leave.

41 See Tazoodin AMIRALI - Deserter, p. 3.

42 For example, see Charles R. Clee: *Desertion and the Freedom of the Seaman*; id.: *Desertion and the Freedom of the Seaman (Concluded)*; Heide Gerstenberger: *The Disciplining of German Seamen*.

43 See *New Provisions Regarding the Apprehension of Deserters from Japanese Ships*.

44 See Charles R. Clee: *Desertion and the Freedom of the Seaman*, pp. 665 f.

45 See *Indian deserters ex "City of Batavia"*.

At the same time, I am interested in the question of why deserters left their ships and what they did afterwards. One way of framing this is by asking whether or not deserters were immigrants. Historians of migration do not typically concern themselves with definitions of ‘migration’ or ‘a migrant’. While the colonial context of Australian history means that there are ongoing discussions about the significance of who gets called a ‘migrant’ and who gets called a ‘settler’, in general the understanding of what counts as migration is otherwise taken for granted.<sup>46</sup> Legally, the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act defined “prohibited immigrant”, but did not establish a definition of “immigrant”.<sup>47</sup> In asking whether deserters were immigrants I am investigating whether they sought to stay in Australia. As well as being a matter of human interest in the lives of people we can catch glimpses of in the files, this approach draws attention to the question of what contribution histories of deserters, and of clandestine migration more generally, could make to the broader picture in Australian immigration history.

The control measures employed against maritime workers were only necessary because some seamen deserted, or tried to desert. My research is based on records of policing: there are limits to what can be read from them about the experience of people who moved. This is partly because certain forms of mobility were, when successful, invisible to authorities. It is also because Immigration and Customs officers who produced the files are invested in their own categories, not in the experiences of the people they write about. Nevertheless, there is some information about people’s movements that can be found in these records.

Australian immigration records show that the number of deserters was relatively high, compared to other forms of non-authorized entry. Each year the Immigration Returns were presented to the federal parliament: detailed statistics, based on Customs records, on how many people entered Australia, and how many were refused entry. The Returns include notes on ‘coloured immigrants’ who entered, with the number of deserters of different racial classification noted. Based on Barry York’s published compilation of the Returns, I calculated that 1190 deserters were listed between 1902 and 1929.<sup>48</sup> This number refers only to deserters who were classified as prohibited immigrants on the grounds of race. It does not include anyone whose desertion was not considered an immigration issue. It also does not include the much smaller number of white deserters who were classified as prohibited immigrants, either because of reported venereal disease,<sup>49</sup> because of war-time or post-war prohibitions on the entry of enemy nationals, such as Germans,<sup>50</sup> or because of interwar concerns about political radicals entering the country.<sup>51</sup> In comparison, in my research on stowaways, I have so far counted 410 prohibited immigrant stowaways (i. e. non-white stowaways) who were caught in the same period.<sup>52</sup> The files on stowaways only show people

46 See Ruth Balint, Zora Simic: *Histories of Migrants and Refugees in Australia*, pp. 379 f.

47 Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Commonwealth).

48 See Barry York: *Admitted: 1901-1946*.

49 See *White Deserters Suffering from Infectious Diseases*.

50 For example, see *SS Elleerfeld – Deserters; Record of Files and Orders* [Box 1].

51 See *Aliens Seamen Deserters – Vic. Passports Regulations*.

52 This figure is based on extensive archival research conducted for my doctoral project. See *Correspondence with Government, Hong Kong Re Illegal Introduction of Chinese with*

who were found hidden on ships or were caught trying to sneak off ships; that is, they show unsuccessful attempts to enter Australia by people who were soon deported. A stowaway who succeeded in getting to Australia left no archival trace: the records do not show how many people actually came in by stowing away. For deserters, on the other hand, record-keeping on ships meant that we know when people entered: they were reported as having deserted. However, in the absence of other records, we do not know whether they stayed. There is a certain paranoia, or at least suspicion, inherent in the customs and immigration files that I am using. For officials, every non-white person was a potential prohibited immigrant. While there was very rarely as intense a concern about prohibited immigrant deserters as there was about rumoured stowaways, there was an assumption, at least in terms of bureaucratic practice, that unless a deserter was 'recovered', he was still in Australia.

### ***Those Who Stayed***

Many deserters have an individual file in the immigration control archives. These files are generally brief, detailing the report of a desertion and the fine issued against the ship. Others are longer and include information about attempts to track down a deserter and, when this was successful, details of his arrest and deportation. There is often, then, correspondence with shipping agents dealing with a request for a refund of the fine. For those deserters who were located, it is possible to make some assumptions about whether they intended to stay in Australia or not.

Wong Luing, for example, was arrested in a market garden in Sydney in 1932 – over seventeen years after his desertion in Melbourne.<sup>53</sup> Also known as Choy Fong, he was recognised by police from his picture on the Prohibited Immigrant list. Another deserter who stayed for a long time was Chong Kong, who was working as a fireman on the tramp steamer 'Batsford' before he deserted at Fremantle in November 1915. That he was intent on staying in Australia can be deduced from the fact that he successfully applied for a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test in 1923, under the name Ah Pow, having grown a moustache, so officials would not recognise him. This certificate allowed him to travel to China and return. He was eventually convicted of being a prohibited

Commonwealth; Discovery of Chinese Stowaways; F.W.E. Gabriel Visit to Singapore & Hong Kong 1923; Governor General's Office – Correspondence – Chinese Stowaways Arriving in Australia from Hong Kong Singapore; Inspector F.W. Gabriel – Visit to Hong Kong, Etc; Investigations into the Illegal Entry into Australia of Chinese Stowaways; Japanese Stowaways – Tokiyiro Sugimoto, Jihizo Tahira, Kametaro Shiozaki, Genrokee Uipedd; (Memorandum Re Alleged Illicit Introduction of Chinese into the Commonwealth) Detection and Prevention of Illegal Entry of Chinese; Mon Shao Stowaway Ex. 'Garbeta'; Questions in Parliament by Senator FINDLEY Re Chinese and the IR Immigration Restriction Act; Royal, J – Stowaway; S S ARENSKERR – September 27 – Chinese Stowaways; Searching of Ships for Stowaways and Contraband – Procedure of Precautions to Be Taken against Illegal Entering of Stowaways; S.S. 'Charon' – 11 Stowaways; SS 'Charon' – Stowaways 16/2/13; SS 'Kumeric' – 5 Stowaways and 1 Deserter 1913; S/S 'Murez' – Chinese Stowaways; Stowaways on 'Levuka.'

53 See SS Tydens – Chinese Deserters.

immigrant in 1928. He successfully asked to be released on a bond for an extra month, so his crops could finish growing. After disposing of his garden business interests, he left Australia in June 1928.<sup>54</sup>

Chong Kong was one of six Chinese deserters from the 'Batsford'. The ship came from New York and stopped at multiple Australian ports to collect wool and timber before heading for London, via South Africa.<sup>55</sup> Along the way, two firemen and a sailor deserted at Newcastle, and two more firemen deserted at Sydney, before Chong Kong left the ship at Fremantle.<sup>56</sup> All of these men sought to stay in Australia for years, and two managed to get documents. This particular case fits with a general spike in desertion during the war, which was at least partly due to sailors who jumped ship rather than risk being mobilised into dangerous military shipping when their ships were requisitioned as troop carriers.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Those Who Left***

On the other hand, there are records of men who were found to have left on other ships. Captains usually said that they had stowed away and then, once found, had been taken on as crew members.<sup>58</sup> In these cases, it is clear that desertion was not an attempt to stay in Australia. For example, on New Year's Eve 1915, Foo Tong, a fireman, deserted from the 'Havre', a British Imperial Oil Company ship bringing oil from Singapore and returning with Australian coal. The ship's agents, facing a fine for his desertion, contacted other ships to investigate rumours that he had left. He was found to have left as a stowaway on the 'Queen Maud', carrying Australian wheat to San Francisco, and to have become a crew member, under the name Ah On. When the 'Queen Maud' returned to Melbourne in 1916, Foo Tong, then working as a firemen's cook was questioned. He said that he had left the 'Havre' because the second engineer had hit him.<sup>59</sup>

Files with such clear proof that a deserter left soon after entry are less common than those that show that someone was in the country for some time. However, evidence about other deserters suggests that they generally took up work on different ships. Records show that 80 German crew members deserted at Port Adelaide in 1928, while 58 German seamen were signed on at the same port that year. As only three seamen officially signed off, it can be assumed that most of the deserters signed on to work on other ships.<sup>60</sup>

54 See SS 'Batsford' [sic] – Deserters, pp. 41 f.

55 See Sydney Morning Herald, 4 October 1915, p. 9 (Steamers Due Today); Fremantle Herald, 12 November 1915, p. 3 (Freighter Batsford).

56 See SS 'Batsford' [sic] – Deserters, pp. 127 f.

57 See Chinese Desertions in New South Wales – Large Increase In. Balachandran attributes the increase in desertion in these years also to an increase in the self-confidence of Indian and Chinese workers, due to the anti-colonial and nationalist movements. Gopal Balachandran: *Making Coolies, (Un)Making Workers*, p. 283.

58 I suspect that this explanation might, at least sometimes, be a story that a captain told to cover up having taken on a worker in port in a not entirely legitimate way.

59 See Foo Tong – Deserter 'Havre' Newcastle; Daily Commercial News and Shipping List, 2 December 1915, p. 4 (Oil For Melbourne); *ibid.* 11 January 1916, p. 10 (The Week's Shipments)

60 See German Deserters Arriving in Australia.

While not every deserter case file available in the archives includes a resolution, it is likely that many people recorded as deserters simply left again soon after their entry. However, it is also clear that other deserters did stay, or tried to stay, in numbers significant enough to be considered in Australian migration history. For deserters who escaped (archival) capture, other archives are needed to tell their stories. As Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh, and Lindi Todd argue, these could include family histories and collective memory within communities that Indian seafarers may have become part of, in particular Aboriginal communities.<sup>61</sup>

Returning to Nagano and his story – this time not as a story of failed settlement in Australia but as a story of transnational mobility, it can be said that his wandering life is not too unusual. Similar tales of men shifting between work on land and at sea can be read in literature and biography across this era.<sup>62</sup> In moving around the world, Nagano was exercising a custom of mobility that brought many other workers to Australia, some of whom settled, while others kept moving. A deserter who was not classified as a prohibited immigrant – that is, a deserter who was classified as white – could still face prosecution by the shipping company for desertion. However, if he avoided this, he could live and work in Australia easily without any need to show official documentation (unless he was suspected of being an ‘enemy alien’ during war time). Nagano’s deportation – his forced movement out of Australia via his classification as a prohibited immigrant – occurred only because of Australia’s racist immigration controls. This may seem obvious. However, it is worth stating in order to be specific about whose mobility was facilitated, and which forms of mobility were blocked, by immigration control and other forms of regulation.

Mobility is a particularly useful framework for thinking about the work of seafarers and the controls on their movement. For sailors and deserters, mobility-as-migration cannot be easily separated from mobility-as-labour. For someone like Nagano, employment on a ship was both work and a means of travel. It is not necessary to know whether or not maritime workers were, or wanted to be, migrants in order to think about how their travels interacted with Australian immigration controls. It becomes clear that the regulation of non-white maritime workers aimed at preventing their autonomous mobility on any scale, be it moving between ships or settling in Australia. Attempts to prevent seamen from leaving the ship at all was a restriction of their mobility on a small scale, in order to ensure that they would continue moving with their ships when those left. Immigration control was just one mechanism among many for ensuring the correct circulation of labour. It was part of the network of governance that Ahuja identifies in his work on lascars.<sup>63</sup>

The movement and labour of so-called ‘coloured’ seamen enabled global connections, including connections between Australian ports and the world. Their

61 See Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh, Lindi Todd: *Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire*, pp. 57-60.

62 See Louis L’Amour: *Education of a Wandering Man*; Luke Lewin Davies: *The Tramp in British Literature*.

63 See Ravi Ahuja: *Mobility and Containment*.

mobility was channelled along particular tracks, namely the shipping routes along which they moved people and goods. Mobility away from these tracks was discouraged – whether it was movement from ship to shore or between ships in search of better employment conditions. All of this is not to deny that maritime workers were capable of self-directed, autonomous or resistant forms of mobility. As Goodall, Ghosh and Todd argue, the “archives of mechanisms for control” are not proof that these controls were successful.<sup>64</sup> The archives of desertion show traces of people who enacted “unruly mobilities” on various scales: asserting their right to shore leave, changing ships in breach of contract, and jumping ship to make new lives in Australia.<sup>65</sup>

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64 Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh, Lindi Todd: *Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire*, p. 47.

65 Valeska Huber: *Channelling Mobilities*, p. 328.

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