

From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother
on the P. & O Steamer “Mongolia”
by John F. Norton
With the Australian National
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*

29th April

By this time land was in sight and by breakfast time we were within sight of the Colombo breakwater. There was some delay before we could enter, owing to some temporary mishap to the engines of the “Mongolia”. However these were righted after an hour or so and without the aid of the tugs our boat was able to get into the harbour and we heard for the first time since we started the rattle of the chains which told of the casting of the anchor. In no time we were surrounded by boats and lighters of every description. There are no wharfs in Colombo as the water is not deep enough, hence all the goods for cargo and provisions must be first put into lighters and then transferred to the ships. The double handling is not costly where labour is so cheap.



Our great boat did not seem such a giant as we lay among others of various nationalities and considerable tonnage. Colombo is a very busy port, for all the ships from the East and the West, as well as from Australia, must make a stay there, no matter how short.

Passport officials now came on board and soon the majority of the passengers were in launches and on their way to the shore. I remained with the Bishop all day and put in the time viewing Colombo from the harbour and watching the men on the lighters, who were getting cargo on our vessel. They were working hard, poor fellows, but they seemed very happy and laughed and chewed beetle nut all day long. As night fell those whose task was not yet complete did not cease, but one of the number on each boat got a fire going and cooked the evening meal of rice for the rest. It was interesting to see how they decided that there was enough water covering the rice in the pot. The cook simply put his hand straight down and then added or took out water as his measurement showed it to be necessary.

I don't think I've mentioned that the “Mongolia” is an oil vessel, that is, she burns oil instead of coal, by which to produce steam for the turbines. So several oil tanks were beside us during the day and the crude oil was very quickly pumped into the liner's hold.

We had a visit from a couple of the Oblate Fathers from St Joseph's College and with them two New Zealand priests who were on their way to Europe. Two of these priests were old acquaintances of mine, so it was a happy meeting.

When night came it was a very pretty scene that met one's gaze. The bright lights of the city, the brilliantly illuminated ships, the intermittent flashes from the lighthouses that stand out at the two entrances to the harbour, the red glow from the lighters, where the dim figures of the tired natives sat around their evening meal - all of these things would have given me great pleasure, if I had not been so worried.

The Bishop and I slept on deck, or rather, tried to, for he had a very restless night, and naturally I did not get much either.