

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

SHIPBOARD PARTY ENDS IN TRAGEDY PORT CAMPBELL

By Mary Ryllis Clark, circa 1996

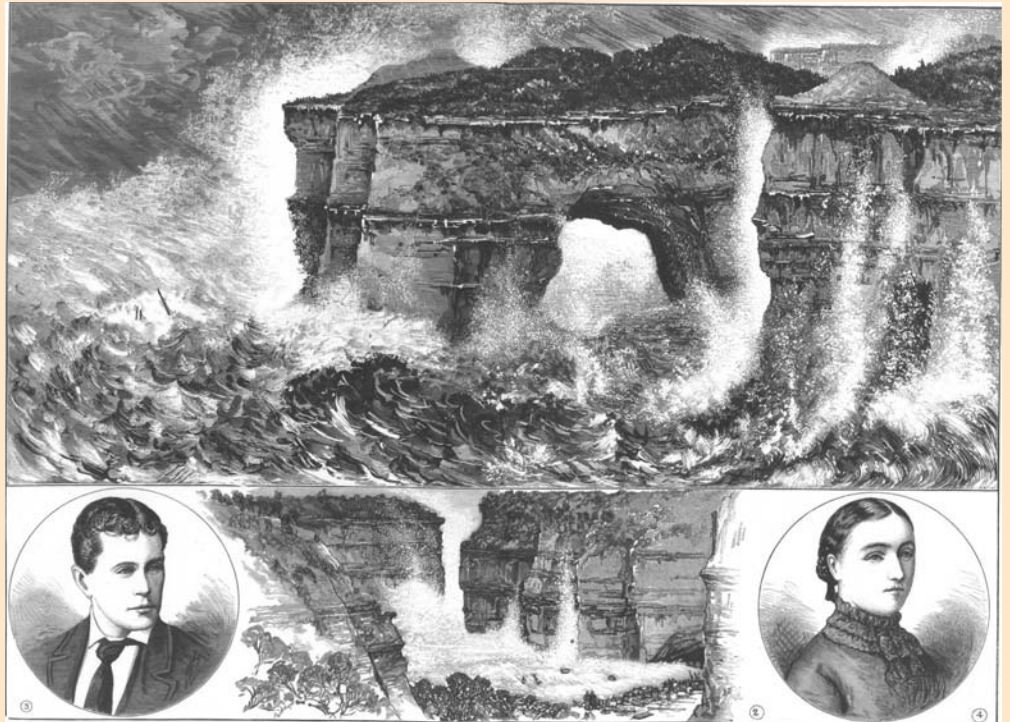
On the night of 31 May 1878 the eighteen passengers aboard the Loch Ard were holding an end-of-voyage party. They had left the Port of London on 2 March and had spent a long ninety days at sea following the Great Circle Route via the southern Indian Ocean. They expected to arrive in Melbourne the next day.

It was misty and visibility was poor. Captain Gibb was anxious. He couldn't get a clear position from his marine sextant as it depended on clear skies and a defined horizon, and he watched anxiously for a sight of Cape Otway.

At midnight 18-year-old Eva Carmichael and her sister Raby went up on deck to strain through the mist for a glimpse of land, but could see nothing. They rejoined their parents and four younger sisters and brothers, who had retired for the night.

Just after 4 a.m. the haze lifted and the crew saw the tall, pale cliffs of the Victorian coast less than 2 kilometres away. Captain Gibb tried desperately to turn about but there was not enough space to maneuver so large a sailing ship, particularly with the wind and current against her.

The shouting woke Eva. She thought the crew were celebrating the sight of land and went to see for herself. She immediately realised the



The wreck of the Loch Ard. From the Australasian Sketcher, July 6 1878. Courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

danger and alerted her family. As they were getting dressed, Eva later said, the *Loch Ard* ran with a 'fearful, shuddering crash' onto an outlying reef off Mutton Bird Island.

There was pandemonium as the thirty-six-man crew struggled to launch the lifeboat, the passengers screamed in terror and the ship disintegrated. Eva was swept into the sea by a huge wave. She could not swim and clung fiercely to a piece of broken mast. For four hours she held on, sustained by her determination and size: she was over 180 centimetres tall and weighed 76 kilograms.

At the entrance to a long, narrow gorge, Eva's mast jammed against some rocks. She saw a figure on the distant beach and screamed for help. It was Tom Pearce, a young apprentice seaman. Tom was badly bruised and cut by

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wreckage, and it took him an hour to swim out to Eva and pull her ashore. Eva recalled that:

He took me into a wild-looking cave a few hundred feet from the beach and, finding a case of brandy, broke the bottle and made me swallow some. He pulled some long grass and shrubs for me to lie on. I soon sank into a state of unconsciousness and must have remained so for hours.

After a rest, Tom climbed the cliffs and eventually came across two boundary riders from the nearby Glenample Homestead. The owner, Hugh Gibson, was alerted and went to the gorge, where Eva was found with some difficulty as she had been terrified when she woke to find herself alone and had hidden under a bush. One of the Gibsons' neighbours recalled the rescue in a letter he wrote to a friend:

When Mr Gibson found her in the scrub she had only her chemise and a red flannel underbody on and looked just like a white marble statue when brought in and sat in a chair. It was two (or three) in the morning and she - Mrs Gibson - gave them beef tea, hot baths for feet and legs only, and got them put to bed with warm blankets and hot bricks besides.

It was twenty hours since the ship had come to grief.

The wreck of the *Loch Ard* caused a sensation. Tom and Eva were the only survivors. Tom was eventually presented with a medal by the Humane Society. The couple was the subject of intense public interest and romantic speculation, but Eva returned to her extended family in Ireland and Tom went back to sea. They never saw each other again.

Very few bodies were recovered from the wreck. A sad but impressive funeral was held on the cliff top above the gorge for the bodies of Mrs Carmichael, her daughter Raby and two

male passengers, Reginald Jones and Arthur Mitchell. Mr McIntyre, a Presbyterian bush missionary, preached on the theme 'And the sea gave up the dead which were in it'.

The Loch Ard Gorge is one of twenty-five wreck sites on the Historic Shipwreck Trail between Princetown and Port Campbell. Yesterday's tragedy has become today's tourist attraction. You can visit the tiny cemetery on the clifftop above the Loch Ard Gorge; follow the clifftop walk to the viewing area on the eastern escarpment to see the actual spot where the *Loch Ard* struck land; descend the jarrah steps to the beach nearly 20 metres below; and stand in the caves called after Torn Pearce and Eva Carmichael.

Signs explain the story of the wreck as well as the geology of the cliffs and the interrelation between the coastline and the ocean. Inevitably, some of the mystery has gone but the coast has not been tamed. It is not hard to stand in this narrow space, looking up at the towering cliffs, and imagine how wild and dangerous it would be here during a storm.

GETTING THERE

Loch Ard Gorge is about 270 kilometres southwest of Melbourne via the Great Ocean Road, just after the Twelve Apostles (formerly called the Sow and Pigs) and before Port Campbell. It is within the Port Campbell National Park. There is parking on the clifftop and at the nearby cemetery.