


SKRZYNECKI'S POEMS

TRANSITIONS:

- THE
JOURNEY
TO
AUSTRALIA



Skrzynecki looks back at the
experience of migrants in
transitioning from their homelands
(the “old world”) to Australia (the
“new world”)

The two poems we will be examining
in this presentation are:

‘Crossing the Red Sea’

‘Sailing to Australia 1949’



‘Crossing the Red Sea

In this poem, Skrynecki looks at the apprehension that migrants had in leaving their homelands as well as their expectations related in moving to a new life in a strange new land, In the opening lines:

*“Many slept on deck
Because of the day’s heat
Or to watch a sunset
They would never see again”*

the reader can feel the emotional pain involved in leaving their past behind them. This is echoed in:

*“Memories strayed
From behind sunken eyes
To look for shorelines –
Peaks of mountains and green rivers
That shared their secrets
With storms and exiles”*



‘Crossing the Red Sea

The memories of the lands that they were leaving behind had darker connotations – they had memories of “*walled-up griefs*”, where they talked “*of death*” and “*people listening to requiems*”. But weighing this up, they still looked forward with some anxiety about moving into the unknown, as can be seen in:

*“But the gestures
Of darkness and starlight
Kept our minds
Away from the finalities
Of surrender –
As they beckoned towards
A blood-rimmed horizon
Beyond whose waters
The Equator
Was still to be crossed.”*

'Sailing to Australia 1949'

In 'Sailing to Australia 1949', Skrzynecki again centers on immigrants expectations of what will happen to them once they arrive in Australia. They had made the decision to leave their past lives behind to make a new start in an unknown land – they were not only leaving behind their homelands decimated by war, but also the haunting memories that they had of them; they were:

*“Tired, embittered
wary of each other—
like men whose death sentences
have been commuted,
they turned their faces
from a shore
none of them could forget”*

the term “*commuted*” implying that they were given a second chance of having a normal life.



'Sailing to Australia 1949'

They had become *“disinherited, self-exiled,/homeless/as a river without banks ”*.

In the lines:

*“Through grey mornings
and long afternoons of drizzle
we lay and talked
of graves that nobody
was prepared
to enter—
argued
about war, disguised nationalities
and the absence of sea birds
from who we always watched”*

the reader is given an insight into the emotional turmoil that those escaping war torn Europe were going through, with the ever present promise/hope of them being *‘nearly, nearly there’*.



'Sailing to Australia 1949'

However, after going through processing where they were “officially/tagged and photographed” and “each face became/a set of facts” that was to last the duration of the voyage to Australia – their “*Castle of Dreams*”, they were still filled with trepidation, when:

*“On arrival,
a great uneasiness
filled the ship—
unspoken, misunderstood,
as a Union Jack
was hung
across the landing dock”*

where they were told “*why we should feel proud/to have arrived,/without mishap, in Australia,/on Armistice Day*”.



Thank you for
paying attention



BWR