This is the author's radio script of this article.
Many hundreds of thousands of words were written on, or about, sea voyages in the 19th century, some of it intended for publication, in the form of official accounts or novels, but much of it surviving only in manuscript form, if at all. For her book *Saltwater in the Ink*, Lucy Sussex has mined the archives and come up with an entertaining mixture of diaries, letters and fiction recounting first-hand experiences of shipboard life.

Sussex introduces each chapter of the book with an anecdote from her own family history, or a description of a Victorian artefact, though not one that necessarily has any personal connection with the writer of what follows. The relevance of these starting points sometimes seems doubtful. Still, they personalise the book and add broader context.

There are fourteen different accounts, mainly from people with no special claim to fame. One exception is the politician Henry Parkes, whose passage to England on the *SS Great Britain* is recorded in a letter sent to his daughter. Sussex has included the accounts of two other passengers on the same voyage, making a fascinating little mini-drama. Parkes describes his fellow passengers one by one to amuse his daughter. The two other writers are variously described as ‘an Irish youth, ... a lad of sanguine temperament & a fine spirit & has managed to fall over head & ears in love with a girl with a face just like a frog’s;’ and ‘a Miss Aspinal, ... a well-educated lady-like person ... on the venerable side of thirty something of a gossip & with some taste for literature.’ Miss Aspinall, in turn, describes Parkes as ‘full of dry fun’, but the Irishman, Charlie Chomley, was her more particular friend, though she doesn’t figure so much in his rather over-written account, which perhaps indicates that she wasn’t so important to him. These people all seem of a fairly robust temperament, despite Parkes’ remark about Chomley’s amorous aspirations. Other voices sound more emotionally fragile: Kate Crossley, at 29, though fearfully genteel – her favourite adjective is ‘nice’ – appears mildly desperate to find a husband, but the muted hints of a shipboard romance led nowhere, and Sussex notes that she wasn’t mentioned in the journal of the gentleman in question. It’s rather startling to find this rather prim gentlewoman recounting a discussion of women’s dress between three of the men: ‘The Captain (who is not over refined) said he liked to see white stockings and would not allow his wife to wear any others. (I wondered if he had seen my red ones.)’

At 16, Mary Cameron, just married, is far from prim and reminds one irresistibly of Lydia Bennet: ‘She is a nice girl, exceedingly lively,’ she says of Miss Palmer, with whom she is ‘immense friends’, ‘but still I think if I had been a gentleman, I shouldn’t have fallen in love with her.’
There are many insights and surprises. Charlotte Butler left Adelaide in 1846 with her husband, two sons and a small party to found a settlement at Guichen Bay, which later became the town of Robe. Amid the privations of the first few days it is astonishing to hear that among the luggage on the beach awaiting the erection of a hut is a piano. A more ill-fated expedition in 1864 attempted to found a community on the northern coast of Western Australia. Sussex’s great-grandmother was one of the pioneers. Her letter is included, along with a harrowing first-person account of a violent clash between a small group of the men and the local Aborigines, which is put in context by an Indigenous oral history recorded in 1965: “The Aborigines harassed the white people … in the end the white people had had enough, and they left. We won the victory!”

Though it would have benefitted from illustrations, *Saltwater in the Ink* is an attractive book, and an accessible introduction to the wealth of primary sources awaiting the inquisitive researcher in libraries, and archives, and even sometimes in that old suitcase on top of the wardrobe.