



Bruce Carroll, descendant of Thomas and Mary Sinclair, outside the family croft, 2023

FROM DUNROSSNESS TO FREMANTLE

The Migration of the Sinclair Family 1863

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The Shetland Islands experienced pronounced population outflows in the 19th century, driven by socioeconomic pressures such as land clearances and declining employment. A potato famine in 1846 also led to widespread distress. At the same time, government policies in Australia sought to attract migrants by offering assisted passages.¹ It was against this backdrop that Thomas Sinclair of Dunrossness, my wife's great-great-grandfather, chose to emigrate to Western Australia with his family. I discuss their journey in this paper.

The 1861 Scotland census identified Thomas Sinclair as a 'fisherman & crofter'.² He was born in Skelberry in 1828 and married Mary Mainland in 1851.³ Mary was two years older than him, born in Garthbanks in 1826.⁴ They lived with their children in Husbrake, a small settlement near Hillock, Dunrossness.

The Sinclairs were not directly affected by the changes on Shetland, but may have been moved by what Marjory Harper has called a 'discontented restlessness'.⁵ Their economic future may have looked bleak. Two of Thomas's younger brothers had already moved to Western Australia and probably wrote home optimistically about life there. They both had jobs in Fremantle Harbour, Laurence as a tidewaiter in the Customs Department, and John in the Water Police.⁶ Their success may have encouraged Thomas to follow them.

¹ Véronique Molinari, 'A most "valuable class": the Shetland Female Emigration Society and the emigration of single women to South Australia and Tasmania in the early 1850s', *Northern Scotland*, 2025, 16(1):1-27, p 5

² Census record for Thomas Sinclair, Parish:Dunrossness, 1861 Scotland Census, Ancestry.com, accessed 20 March 2026.

³ Baptism registration for Thomas Sinclair, born 8 August 1828, Dunrossness, Shetland, in National Records of Scotland, Old Parish Registers, Births 003/ Dunrossness, Sandwick and Cunningsb, page 42 of 197, ScotlandsPeople, accessed 20 March 2026; Marriage registration for Thomas Sinclair and Mary Mainland, married 13 December 1851, Dunrossness, Shetland, in National Records of Scotland, Old Parish Registers, Marriages 003/Dunrossness, Sandwick and Cunningsb, page 193 of 197, ScotlandsPeople, accessed 20 March 2026.

⁴ Baptism registration for Mary Mainland, born 3 January 1826, Garthbanks, Shetland, in National Records of Scotland, Old Parish Registers, Births 003/ Dunrossness, Sandwick and Cunningsb, page 34 of 197, ScotlandsPeople, accessed 20 March 2026.

⁵ Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus*, Profile Books, London, 2003, p 63.

⁶ Rica Erickson (ed), *The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*, Vol 4, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1987, pp 2825-6.

When Thomas Sinclair and his family decided to emigrate too, John Sinclair nominated them, as well as Mary's younger brother, Henry Mainland.⁷ His formal nomination was probably necessary to secure their assisted passages.⁸ Once they were approved for assisted passages, the family had to make their way south to join an emigrant ship.

Getting to Australia in the mid-19th century could be complicated. In the Sinclairs' case, their journey had to be in two parts: first, they had to travel from Shetland to London; secondly, they had to take an assigned ship to Fremantle. The first leg of their journey took the Sinclairs a week to complete, as they had to use small coastal vessels to reach Gravesend. This must have been an uncomfortable experience for Mary, who, unlike Thomas, had probably not been at sea before. None of the family would have seen cities like Aberdeen and London, and it was a significant adjustment for them, leaving the small, familiar communities of Shetland to travel long distances in the company of strangers to places they did not know.

Thomas kept a journal of their travels, starting with their departure from Hillock.⁹ He wrote that they took leave of their parents and kin, attended two church services in Lerwick, and left Shetland for good on 14 August 1863. It was an unpleasant start to the journey because Mary and the children were seasick from the time they got on the boat in Dunrossness. Thomas observed wearily that he was

in the Ladies' Cabin attending my family all the passage to Aberdeen. I had a very fatiguing nig[ht] on Monday night – with my own family & other passengers who were all sick.¹⁰

⁷ Margret Sinclair, 'Half a World Away', unpublished report, Albany Library, 2010, p 2.

⁸ Timothy J Hatton, 'The political economy of assisted immigration: Australia 1860-1913', 2023, *IZA Discussion Paper Series*, No. 16298, 1-33, pp 5-6.

⁹ Thomas Sinclair, 'Journal of Thomas Sinclair on his voyage to Fremantle aboard the "Tartar" 1863', Esperance Museum, Sinclair Family Collection, Item 2/1.

¹⁰ Sinclair, Journal of Thomas Sinclair, p 1.

When the family arrived in Gravesend they made their way to the emigrant ship that was to take them to Fremantle. The ship was the barque *Tartar*, one of three so-called ‘bride ships’ to arrive in Western Australia in 1863.¹¹ It carried 122 emigrants, fifty of whom were single women.¹²

The *Tartar* let off its mooring in the early morning of 27 August.¹³ Three days later, it ran into a fearsome storm in the English Channel, which distressed Mary and the children. At the height of the storm, she asked Thomas whether the ship was foundering, and he replied that he did not know, adding that whatever happened was God’s will.¹⁴

The bad weather continued for nearly two weeks. Janet Millett, one of the cabin passengers, observed that the winds were so bad in the English Channel that ‘the Isle of Wight disappeared and re-appeared to us so often that we grew weary of bidding it farewell’.¹⁵ Her husband, Reverend Edward Millett, visited the married emigrants’ quarters during bad weather to give them ‘biscuits and raisins and ... little dainties’.¹⁶

Having endured the rough weather from Shetland to Gravesend, Mary now had to deal with more rough weather on the *Tartar*. Millett made special mention of her discomfort:

There was one emigrant from the far north of Scotland – I think the Shetland Isles – whose wife was always ill and low-spirited, let the weather be what it might, and who, when at her worst, could suggest nothing eatable that she fancied except ‘a Wick herring’.¹⁷

¹¹ Rica Erickson, *The Bride Ships: Experiences of Immigrants Arriving in Western Australia 1849-1889*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 1992, p 73.

¹² State Records Office of Western Australia, ‘Manifest of the Ship *Tartar*’, Arrivals at Fremantle, Western Australia, 14 December 1863, Cons 36, Item 530.

¹³ Sinclair, Journal of Thomas Sinclair, p 2.

¹⁴ Sinclair, Journal of Thomas Sinclair, p 3.

¹⁵ Mrs Edward Millett, *An Australian Parsonage or, the Settler and the Savage in Western Australia*, Edward Stanford, London, 1872, p 9.

¹⁶ Millett, *An Australian Parsonage*, p 8.

¹⁷ Millett, *An Australian Parsonage*, p 8.

The weather calmed after the *Tartar* cleared the English Channel, and the rest of the voyage was uneventful. Thomas faithfully recorded the ship's progress in his journal, as well as the conditions on board and the ship's routine. He, Mary and their five children had been assigned two berths below decks in the married persons section. Thomas described the routine of eating meals, washing clothes and bedding, keeping watch, and scrubbing decks, as well as the regular inspections by the captain and ship's doctor. He attended Reverend Millett's Anglican church services, even though he did not think his sermons were as good as those of the Scottish Church in Shetland.¹⁸

Food quality became an issue, and there were complaints that the meat was bad, with some passengers throwing their meals overboard. Thomas was involved in an argument with the ship's doctor, suggesting to him that his children would not need medication if they had better food to eat.¹⁹

The *Tartar* reached its destination on 12 December 1863.²⁰ When it arrived in Fremantle Harbour, the passengers held a tea party for the captain, and Millett observed that Mary seemed now to be in a happier mood.²¹

The Sinclair family's emigration was a classic example of 'chain migration', a micro-structure through which emigrants are drawn in by 'primary social relationships with previous migrants'.²² The three Sinclair brothers had built on their primary relationships to form a chain that drew all of them together in a new country.

¹⁸ Sinclair, *Journal of Thomas Sinclair*, p 12.

¹⁹ Sinclair, *Journal of Thomas Sinclair*, pp 9-10.

²⁰ 'Shipping Intelligence', *The West Australian Times* (Perth), 17 December 1863, p 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3367396>, accessed 18 March 2026.

²¹ Millett, *An Australian Parsonage*, p 10.

²² Steven Castles and Mark J Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 2nd ed, Macmillan, London, 1998, pp 24-25; John S Macdonald and Leatrice D Macdonald, 'Chain migration, ethnic neighbourhood formation and social networks', *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 42(1), pp 82-97, p 82.

Having reached Australia, however, the brothers pursued careers of their own, and the links between them became less important over the years. John Sinclair left the Water Police and moved to Bunbury where he became the lighthouse keeper.²³ Laurence continued to work in Fremantle.²⁴ Mary's brother, Henry Mainland, moved north, where he worked as a policeman and hotel keeper.²⁵ Thomas found a job in the Convicts Department but died in 1868, five years after the family arrived in Western Australia.²⁶ Mary later moved to Esperance, on the south coast, with their children. Her son Laurence discovered gold in the area in 1894, and, mindful of his Shetland heritage, named the find 'Norseman'.²⁷

²³ Erickson, *The Bicentennial Dictionary*, Vol 4, p 2825.

²⁴ Erickson, *The Bicentennial Dictionary*, Vol 4, p 2826.

²⁵ Rica Erickson (ed), *The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*, Vol 3, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1987, p 2054.

²⁶ Erickson, *The Bicentennial Dictionary*, Vol 4, p 2827; Death certificate of Thomas Sinclair, died 6 July 1868, Guildford, Western Australia, original held by Michael Robinson, Bedford, Western Australia.

²⁷ 'History of Norseman', *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), 20 November 1948, p 3.

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