For the term of his natural life

*For the Term of His Natural Life* by Marcus Clarke is the story of a convict called Rufus Dawes who was sentenced to transportation for a murder that he did not commit. You can read the whole book online at [http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00023.pdf](http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00023.pdf).

The excerpt below provides a vivid description of convict quarters on board a transport ship.

Read the following extract in class.

Talk about what the voyage would have been like for convicts.

How do you feel about the conditions on board?

How useful is a novel as a historical source?

**CHAPTER V. THE BARRACOON**

IN the prison of the 'tween decks reigned a darkness pregnant with murmurs. The sentry at the entrance to the hatchway was supposed to “prevent the prisoners from making a noise,” but he put a very liberal interpretation upon the clause, and so long as the prisoners refrained from shouting, yelling, and fighting — eccentricities in which they sometimes indulged — he did not disturb them. This course of conduct was dictated by prudence, no less than by convenience, for one sentry was but little over so many; and the convicts, if pressed too hard, would raise a sort of bestial boo-hoo, in which all voices were confounded, and which, while it made noise enough and to spare, utterly precluded individual punishment. One could not flog a hundred and eighty men, and it was impossible to distinguish any particular offender. So, in virtue of this last appeal, convictism had established a tacit right to converse in whispers, and to move about inside its oaken cage. To one coming in from the upper air, the place would have seemed in pitchy darkness, but the convict eye, accustomed to the sinister twilight, was enabled to discern surrounding objects with tolerable distinctness. The prison was about fifty feet long and fifty feet wide, and ran the full height of the 'tween decks, viz., about five feet ten inches high. The barricade was loop-holed here and there, and the planks were in some places wide enough to admit a musket barrel. On the aft side, next the soldiers’ berths, was a trap door, like the stokehole of a furnace. At first sight this appeared to be contrived for the humane purpose of ventilation, but a second glance dispelled this weak conclusion. The opening was just large enough to admit the muzzle of a small howitzer, secured on the deck below. In case of a mutiny, the soldiers could sweep the prison from end to end with grapeshot. Such fresh air as there was, filtered through the loopholes, and came, in somewhat larger quantity, through a wind-sail passed into the prison from the hatchway. But the wind-sail, being necessarily at one end only of the place, the air it brought was pretty well absorbed by the twenty or thirty lucky fellows near it, and the other hundred and fifty did not come so well off. The scuttles were open, certainly, but as the row of bunks had been built against them, the air they brought was the peculiar property of such men as occupied the berths into which they penetrated. These berths were twenty-eight in number, each containing six men. They ran in a double tier round three sides of the prison, twenty at each side, and eight affixed to that portion of the forward barricade opposite the door. Each berth was presumed to be five feet six inches square, but the necessities of stowage had deprived them of six inches, and even under that pressure twelve men were compelled to sleep on the deck. Pine did not exaggerate when he spoke of the custom of overcrowding convict ships; and as he was entitled to half a guinea for every man he delivered alive at Hobart Town, he had some reason to complain.