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Maritime Woe and Monetary Triumph in the 1740s

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The publication of this book in a paperback edition is most welcome. It narrates a global adventure that was well remembered in the eighteenth century and does it beautifully. The author is the unmatched expert on the subject and takes pains to separate facts from myths. Scholars may use it with confidence, and students would enjoy and learn from reading it.

The story of Commodore George Anson's circumnavigation (1740-44) has a place in world history. It comprehensively exhibits the dreadful physical obstacles posed to Europeans by the Pacific Ocean. Also, the voyage included a couple of prolonged confrontations of British naval power and Chinese pride. These occurred in 1743 when Anson took his sole remaining ship, the 60-gun *Centurion*, into the Canton river. The Chinese found themselves confronted by broadsides of twenty-four pounders (they had never seen shipboard cannon that big) and a blunt commander who refused to pay port dues yet demanded their help in preparing to return to sea. Although they wished him to be gone, they were extremely reluctant to provide what he needed. After experiencing protracted resistance, Anson reminded a Chinese official of his circumstances, which were such that "in case I received a refusal I should then consult with my people whether to eat one another or the Chinese" (p. 157).

The heart and soul of the book lies in the narrative of the voyage itself. Williams begins with the preliminary planning; the delays in getting the squadron manned; the heartless, foolish decision to use aging military pensioners from Chelsea Hospital as the backbone of the army that was to raid the Peruvian and Panamanian coasts; and the speedy deaths of these men and other military recruits during the southward voyage to Cape Horn. Arriving there too late to avoid the worst season for an east-to-west passage, the squadron paid the price in full. As ad-

verse winds and storms nullified progress, scurvy and exposure left hardly anyone fit for duty; two ships turned back. Unable to ascertain his longitude, Anson turned northward too soon, but luckily the night watch of the *Centurion* spied the horrifying cliffs of south Chile in time to steer away. Time spent searching for the island of Juan Fernandez (renamed Isla Robinson Crusoe by the Chilean government in 1966) brought many more deaths from scurvy; as Williams informs us, Anson's instructions located the island 225 miles closer to the coast and more than a degree of further south than it actually is. The island's fresh nourishment brought recovery, after which the reduced squadron raided and burnt Paita on the Peruvian coast, proceeded to Acapulco (where the galleon declined to sail), and then headed across the Pacific.

On the transpacific voyage, dreadfully lengthened by sailing for a time on a latitude too far south for the trade winds, scurvy very nearly annihilated the crews of the two remaining ships. By the time the *Centurion* reached the island of Tinian, which was fruitful and luckily unoccupied (arrival at nearby Guam would have meant a Spanish prison or worse), it was the only ship left, and Anson came close to being marooned when it was blown out to sea from its anchorage by a storm with only a skeleton (in more ways than one) crew aboard. But Lieutenant Philip Saumarez managed to bring her back, again the seamen recovered, and the ship proceeded to Canton for repairs and resupply. Taking station off the western entrance of the San Bernardino straight, it intercepted, engaged and captured a galleon from Acapulco, after which Anson returned to the Canton river to make ready for the long voyage home. He spent a total of ten months at Macao and Canton. By way of the Indian Ocean the *Centurion* reached England on 15 June 1744. Of 1,900 who departed on seven ships in September 1740, 1,400 died, four by enemy action (p. 202). Those who returned with the *Centurion* received a hero's welcome.

Essentially, the story of the voyage could be read in 1748 when the authorized version “By Lord Anson” was published. That book remains a classic, and Williams edited a fine modern printing in 1974 (of which, strangely, no mention is made in the book under review).[1] In retelling the story now, he provides background information on shipboard life, navigation, and other relevant matters to help the non-expert reader. But this book does much more.

It melds all the known additional source material into the narrative, a good deal of which is drawn from Williams’s research for his Navy Records Society volume of 1967,[2] and it benefits from the research he has done since then—for instance, the detailed compilation from surviving ships’ logs and muster books that reveal the chronological pattern of deaths. Other newfound evidence lends precision to our knowledge of Spanish lapses and of the galleon battle, details that confirm how astutely thoroughly Anson prepared his crew to fight it. Perhaps most interesting are the manuscript letters Williams has discovered at the Portland (Oregon) Historical Society which cast a new light on Anson’s relations with the Chinese.

Finally, and not least, the book rounds out the story by addressing topics hardly or not at all discussed in the 1748 classic. There are chapters on the expedition’s preliminary planning and on the festive reception of the *Centurion*’s officers and crew in London upon their return as well as the unpleasant legal quarrel that ensued. The latter concerned the apportioning of prize shares. (The quantity of silver taken out of the *Nuestra Señora de Covadonga* was so heavy that her large cannon had to be lowered into the hold to keep her stable.) There were officers on board the *Centurion* helping to fight the battle who came from two ships that Anson had ordered abandoned in the Pacific; they claimed an officer’s share of the great prize. The High Court of Admiralty found for them, but the decision was overturned on appeal. Technically Anson had a case for opposing the claim, but the result he sought and gained was unjust and ungenerous. A concluding chapter offers a judicious and informative summing up, and pays particular attention to the follow-up voyage proposed by Anson in 1749 but forbidden by British ministers of state.

I have only two complaints—one minor, one considerable. The minor one is that the chapter on the planning phase may leave readers with the impression that Admiral Sir John Norris was as influential in promoting this enterprise as Admiral Sir Charles Wager

(an impression embellished by the inclusion of a portrait of Norris but not Wager). This was Wager’s project through and through, a point that can be substantiated by evidence beyond what is presented in this book.

The more considerable complaint concerns the way the expedition is characterized. Williams acknowledges that it “was bent on war, not exploration” (p. 223) and he does ample justice not only to the raid on Paita and the galleon battle but also takes notice of the Spanish naval effort to thwart Anson’s progress. The geopolitical background of the war is left shadowy, however. The reader is not even told that the French really were (finally) at war with the British when the *Centurion* entered the English Channel in June 1744. The absence of political and strategic context even extends to the basic question, which must occur to many readers, of why the vast personal enrichment of Commodore Anson and a few others was so generally accepted as justifying an allocation of scarce naval resources in time of war. Granted, the “capture of the galleon after repeated disasters” did catch “the public imagination” (p. 219), but did the public believe it helped the war effort and if so, why? Williams has discovered a candid poem entitled “Deluded Britons” (which first appeared in the *London Daily Advertiser* of 5 July 1744) that went straight to the point. Its author asked how this wealth “centering in a private hand” and “purchased at a treble cost” with “Albion’s sons, unprofitably lost” (pp. 207-8) could be thought to benefit the kingdom. The book leaves the question in the air.

Political and strategic considerations prompted the British government to prohibit the expedition that Anson proposed in 1749. While it is correct to say that it was set aside because the Spanish government objected and there were “delicate diplomatic negotiations” underway (p. 231), it would surely have been of interest to add that when the Spanish minister, Don José de Carvajal (who was friendly to Britain), rebuffed the British claim that the purposes were “Improvement of Navigation, and procuring a more perfect Knowledge of the World in general,” he observed that “neither He nor any one else could be a Stranger to the Rise and Intent of such an Expedition, since it was so fully explained in the printed Relation of Lord Anson’s Voyage.” Indeed it was; Carvajal was undoubtedly referring to the passage in the book where Anson comments that such geographical knowledge “in time of war, would make us

masters of those seas.” These quotations are drawn from an article co-authored by Williams and from an extract of the 1748 book which he printed in the Navy Records Society volume.[3] (As it happened, the British government’s decision to cancel the project was very wise: Spanish neutrality proved invaluable when Anglo-French hostilities erupted in 1755.)

All in all, there seems to have been a determination to keep the book in the “voyage” genre—a decision that may be justified for the sake of a popular audience, but the result slights the political and strategic aspects. That said, Williams is to be congratulated not only on a splendid scholarly achievement, backed by his own probing research, but also for writing a book that is a wonderful read. The cover, which re-

produces in color John Clevely’s brilliant painting of the galleon battle, adds to the book’s attractiveness.

Notes

[1]. Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, *A Voyage round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV by George Anson*, ed. Glyndwr Williams (London, 1974).

[2]. Glyndwr Williams, ed., *Documents relating to Anson’s Voyage Round the World, 1740-1744* (London, 1967).

[3]. Alan Frost and Glyndwr Williams, “The Beginnings of Britain’s Exploration of the Pacific Ocean in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 83 (1997), pp. 413-4; Williams, *Documents*, p. 273.

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