

Newsletter May 2021

Welcome to the Second Newsletter for 2021.

As many of you are aware, sadly another long-standing and active member of the IMHA has passed away. Dr David M. Williams died on 19th March 2021 after suffering a severe stroke. David's friendship, humour and scholarship are a great loss to us all. Dr Bernard Attard and Emeritus Professor Sarah Palmer have kindly contributed obituaries in this Newsletter. Professor Hugh Murphy has also written an obituary for David Williams published in *The Mariner's Mirror* vol. 107:2 (May), 2021, pp.136-37.

As you are aware, the editorial management of the IJMh will move to the University of Leiden in 2022. However, due to the complexity of transferring financial arrangements from the UK to the Netherlands, the Executive has agreed that we will keep the current arrangement running the IMHA account as an account within the University of Hull. Continuation of the arrangement with the University of Hull requires an overseer for the account that is employed with the University. Due to his retirement, Professor David Starkey is no longer able to fulfill this position and Dr Martin Wilcox has kindly agreed to take over as the Treasurer of IMHA and overseer for the account with the University of Hull. Martin is a long-standing member and has served as Book Review Editor for the IJMh. He has kindly supplied a biography for this Newsletter. I would like to thank David and Martin for their assistance.

In order to facilitate the transition, the current Treasurer, Professor Maria Fusaro, has resigned and Martin has been appointed in an acting capacity until the next General Assembly. Maria has served as Treasurer since 2016 and I would like to thank her for valuable and insightful contributions as Treasurer and to the general management of the IMHA. Maria says that the IMHA is the first professional association she was ever a member of, and I am delighted to hear that it remains very close to her heart. I look forward to her continuing as an active member. Just a reminder that that you can renew your membership for 2021 via our website <https://imha.info/>.

My thanks go to Dr Ian Chambers for his voluntary help with producing this newsletter.

From the President
Emeritus Professor Malcolm Tull



Dr David M. Williams (1940–2021)

David Malcolm Williams was an outstanding scholar, colleague, teacher and mentor who contributed enormously to the development of maritime history in the United Kingdom and internationally.

David spent his early years in Caernarvon, leaving as an eighteen-year old in 1958 to start a BA in Economics at the University of Liverpool. He joined an intake of 12 students, which included Peter Davies, later also an accomplished maritime historian, who became a lifetime friend and collaborator in national and international professional associations. The latter recalled David as coming from a ‘quite conventional and close-knit family’, yet also taking ‘full advantage’ of the extra-curricular opportunities offered to a new undergraduate in Liverpool.

David went up at a particularly auspicious time. The Department of Commerce and Economics included a group of gifted economic historians, led notably by the Chaddock Professor, Francis Hyde. Hyde amongst others formed what was known as the ‘Liverpool School of Maritime History’. Under their influence, David chose economic history options in his final year, graduating as the best student and winning the Gladstone Memorial Scholarship which allowed him to proceed to an MA in 1961. The topic he finally settled on for his dissertation was ‘The Function of the Merchant in Specific Liverpool Import Trades, 1820-1850’. Like all postgraduate economic historians, he was supervised by Hyde himself.

In 1963, after an unexpected vacancy, David was appointed Tutor in Economic History at Liverpool, a role in which he first displayed his talent for teaching. It also set him on his future path. The following year, he applied successfully for an assistant lecturership in Economic History at Leicester, joining Professor Ralph Davis in October 1964 as the nucleus of what would become one of the leading departments of Economic and Social History in the country. For the rest of his career, David was an immensely versatile teacher, a memorable and entertaining lecturer, the saviour of lost undergraduate causes, and an unfailingly helpful colleague and mentor. He was unflappable. Whether in Department meetings or as an external examiner, his judgement were trusted and reliable. He always got on with what he was asked to do.

Beyond the University, David’s growing international reputation as an original and innovative maritime historian led to his deepening involvement in scholarly networks and professional bodies at home and abroad, beginning notably with the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project and the associated Newfoundland seminar during the 1970s. He served as Secretary to the British Commission for Maritime History (1989–1998); as President of the International Maritime Economic History Association (2001-2004); and successively as chair of the editorial board (1990–95), editor (1995–98) and editorial board member (1999–2001) of the *International Journal of Maritime History*.

Additionally, he was a review editor and editorial board member of the *Journal of Transport History* and an adviser to the Centres for Maritime Historical Studies at Exeter and Port and Maritime History at Liverpool. David excelled in all these capacities because of his human qualities, his scholarly standing and his considerable administrative skills. He actively promoted his discipline, created opportunities for new researchers, and acquired the most formidable network of contacts and friends.

As a scholar, David exemplified a new approach to maritime history which placed the subject in its broader economic and social settings, thus widening its scope and increasing its relevance. In the introduction to his PhD, awarded by the University in 2003, he described himself as ‘an economic historian specialising in the field of maritime history’. His key influences were Hyde, Davis and the subject’s other ‘founders and promoters’, and his training as an economic historian was evident in the analytical rigour of his work and his systematic use of statistical sources. His interests were wide-ranging. He made important and innovative contributions to the histories of merchants and shipping in the Atlantic commodity trades, the social history of seamen, the beginnings of state regulation of conditions at sea, the origins and development of pleasure cruising, and the early history of steam navigation, much of his work in the last two areas with his long-time collaborator, John Armstrong. Another distinguished colleague, Skip Fischer of Memorial University in Canada, who generously acknowledged his own intellectual debt to David, described his work on bulk passenger trades in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (‘bulk passengers’ including slaves, emigrants, convicts, indentured servants and contract labour) as ‘undeniably seminal’. Fischer also wrote on the occasion of David’s sixtieth birthday: ‘David’s place in maritime history far transcends his individual publications, for his vision of what this discipline ought to be has had a particularly significant impact on the way in which most of us think about what we do’.

David’s preferred medium was the essay. He published some 50, either as book chapters or in scholarly journals, alongside five edited books and sundry other pieces. Two collections of essays were published as books. The first, *Merchants and Mariners: Selected Maritime Writings of David M. Williams* (2000), in which Fischer’s appraisal appeared, included a personal tribute by Peter Davies. The second, *The Impact of Technological Change: The Early Steamship in Britain*, co-written with John Armstrong, was published in 2011. One further collection, under the title ‘British Merchant Shipping and its Labour Force in an Era of Economic Expansion and Social Change, 1790–1914’, with a valuable introduction by David, was successfully submitted for the award of his Leicester doctorate in 2003.

The first of the collected volumes was presented to David as a token of appreciation and esteem at the Third International Maritime History Congress in Esbjerg, Denmark, in August 2000. David’s retirement as a senior lecturer in the School of History at Leicester in 2005 was marked by a similar gathering of friends and colleagues for a symposium and evening celebration, with both Davies and Fischer in attendance. The affection and regard for David on this occasion was palpable. To all who encountered him, whatever their background, age or circumstances, he was unfailingly humane, tolerant, kind and good humoured. He had a vast repertoire of stories and anecdotes, which enlivened his teaching and entertained his colleagues. His lectures to students and scholars were performances which might conclude with spontaneous applause. He was an indefatigable collector of postcards, travelling regularly to fairs in the Netherlands. His was a keen eye for a bargain, including the comforts of the members room at the Royal Academy which, for a modest subscription, he used as a base for working visits to London.

For all his many qualities, David was a deeply self-effacing person who avoided pretension, disliked the limelight and saw things for what they were. He died on 19 March leaving his wife Maureen, two children, Tristan and Penny, and three grandchildren, Benedict, Josephine and Carenza. He will be remembered with a smile and great affection.

Dr Bernard Attard

Director of Education (History)

School of History, Politics and International Relations University of Leicester

In Memoriam: Dr David M. Williams

David Williams, who died at the age of 80 on 19 March 2021 following a severe stroke, was one of my oldest friends. Our friendship, like that between many other maritime historians, was first forged at conferences. We both participated in the St. John's Newfoundland Maritime History Group conferences 'Volumes not Values' (197) and 'Working Men Who Got Wet' (197). I learned then that David was both an excellent scholar, and an extraordinarily warm and friendly person. Back in England, David was an obvious choice of speaker for the 1981 Chartist and Uncharted Waters conference organised by Glyn Williams and myself at Queen Mary, University of London, where again he delivered an important paper. Indeed, looking at the list of David's abundant publications since these early years, it is striking how many of these originated as conference presentations. It is, however, no surprise that he received many invitations. Not only could David be relied upon for a well-researched original piece (no 'pot-boilers' for him), but his rhetorical style of delivery, worthy of the stage, could be guaranteed to enliven proceedings. His fine strong voice may perhaps have owed something to Welsh ancestry and Caernarvon up-bringing.

David's student years at the University of Liverpool, where he was taught by Sheila Marriner and Francis Hyde, founders of the 'Liverpool School of Maritime History', stimulated an interest in the subject, although he always described himself as an economic historian. His 1963 MA on 'The Function of the Merchant in Specific Liverpool Import Trades 1820-1850' reflected the Liverpool focus on maritime business, but appointment as an assistant lecturer at the University of Leicester just a year later brought him into contact with the trade and shipping historian Ralph Davis, who influenced his subsequent research, encouraging a broader scope. In 2000, when David's academic contribution was honoured by the IMEHA in *Merchants and Mariners: Selected Maritime Writings of David M. Williams*, compiler Lars Scholl identified these themes: 'the economic (trades, deployment of the merchant fleet, and state regulation of shipping) and social (many aspects of the seaman's condition)'. More recently, David also investigated maritime tourism and, in a fruitful collaboration with the late John Armstrong, reconsidered the transition from sail to steam, challenging the conventional view that this was a drawn-out process. David's expertise and judgement were also reflected in several skilful historiographical surveys.

Puzzlingly, despite his exceptional record of more than fifty scholarly publications, and the considerable esteem in which his scholarship was held by his peers, David evidently regretted that he had not undertaken research for a PhD in the early years of his career, and therefore lacked the title. In 2004, under the title 'British Merchant Shipping and its Labour Force in an Era of Economic Expansion and Social change, 1790-1914' he submitted a selection of his work for a doctorate by published work at the University of Leicester and unsurprisingly was awarded the degree.

David's contribution to maritime history went well beyond his own research. A founding member of the Editorial Board of our predecessor organisation, the International Maritime Economic History Association, his stalwart service to the Journal included serving as Chair and a stint as Editor. The same exceptional organisational and administrative talents were put to use as the Secretary of the British Commission for Maritime History. It was David who in 1993 proposed an annual series of New Researchers in Maritime History conferences, which continues to prosper, and initiated prizes for undergraduate dissertations. Anyone who worked with David on these international and national organisations would become familiar with his gentle prompting and the "Can we have a quiet word?", designed to ensure everything ran smoothly and amicably. There were indeed several occasions when, after a message from David encouraging me to attend a particular seminar because he feared a low turn-out, on arrival I found a packed room filled, no doubt, with those he had similarly persuaded.

All this activity and hard work went on against a background of family responsibilities, inspiring teaching at the University of Leicester and service as External Examiner. Yet, although it took its toll, seemingly David took everything in his stride, with undimmed enthusiasm and generosity with his time.

Newsletter May 2021

David burnished his world-wide friendships and there will be many like me who never went to an event without hoping he would be there, ready to share his great fund of stories, latest terrible jokes and, as an avid collector of historical postcards, news of recent acquisitions. A learned man, with learning lightly borne, he was a sharp commentator on the world and its ways. As maritime historians, we owe a great debt to David Williams for his role in laying the foundations of our discipline as a collaborative international endeavour. On a personal level, there will also be many who lament the passing of a good friend.

Emeritus Professor Sarah Palmer, University of Greenwich

The International Commission of the History of Oceanography

We are a global body devoted to linking scholars, writers, and teachers interested in the history of marine sciences, aquatic environments, and their technologies, broadly defined. Some of the things we do include:

- Organizing or sponsoring sessions at relevant conferences

Building a shared Zotero bibliography: https://www.zotero.org/groups/2526220/history_of_marine_science_icho_library

Hosting a blog on our website open to contributions from our community

Supporting graduate student participation at international conferences

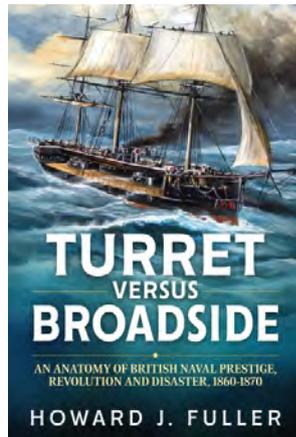
For more information, please visit our website: <https://oceansciencehistory.com/>

By the way, if you would like to receive infrequent emails (such as, when members are organizing conference sessions, to report new initiatives, etc.) please sign up here: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=OCEANSCIENCEHISTORY>

Finally, if you have any events or work that you'd like us to promote, please be in touch here: <https://oceansciencehistory.com/contact/>

Dr Joseph Christensen, University of Western Australia

New Books



Howard J. Fuller has published a new research monograph which might interest fellow members (last year being the 150th anniversary of the sinking of HMS *Captain*):

<https://www.helion.co.uk/military-history-books/turret-versus-broadside-an-anatomy-of-british-naval-prestige-revolution-and-disaster-1860-1870.php>

Description and bio as follows:

On the 150th anniversary of the capsizing of Britain's low-freeboard yet fully-masted ironclad, HMS *Captain*, this widely-researched, intensive analysis of the great 'Turret versus Broadside' debate sheds new light on how the most well-funded and professional navy in the world at the height of its power could nevertheless build an 'inherently unstable' capital ship.

Utilising an impressive array of government reports, contemporary periodicals, and unpublished personal papers this definitive study crucially provides for the first time both a long-term and international context. The 1860s was a pivotal decade in the evolution of British national identity as well as warship design. Nor were these two elements mutually exclusive. 1860 began gloriously with the launch of Britain's first ocean-going ironclad, HMS *Warrior*, but 1870 ended badly with the *Captain*. Along the way, British public and political faith in the supremacy of the Royal Navy was not reaffirmed as some histories suggest, but wavered. The growing emphasis upon new technologies including ever heavier guns and thicker armour plating for men-of-war was not 'decisive' but divisive, as pressure mounted to somehow combine the range of *Warrior* with the unique protection and hitting power of American monitor-ironclads of the Civil War. As the geopolitical debate over rival ironclad proposals intensified, aggressively-minded Prime Minister Lord Palmerston gradually adopted a non-interventionist foreign policy which surprised his contemporaries. *Turret versus Broadside* traces the previously unexplored connection between an increasingly schizophrenic Admiralty for and against the *Captain*, for example, and sabre-rattling mid-Victorians sinking into an era of 'Splendid Isolation'.

'A skilful account of a key episode in naval development and procurement. Of major interest to all those concerned with the complexities of technological capability and its interaction with power politics.' **Jeremy Black (University of Exeter), author of *War and Technology***

'Howard Fuller's book about the relative merits of a rotating turret vs. guns mounted in broadside on combat ships not only illuminates a specific concern of 19th century navies—and the Royal Navy in particular, it is also a metaphor about the complexities of embracing technological change in a volatile geopolitical environment, and thus offers valuable lessons for our own time.' **Craig L. Symonds (U.S. Naval War College), author of *World War II at Sea: A Global History***

"Dr. Fuller teaches us a crucial lesson: that circumstances could be far more effective in underpinning British naval supremacy, even at its height, than Admiralty planning." **C. I. Hamilton, author of *The Making of the Modern Admiralty: British Naval Policy-Making, 1805-1927***

International Maritime History Association

Howard J. Fuller is Reader in War Studies at the University of Wolverhampton (UK), and a former Fellow of US Naval History through the US Naval Historical Center (now Naval History and Heritage Command), Washington, DC, and Caird Research Fellow through the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. He is the author of numerous books and articles including *Clad in Iron: The American Civil War and the Challenge of British Naval Power* (Praeger, 2007, reprinted in 2010 by Naval Institute Press) and *Empire, Technology and Sea power: Royal Navy Crisis in the Age of Palmerston* (Routledge, 2013).

Conferences and Workshops

The Estonian Maritime Museum is organizing a workshop about digital data in humanities that may be of interest to IMHA members.

For information and the call for papers are here <https://meremuuseum.ee/workshop2021/>

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Cameron La Follette, Richard Ravalli, and Rex Gurney recently spoke to the Los Angeles Public Library regarding the library's early 19th century Spanish manuscript about the *Mercury*, an American maritime fur trade and smuggling vessel captured in California in 1813. The captain of the *Mercury*, George Washington Eayrs, ended up spending the rest of his life in Mexico following his arrest. His many requests for restitution, and the years of bureaucratic correspondence relating to the capture, resulted in hundreds of pages of documents associated with his legal case. The presentation, titled "Maritime Smuggling in California: A Deep Dive into the Earliest Documented Case" reports on preliminary digital study of the manuscript and its associated typescript. It can be found on the Los Angeles Public Library's YouTube page.

Here is the link to the talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUg9MFqtiXs>

Dr Richard Ravalli, Los Angeles Public Library.



Autobiography

I sometimes wonder what influences historians to specialise in whichever area they do. Many years ago, a colleague remarked that historians write about what they wanted to do, and certainly I can think of some to whom this probably applies. To an extent it does to me, since I did think about going to sea as a child, without understanding (as a boy growing up in the landlocked East Midlands), that the ships I was fascinated by were rapidly passing into history. Some years ago, too, I read an interesting paper on how naval fiction had influenced budding naval historians, which struck a chord with me, as someone who was reading Captain Hornblower before I was ten. I think, though, that the biggest influences were my parents. My father worked briefly for Cunard in London before he trained for the priesthood and retains to this day an interest in ships. I was brought up in a house decorated with pictures of ocean liners, and many a family day out involved either a preserved railway or historic ship. To this day my father has a photo of me as a small boy, proudly standing by the wheel of *SS Great Britain*, which had then not long returned to its birthplace in Bristol.

My interest in maritime history rather faded as a teenager, and I don't remember ever encountering it as an academic subject at university. Instead, influenced by courses I took at the University of Durham, plus a dose of lefty student politics, I developed an interest in the history of communism and the USSR. It was this that I planned to develop when, early in my third year, I decided I wanted to undertake a Masters. At that point serendipity intervened. I had planned on either staying at Durham or moving to London, but then I applied for a prospectus from the University of Hull. I'd lived near the city for a few years before going to university and had friends in the area, and I was curious about what the university had to offer. What I found was an advertisement for a new MA in Maritime History. Here was an opportunity to combine something I had realised I was good at and wanted to continue doing with something in which I had a lifelong interest. After attending an open day my mind was made up, I applied and was accepted, and, in September 2000, I moved to Hull.

Even though the fishing industry in Hull declined precipitously in the 1970s and 80s it casts a long shadow. I'd long had an interest in the industry, which I attribute to the Fishing Heritage Centre in Grimsby. This was, and is, an excellent immersive museum recreating a series of scenes from the trawlerman's life, ranging from his home, to various parts of the trawler (some of them constructed with parts of actual trawlers which, at the time the museum was built, were being scrapped in large

International Maritime History Association

numbers), to the dockside pub and the man from the Mission to Deep-Sea Fisherman visiting the distraught family of a man lost at sea. Moreover, during the summer of 1997 I had a summer job on the Yorkshire coast, where one of my colleagues was the widow of a deckhand lost with the *Gaul* in 1974. At that time the wreck had recently been relocated and it was all over the local news, and we talked about it a lot. From those two influences came the idea of studying the decline of the industry, although David Starkey sensibly warned me off the *Gaul*: a young outsider with a ‘posh’ accent asking questions about something so sensitive would not have been well received. Instead, and thanks largely to Robb Robinson, I became interested in the early history of the industry on the Humber. From that came my MA thesis, on the apprenticed labour system, and it also formed the subject of my PhD, for which in early summer 2001 I obtained funding from the Economic and Social Research Council.

I could not have had a better place to undertake a PhD than the Maritime Historical Studies Centre (as it then was) in 2001-6. David Starkey was as effective a supervisor as one could wish for, and Blaydes House was a great environment to work in, with a lively community of postgraduates, endless opportunities to discuss ideas with others, and plenty of chances to attend conferences and meet researchers from elsewhere. Not all of these were historians, for at that time the History of Marine Animal Populations project was in full swing, and I attended a string of workshops in Denmark, the United States and at home in Hull. This exposure to people working in different disciplines was a real eye-opener and left me convinced of the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. I currently have a funding application in for a project to investigate the environmental drivers of the use of unfree labour in fishing over the past century and a half, to be led jointly by myself, a marine biologist and a sociologist. That I saw the value in such a collaboration is a direct legacy of HMAP.

What I was not at this stage was a naval historian, although I had undertaken a course on naval history during my MA which had introduced me – via the inimitable style of its leader, the late and much missed Eric Grove – to its broad outlines. Real engagement with it came later, when in March 2006 (only a month after I had passed my *viva voce*) I was interviewed for the postdoctoral research fellowship attached to the Leverhulme-funded project, ‘Sustaining the Empire; War, the British Navy and the Contractor State,’ based at Greenwich Maritime Institute and led by Roger Knight. A few hours after the interview I was sitting in a Greenwich pub, waiting for the friend with whom I was to stay that night, when GMI’s director, Sarah Palmer, phoned to tell me I’d got the job.

Once again I’d landed in the right place at the right time. GMI was a fantastic place to work, the project team gelled well, and although I never really settled in London, I valued the proximity of the National Maritime Museum, National Archives and British Library. Money was less tight then than it now is, and I was able to make a string of research trips to all corners of the UK running down leads I’d spotted. Perhaps the most enjoyable of these was a week spent in Truro working through the surviving fragments of the records generated by ‘the smuggler’s banker,’ Zephaniah Job, who was also one of Plymouth Victualling Yard’s major contractors early in the French Revolutionary War. He was just a name in a contract ledger before I spotted a passage on him in a book I picked up in the museum in Brixham, but what I found in Truro ended up being written up into a chapter in the book I co-authored with Roger, which was published in 2010, as well as an article in *Troze*.

By that time my contract at Greenwich had been extended beyond its initial three years, and for the next few years I continued as a research fellow, and also took over teaching parts of the MA in Maritime History after Sarah’s retirement in 2010. During that time I conducted research into aspects of naval history and maritime labour. One of these projects, an analysis of the early residents of Greenwich Hospital, has proved pleasantly difficult to leave in the past. I have received a steady stream of enquiries about it since my article on the subject appeared in the *IJMH* in 2013, and in the last few months I have begun working with a volunteer group in Greenwich who are researching the hospital and its pensioners. I have always enjoyed and seen value in ‘public history’ and communicating with non-academic audiences. My first book was a short history of the fishing industry and guide to family historians, published in 2009, and ever since I was a PhD student I have given talks on various aspects

Newsletter May 2021

of my research to local history groups, genealogical societies and others, as well as contributing short pieces to publications such as *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*. Since 2015 I have also organised the University of Hull's Maritime History Seminar Series, a public lecture series that, before Covid hit, was attracting the largest audiences for an event of its type in the UK.

After eight years at Greenwich, I returned to the University of Hull in 2014. Blaydes House became my base once more, although from the 2015-6 academic year I had a full teaching load which required me to spend more time on the main university campus and less time conducting research and dealing with the public. Moreover, I was drafted in to run the North of England Consortium for Arts and Humanities, an institutionally funded Centre for Doctoral Training that has funded more than 40 PhDs since its inception in 2015. As a result, I have spent more time on teaching and administration, and correspondingly less on research, for the last few years, although that looks set to change again. Meanwhile, I have continued as Reviews Editor for the *IJMH*, which I took on in 2014, and am part-way through my second term as a Councillor of the Navy Records Society. Within the last month I have also taken over as Treasurer of the IMHA.

Back in the spring of 2002 I attended my first conference, New Researchers in Maritime History, which that year was held in Glasgow. It was around then that I realised that maritime history appealed to me as a career, not just because it was intellectually compelling but also because of the personalities involved. I feel privileged to have worked, collaborated, sat on conference panels and talked over dinners and drinks with some of the leading lights in the discipline, some of them sadly no longer with us. Helen Doe concluded her autobiography in the previous edition of this newsletter by quoting John Armstrong's remark that 'maritime historians are a friendly bunch.' He was right, but maritime historians are also an interesting, clubbable, sometimes frustrating (at least to a book reviews editor looking at a list of overdue reviews!) and endlessly varied bunch with whom it has been a pleasure to work for the last two decades. I look forward to continuing to do so.

Martin Wilcox
May 2021

Shipwrecks and castaways

« It's not because a man wears the mark of wreckage that he is wrecked inside his heart. »

J.M Coetzee

Stories of shipwrecks are often dealt with in sea culture, especially in movies and literature. Whether fictional or based on true events, these stories are manifold and sometimes very old. In “*The Tales of the Arabian Nights, the story of Sinbad the Sailor*” tells of adventures based on the one hand on true historical events, and on the other and on fictional legends, such as Homer’s “*Odyssey*”. Indeed, shipwrecks have been not only subject to countless tales, but also to a legal applicable framework.

Among most well-known stories, we can quote *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel published in 1719 by British writer Daniel Defoe. The novel reads as a first-person-written diary and relates the story of Robinson, a castaway who spends 28 years on a remote tropical desert island near the coasts of Venezuela, where he meets a local native whom he calls ‘Friday’ (after the first day of their meeting). Daniel Defoe’s novel is greatly inspired by the real life of a Scottish sailor named Alexander Selkirk, who spent in fact four years and four days alone on a desert island. Selkirk was the victim of a shipwreck and landed on a remote island in hazardous conditions. Alone and without equipment, unable to rebuild any ship, he was forced to stay on the island in order to survive. His only hope was to get spotted and rescued by any ship who would approach the island. By necessity, he had to adapt to the island’s environment and survive with anything that he found on the spot. Thus he built huts with some remaining elements of the wrecked ship and used his own sword to hunt game and cook it. In order to maintain his language skills and his cultural knowledge, he used to read a Bible found among the remains of the ship. After spending four lonely years, he was eventually rescued in February 1709 and brought home, where he became a local celebrity thanks to his own story. Yet he never fully mentally recovered from his lonely years on the desert island. He even built his own hut on his father’s domain. Funny fact: he went sailing again and died in the ocean off the shores of Africa. In tribute to his memory, a Chilean island named Mas-a-Tierra was renamed Selkirk Island.

Similar stories happened to other sailors, such as Spanish sailor Pedro Luis Serrano, who got stuck for seven years on a small desert Caribbean island after being the victim of a shipwreck off the shores of Nicaragua in 1520. This island where he was rescued was named Serrana Island as a tribute.

France being a maritime nation¹, French historiography is full of real life stories of shipwrecks. Let’s quote the story of Narcisse Pelletier. This French sailor (who was born in Vendée in 1844 and who died in Saint-Nazaire in 1894) was known for wrecking in Australia and then integrating an Aboriginal tribe. Here is his story: in 1858, at the age of fourteen, he engaged as a cabin boy on the Saint Paul ship, which accidentally wrecked on Australian coasts after being deserted by its staff. Pelletier survived the shipwreck and integrated an Aboriginal tribe, who renamed him as Amglo. He was then found again seventeen years later by Westerners², who brought him back to his family in France, where he ended his life as a lighthouse keeper. His story still remains a precious documentation about Aboriginal customs, daily life, language and culture.

“He was no Frenchman no more – he was Australian”

Constant Merland

From the age of 14 to 31, Narcisse “Amglo” Pelletier lived off fishing and hunting with his adoptive family. He adopted the customs, culture and language of Aborigines. He even forgot his French mother-tongue and wore tribal scars on his body. His story was written after his return to

Newsletter May 2021

France by Dr Constant Merland, a French doctor from Nantes who interviewed Pelletier before publishing in 1876 *“Narcisse Pelletier: seventeen years among savages”*. This biographical book contains much precious details about the social organization of the Aboriginal tribe who had adopted Pelletier as “Amglo”. Yet, once back in France, Pelletier struggled to get back to a normal Western way of life. First, he was proposed a role in a nomad circus, but he refused to be a circus freak. He then became a lighthouse keeper until the end of his life. He died at the age of 50 and was buried in La Briandais cemetery, Saint-Nazaire.

Also very well-known is the shipwreck of La Méduse, which inspired famous French painter Géricault for his painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. In 1816, La Méduse frigate left Aix Island (near La Rochelle) and headed towards Senegal under the command of Chaumareys – who had been chosen not for his sailing skills, but for his military exploits against revolutionaries, and who had not been sailing for 25 years! Due to multiple sailing mistakes by Chaumareys, the frigate grounded on a sand bank off the shores of Mauritania. A dock (12 meters long, 6 meters wide, called “the machine”) was hastily built in order to free the ship from the sand, but without success. It was decided to evacuate the ship. All 147 sailors had to bunch into the machine, trailed by corporals, but the raft was too heavy... and Chaumareys ordered to cut the moorings! Thus the raft was left to the currents’ mercy and drifted for thirteen days. Without food and water, sailors had nothing to eat and were forced to drink their own urine. They started to kill each other in the first nights. The situation quickly derived into mutinies, drownings, and also madness attacks and cannibalism³.

On 17th July, L’Argus brig⁴ rescued remaining survivors – that is only fifteen men. Two of them – Alexandre Correard and Jean-Baptiste Savigny – would publish their own story of the wreckage after their return. The wrecked raft of the Medusa was eventually found in 1980⁵.

Here is another striking story which happened at Tromelin Island. These 1,5 kilometers long and 700 meters wide French island is located in the Indian Ocean and devoid of drinkable water and unfit to any kind of cultivation. A tragic episode occurred there when *L’Utile* – a frigate belonging to the French East India Company commanded by Captain Jean de La Fargue – wrecked on the island’s coral reefs. *L’Utile* had left Bayonne with 142 crewmembers on board and then taken 160 Malagasy men, women and children during a stop. A sailing mistake by night pushed the frigate to wreck on Tromelin Island’s coral reefs. Crewmembers and about sixty Malagasy slaves managed to reach the island. Survivors found some equipment and food among of remains of the ship and fed on fish, turtles and birds.

Lieutenant Barthélémy Castellan du Vernet took command of the remaining crew and had them build two camps: one for the crew and one for Malagasy slaves. Then he ordered the building of a watercraft with tools from the wrecked frigate. Two months later, 122 crewmen hardly took place on the watercraft and left Malagasy slaves on the island after promising to come back and rescue them. The crewmen reached Madagascar in four days and were transferred to Bourbon Island (today

known as Réunion) then to France Island (today known as Mauritius). Castellan asked several time for permission to go and rescue the Malagasy slaves left on Tromelin Island, but French Governor Antoine-Marie Desfortes-Boucher strictly refused, because he considered that slave transport could create feuds with British rivals. Castellan eventually abandoned his rescue project and went back to continental France in late August 1762. Nevertheless, another ship which passed by Tromelin Island spotted the Malagasy slaves in 1773 and signaled them again.

A rescue boat was sent but failed to approach the island because of the coral reefs. No less than fifteen years later did Bernard Boudin de Tromelin, commander of La Dauphine, reach the island and rescue the eight last survivors: seven women and one 8-month-old baby. He discovered the survivors dressed with feather-locked clothes. They had managed to keep a fire lit with wood remaining from the wrecked ship. The island was definitely named after Tromelin in the 19th century.

From a legal point of view, wrecked ships were originally ruled during the Old Regime by what was called “droit de bris” (also known as “droit d’épave” or “droit de lagan”). According to this law, who owns the land where a ship wrecks can also own the wrecked ship and its cargo. Any object

International Maritime History Association

with no identifiable owner – which implies incidental or unconscious physical dispossession – can be considered as a shipwreck. On the other hand, unlike any left object, the notion of will is absent; thus, the owner might manifest one day, as long as he doesn't renounce his lost property. It happened very often in the past that local populations – who lived in poverty – did not respect this law (considered as a feudal privilege) and plundered shipwrecks for profit. Though it is hard to keep record, “droit de bris” probably already existed during the Antiquity. In France, Louis XI was the first king to define “droit de bris” as a royal law. Under the reign of Louis XIV, Colbert restricted this law in 1681 to any property remaining unclaimed after a legal deadline⁶. The law remained valid until the XIXth century. Nowadays in France, collecting remains of a shipwreck is forbidden but often performed.

As a conclusion, shipwrecks leave a mark in History and often inspire artists, far beyond the domain of sea culture.

Simon Coyac - French Lifeguard

- 1 Thanks to the uniqueness of its territory, including wide coastlines, France developed a strong sea culture and engaged in many expeditions, raids and trade trips across the seas and oceans of the whole planet.
- 2 *“Narcisse Pelletier, the true story of the White Savage”*, written by Constant Merland and published by Thomas Duranteau
- 3 *“Les Naufragés de La Méduse”*, Belin, 2016, by Jacques-Olivier Boudon
- 4 A brig is a sailing vessel with two square-rigged masts, mainly used for cabotage
- 5 Article by Yvonne Rebeyrol in newspaper *“Le Monde”* from 4th March 1981
- 6 In August 1681, a decree by the French Navy forbids to plunder the shipwrecks and their cargo.