

# The Loss of the Wager

JOHN BULKELEY  
and JOHN BYRON

Introduction by ALAN GURNEY



*first person singular*

# THE LOSS OF THE *WAGER*

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*The Wreck of the Wager.*  
*The original frontispiece to Byron's Narrative*

THE LOSS OF THE  
*WAGER*

THE NARRATIVES OF JOHN BULKELEY  
AND THE HON. JOHN BYRON

with an introduction by  
Alan Gurney

THE BOYDELL PRESS

Introduction and epilogue © Alan Gurney 2004

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## *first person singular*

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## Introduction

The Admiralty *Pilots*, published by the Hydrographic Office, are the seafarer's Baedekers. Totalling seventy-seven volumes they cover the world's coastlines, oceans and seas. Inside their sober navy-blue cloth covers they contain sage advice on dangers, safe anchorages, reefs, and currents; and when paraded on a chart-room bookshelf, their gilt-lettered spines on show, they make for an impressive display of hard won nautical information.

The *South American Pilot* has this to say regarding a small island on the Chilean coast some 500 nautical miles north of Cape Horn:

Isla Wager lies close E of Isla Byron; it can be identified by Monte Anson, which is conical and 438m (1,436 ft) high, on the N side of the island . . . also by Monte Wager, with a flat summit of 652m (2,139 ft) situated in the middle of the island.

A few lines later the *Pilot* also mentions that a cove, Bahia Speedwell, is 'difficult to approach' and that Canal Cheap 'is deep throughout.' A few miles north of Wager Island the *Pilot* details the Islas Marinas (Marine Islands) comprising Crosslet, Hereford, Smith, and Hales Islands. Such English sounding names in a Spanish speaking country pose a question, and perhaps to the curious they also hint at a story. The curious would be right.

The story is an eighteenth-century melodrama set in a ferociously inhospitable climate and along one of the world's more remote and dangerous coastlines. *The South American Pilot* is brutally explicit on the climate: "The area covered by this



volume is exposed to an almost unbroken series of depressions which move E across or to the S of it. Except in regions sheltered from the prevailing W winds, the weather in all seasons is predominantly cold and stormy with much cloud and rain.' As to the location, a glance at any map or chart of South America's dangling, scorpion-like tail, shows a deadly, fractured coastline of reefs, islands and channels. 'One sight of such a coast,' wrote Charles Darwin, having sailed in the *Beagle* between reefs known as the Furies and looked out on a sea so covered with breakers that it was known as the Milky Way, 'is enough to make a landsman dream for a week about shipwrecks, peril, and death.' Add disease, starvation, treachery, murder, insanity and mutiny (all lubricated by brandy and wine) to Darwin's nightmare, and one holds the essence of the story that followed upon the *Wager's* shipwreck on 14 May 1741 in the Golfo de Peñas – which can be translated as the Gulf of Sorrows – and the trials, tribulations and horrors which fell upon her men and their struggle for survival and escape: all told in *A Voyage to the South Seas* by John Bulkeley and John Cummins, and *The Narrative of the Honourable John Byron* by John Byron.

The *Wager*, 599 tons and 24 guns, sailed from England on 18 September 1740 as one of eight ships under the command of Commodore George Anson: six men-of-war, the *Centurion*, *Gloucester*, *Severn*, *Pearl*, *Wager*, *Tryal*, and two merchant ships, the *Anna* and the *Industry*, carrying supplies. Great Britain and Spain had been at war for a year, and the squadron's destination was the Pacific where Anson had been ordered to 'annoy and distress the Spaniards . . . by taking, sinking, burning, or otherwise destroying all their ships and vessels that you shall meet with . . . to seize, surprise, or take any of the towns or places belonging to the Spaniards on the coast.'

The *Wager*, an East Indiaman bought into the Royal Navy, carried artillery and military stores for the land forces, merchandise goods to win over the native population, wine and brandy for the squadron. Overloaded with these stores, she also

carried twice her number of usual human cargo: the seamen being outnumbered by marines (most of them raw and young recruits who had never loaded a musket) and old decrepit soldiers (most of them over 60 years old and some over 70), out-pensioners from the Chelsea Hospital known as 'invalids.' These were the land forces that were going to wreak havoc amongst the Spanish colonies and possessions.

'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned. A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.' So runs Dr Samuel Johnson's acid opinion on life at sea. Most of the *Wager's* complement would have agreed. Many of the crew had been press-ganged, some had come from jail. And the regulation 14 inches allowed between hammocks had been reduced to cram in the land forces. Such crowded and fetid conditions, plus a diet of salt meat and weevil infested biscuit, made every ship of the squadron an ideal breeding ground for various diseases.

Disease, particularly the disease known as scurvy, killed more men of the Georgian navy than cannon ball, musket shot, drowning and shipwreck combined. Pascoe Thomas of the *Centurion* described in clinical detail his own sufferings from scurvy: 'Several hard nodes now began to rise in my legs, thighs, and arms, and not only many more black spots appeared in the skin, but these spread till almost my legs and thighs were as black as a Negro; and this accompanied with such an excessive pains in the joints of the knees, ankles and toes, as I thought before I experienced them, that human nature could never have supported. It next advanced to the mouth; all my teeth were presently loose, and my gums, overcharged with extravagated blood, fell down almost quite over my teeth. This occasioned my breath to stink much, yet without affecting my lungs; but I believe, one week more at sea would have ended me, and less than a month more, all the rest.'

Scurvy, a deficiency disease, is brought on by lack of Vitamin

C. Sir Richard Hawkins, the Elizabethan seaman, called scurvy 'the plague of the sea' and recommended fresh lemons and oranges as a cure. The East India Company had been issuing lemon juice aboard its fleet for over a century before the sailing of Anson's squadron. The Dutchmen Wilhelm Schouten and Jacob le Maire bought twenty thousand lemons at Sierra Leone before their historic 1616 rounding of Cape Horn. Captain John Smith – the founder of Virginia – in his 1627 *Seaman's Grammar* recommended that ships carry 'the juice of the lemons for the scurvy. Some it may be will say I would have men feast than fight, but I say the want of these necessities occasions the loss of more men than in any English fleet hath been slain since eighty-eight.'\*

The Admiralty, aware of the ravages caused by scurvy, placed its faith in elixir of vitriol (sulphuric acid) mixed with alcohol, sugar and spices. The crowded conditions aboard warships also led to deaths from another disease, typhus. Also known as ship or jail fever, typhus is spread by lice. The purser of the *Tryal*, the smallest warship of the squadron, recorded that during the weeks spent in rounding Cape Horn – a time of constant gales, freezing temperatures, mountainous seas, and with men dying daily – that the living were 'almost devoured by vermin' and that he had seen 'above a peck [two gallons] of lice on a man even after he was dead.' The sea conditions off Cape Horn meant no galley fires; and aboard the *Tryal* the men lived on water and ship's biscuit toasted over burning brandy: 'to kill the numerous insects it abounded with.' Captain Dandy Kidd of the *Pearl*, who was buried at sea in the South Atlantic, predicted on his deathbed that the whole enterprise would end in 'poverty, vermin, famine, death and destruction.' Which was either a remarkable instance of second sight, or written into the narrative stories after all the facts were known.

\* Eighty-eight refers to 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada.

The delay in sailing from England – recruiting and victualing problems, and constant westerly winds – led to the fleet attempting the rounding of Cape Horn at the worst possible time: the southern autumn. The squadron's battle started on 7 March 1741 after an easy and quick passage through the Le Maire Strait separating Staten Island from Tierra del Fuego. 'We passed those memorable streights,' runs the official narrative, 'ignorant of the dreadful calamities which were then impending, and just ready to break upon us; ignorant that the time drew near when the squadron would be separated never to unite again, and that this day of our passage was the last cheerful day that the greatest part of us would ever live to enjoy.'

Certain vignettes remain vivid in the mind after a reading of the various accounts of the two month battle to clear Cape Horn. Of mountainous seas, endless storms, snow and sleet; of men with frostbitten fingers grappling with frozen sails and ice covered rigging; of dead bodies, some in rolled-up hammocks acting as a burial shroud, rolling across sea-washed decks, their living companions too weak to pitch them overboard; of masts and yards going by the board; of streaming rigging and strips of sail thrashing in the wind; of the *Centurion*, unable to set any sails in one storm, setting her men in the rigging and along the yards to provide windage so that the ship could wear and steer down wind; of men being pitched overboard and drowning; of seas sweeping across decks and ripping of hatches and scuttles; of hulls and decks working in the tormented seas so that every seam poured water, and not a dry place below; of one ship, its pumps broken, with the men bailing with buckets; of one veteran soldier, wounded fifty years previously at the Battle of the Boyne, and now dying of scurvy, whose wounds opened up as if fresh, and with a broken limb, long since healed, fractured again as if newly broken; of the terrible time when they thought themselves clear of Tierra del Fuego only to find themselves two miles off its coast: the east setting current and the violent westerly winds having set them some three hundred miles east

of their estimated position. That fearful day was 13 April. It was to take them another three weeks before they knew that they had last won free and had rounded Cape Horn.

When the *Wager*, a virtual wreck, drove ashore to her last resting place, her complement of men – 243 when leaving England and with 45 soldiers transferred to the *Centurion* and the *Severn* before the rounding of Cape Horn – numbered 152: scurvy, typhus, and dysentery making the grim accounting of the missing.

Such then is the background to the narratives of John Bulkeley and John Byron. A ship's company demoralized and debilitated by ten weeks of battling against the elements, disease and death: a struggle which had left only a dozen men capable of working the ship before her piling ashore. The shore no welcoming palm-tree girted island, but a grim, rain sodden and gale lashed one, covered with bog and a dense scrub forest of southern beech.

The first thing that strikes one when reading the narratives is the complete and utter breakdown of authority aboard the *Wager*. Suddenly, at a stroke, the strict hierarchical discipline of the Royal Navy tumbles into total anarchy. The scenes aboard the grounded vessel, her masts cut down and her hull pounded by waves, are ones straight out of the *Grand Guignol*. Men break into the weapon chests and arm themselves with swords, muskets and pistols. Brandy and wine barrels are broached and drunks reel around the deck, some to fall down hatches and then drown in the flooded bilges. Some men sing Psalms, others fight. One man is murdered, strangled to death. This bacchanalia becomes Surrealist when men break open the merchandise chests containing clothing, and then parade the deck wearing velvet coats, laces and ribbons over their soiled canvas trousers and shirts.

Out of this anarchy emerges the gunner, John Bulkeley, a Daniel Defoe character who carries a copy of Thomas á Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, and, like Robinson Crusoe,

keeps a daily journal. *A Voyage to the South Seas*, based on this journal, is the extraordinary story of the anarchic and starving weeks spent on the island, followed by the equally harrowing voyage in the *Speedwell*, the *Wager*'s longboat, lengthened and decked by John Cummins the ship's carpenter, to Brazil. By January 1743 both men were home in England, reunited with their families in Portsmouth. A few months later *A Voyage to the South Seas* was published, and avidly read by a public hungry for accounts of voyages, travels and adventures: preferably ones laced with descriptions of pagan natives and their strange ways. *A Voyage to the South Seas* did not disappoint.

The Honourable John Byron sailed aboard the *Wager* as a seventeen-year-old midshipman. But his escape from Wager Island, to the north and into the hands of the Spanish, rather than the southern route through the Strait of Magellan taken by the *Speedwell*, meant that he was not reunited with his family – in a manner which might have been penned by Henry Fielding for an incident in *Tom Jones* – until 1746. Byron's *Narrative* did not appear until 1768.

The two accounts, describing different travels, carry the same theme: the demoralizing effect of starvation and deprivation on humans. On the voyage in the *Speedwell*, when men were reduced to gnawing on sealskin which had been used as a hatchway cover, Bulkeley noted that: 'Hunger is void of all compassion; every person was so intent on the preservation of his own life, that he was regardless of another's, and the bowels of commiseration were shut up.' Byron wrote in similar vein on the pleadings for food of a dying seaman: 'But we were become so hardened against the impression of others suffering by our own; so familiarised to scenes of this and every other kind of misery, that the poor man's dying intreaties were vain.'

Byron travelled north with a party led by the *Wager*'s commander, Captain David Cheap. But it is doubtful if any of the party could have survived without the help of the coast's

nomadic natives, the canoe-borne Alacaluf. These were a far remove from the 'noble savage' popularised by Rousseau and the accounts of the Pacific voyages of James Cook and Louis Bougainville. The Alacaluf men realized at once that Cheap was the leader of these strange folk who had appeared on their shores. Leaders were to be treated with respect, and those under them with cuffs and kicks: which was the treatment received by Byron, the second son of a peer, in a classic case of master-servant inversion.

Bulkeley's imperative in publishing his account was twofold: to make money (he and his family had received no wages since the wreck of the *Wager*), and to place on record the complicated events which had led to the leaving of Cheap and a handful of people on Wager Island: an act which could have been construed as mutiny, the penalty being death. Also, being an orderly man, his comment in the Preface to the *Voyage* shows his attempt to create some order out of the anarchy into which the survivors had fallen: 'There was a necessity for action, and a great deal of it too; and had we been as indolent and regardless for the preservation of the people, as others who were superior in command, there would not have been a single man, who was shipwreck'd in the *Wager*, now in England to give any relation of the matter.' In the event the inevitable court martial, delayed until the return of Captain Cheap, and held at Spithead on 15 April 1746, only looked into the causes leading to the *Wager*'s loss.

A few weeks after the court martial John Bulkeley was offered the command of the ten-gun *Royal George*, a 70-ton cutter carrying a crew of sixty. But having cast his experienced eye over her, he refused the command claiming that she was 'too small to bear the sea.' He was proved right. On her next voyage she sank in the Bay of Biscay with the loss of all hands. Bulkeley soon removed himself to Pennsylvania where, in 1757, a second edition of the *Voyage* was published.

Byron returned to Patagonia. In 1764 he sailed from England

commanding an expedition of two vessels, the frigate *Dolphin* and the sloop *Tamar*. It took seven weeks to sail through the Strait of Magellan before entering into the Pacific. Byron spent no time investigating Wager Island. In fact his circumnavigation is memorable for its speed, its paucity of new discoveries, its ignoring of his Admiralty instructions, its criticism by the Royal Society for the lack of scientific results, and the derisory laughter from the general public on the tales of Patagonian giants. John Charnock, the naval biographer, thought Byron 'a brave and excellent officer, but, a man extremely unfortunate.' To the seamen who served under him he was known as 'Foul-weather Jack' for his unique ability to attracting storms. As a father he sired a handsome, profligate, dissolute son in a Guards Regiment: Captain 'Mad Jack' Byron, who in turn fathered the poet Lord Byron. The scene in *Don Juan*, claimed Byron, was based on 'those related in my grand-dad's *Narrative*.'

But the wreck of the *Wager* gave birth to more than books written by survivors and a small footnote in English literature. Admiralty law, at the time of the *Wager*'s wreck, held that a seaman's wages ceased when a ship was wrecked and lost. Why then should a seaman, receiving no wages, be still liable to naval discipline? This was a loophole which mutineers could slither. In 1747 an Act was passed which extended both wages and naval discipline after shipwreck or capture.

Another result, not so much concerning the *Wager* but the whole of Anson's expedition, was an epochal study into scurvy. The appalling losses to scurvy prompted a twenty-eight-year-old Royal Navy surgeon, Dr James Lind, to investigate the causes and a cure. In the world's first controlled dietary experiment, he found that the juice of oranges and lemons was a certain cure. It took the Admiralty decades before it ordered that lemon juice be served to its seamen. But even then it made a qualification: the men had to spend six weeks on salt rations before the issue of the lemon juice.



And what of Crosslet, Hereford, Smith and Hales, the young marines who have a group of islands named after them? The young men mentioned in this Introduction. Read on and find their fate in Byron's *Narrative*.

A Voyage to the South Seas  
in the Years 1740–1



# Dedication

To the Honourable  
EDWARD VERNON, Esq,  
*Vice-Admiral of the Blue, &c.*

*Sir,*

We have presum'd to put the following sheets under your protection, tho' we have not the honour of being personally known to you, nor have applied to you for the liberty of using your celebrated name on this occasion.

As this book is a faithful extract from the journals of two British seamen, late officers in his majesty's navy, we thought we could not more properly dedicate it than to a British admiral.

We know your detestation of flattery; and you know, from long experience, that a British seaman hath a spirit too brave to stoop to so degenerate a practice.

The following pages we hope will recommend themselves to you, because they are written in a plain maritime stile, and void of partiality and prejudice.

The distresses mention'd in this book have perhaps not been equal'd in our age; and we question whether any navigators living have, for so long a continuance, suffer'd such variety of hardships, as the unfortunate people of the *Wager*.

After surviving the loss of the ship, and combating with famine and innumerable difficulties, a remnant of us are

return'd to our native country; but even here we are still unfortunate, destitute of employment, almost without support, or any prospect of being restor'd to our stations, till some important questions are decided, which cannot be cleared up till the arrival of our late captain, or at least the commodore.

We, sir, who present you with this book, have been several years in the navy, and thought ourselves well acquainted with its laws and discipline, and have many certificates to produce, that we have always acted in obedience to command ; but the proceedings of the officers and people, since the loss of the ship, are reckon'd so dark and intricate, that we know not what to expect, nor what will be the result of our superiors' determination.

The only consolation, we have in our present anxiety, is placed in a confidence of the unbiass'd integrity, justice, and humanity of the right honourable persons who will one day determine for or against us.

When you read our account of the affair, you'll find the facts impartially related, the whole narrative written without the least shadow of prejudice or malice, and no more in favour of ourselves, than of the other officers concern'd : we stand or fall by the truth; if truth will not support us, nothing can.

In our voyage from the Brazil to Lisbon, we were oblig'd to you for the generous treatment we met with from an enemy, a subject of Spain, a person of distinction, and a passenger in the same ship: your virtues have procur'd you the esteem even of your enemies.

Your zeal for the national service deserves the love of every honest Briton : to leave an abundant fortune, your family, and your country, to hazard your life in the most perilous expeditions, with no other motive than to retrieve the honour of the nation, shows the spirit of a true British hero, and deserves the highest commendations.

That you, sir, may never deviate from your integrity, but continue a terror to the enemies of Britain, an honour to his

majesty's service, and an ornament to your country, are the  
sincere wishes of,

Honourable Sir,  
*your most dutiful,*  
*and most obedient*  
*humble servants,*

JOHN BULKELEY  
JOHN CUMMINS



## Preface

As an introduction, we think proper to acquaint the reader with our reasons for causing the following sheets to be made publick to the world. The chief motive, which induced us to this task, was to clear our characters, which have been exceedingly blemish'd by persons who (next to Heaven) owe the preservation of their lives to our skill, and indefatigable care; and who having an opportunity of arriving before us in England, have endeavour'd to raise their reputation on the ruin of our's.

It will appear to the reader, on perusal of the following pages, that this journal was attempted to be taken from us by violence at Rio Janeiro; that we have preserved it, at the hazard of our lives; that there was no journal kept after the loss of the ship, by any officers but ourselves; and if we had not been careful in making remarks on each day's transactions, persons must have continued in the dark, in relation to all the subsequent proceedings.

It is a very usual thing to publish voyages, especially when the navigators have met with any extraordinary events. We believe, our expedition, though it was not a secret, is allowed to be an extraordinary one, and consequently attended with extraordinary events: indeed while the commodore was with us, every thing went well, but when the squadron separated, things began to have a new face; after the loss of the *Wager*, there was a general disorder and confusion among the people, who were now no longer implicitly obedient. There were two seamen particularly, who propagated this confusion, they said they had suffer'd ship-wreck in his majesty's ship the *Biddeford*, and received no wages from the day that the ship was lost; that when



they were out of pay, they look'd upon themselves as their own masters, and no longer subjected to command. The people however were not altogether infected, but still continued to pay a dutiful respect to their commander; but when the captain had rashly shot Mr Cozens (whose fate the reader will find particularly related) they then grew very turbulent and unruly, the captain daily lost the love of the men, who with their affection lost their duty.

Our confining the captain is reckoned an audacious and unprecedented action, and our not bringing him home with us, is reckon'd worse; but the reader will find that necessity absolutely compell'd us to act as we did, and that we had sufficient reasons for leaving him behind.

Our attempt for liberty in sailing to the southward through the Streights of Magellan with such a number of people, stow'd in a long-boat, has been censur'd as a mad undertaking. Desperate diseases require desperate remedies; had we gone to the northward, there appear'd no probability of escaping the Spaniards, and when we had fallen into their hands, 'tis not unlikely but they might have employed us as drudges in their mines for life, therefore we rather chose to encounter all difficulties than to become slaves to a merciless enemy.

Some persons have objected against our capacity for keeping a journal of this nature; but several judges of maritime affairs, allow this work to be exact and regular. We think, persons with a common share of understanding are capable of committing to paper daily remarks of matters worthy their observation, especially of facts in which they themselves had so large a share. We only relate such things as could not possibly escape our knowledge, and what we actually know to be true. We don't set up for naturalists and men of great learning, therefore have avoided meddling with things above our capacity.

We are also condemn'd by many for being too busy and active for persons in our stations. There was a necessity for action, and a great deal of it too; and had we been as indolent

and regardless for the preservation of the people, as others who were superior in command, there would not have been a single man, who was shipwreck'd in the *Wager*, now in England to give any relation of the matter.

The gentleman who commanded in the long-boat on his arrival before us at Lisbon, represented us to the English merchants in a very vile light, we were even advised by some of our friends there not to return to our country, lest we should suffer death for mutiny. But when the gentlemen of the factory had perus'd our journal, they found, if there was any mutiny in the case, the very person who accused us, was the ringleader and chief mutineer. We were confident of our own innocence, and determin'd to see our country at all events, being positive that we have acted to the best of our understandings, in all respects, for the preservation of our lives and liberties; and when our superiors shall think proper to call us to an account, which we expect will be at the commodore's arrival, we do not doubt but we shall clear ourselves in spite of all invidious reflections and malicious imputations.

It has been hinted to us, as if publishing this journal would give offence to some persons of distinction. We can't conceive, how any transactions relating to the *Wager*, although made ever so publick, can give offence to any great man at home. Can it be any offence to tell the world that we were shipwreck'd in the *Wager*, when all people know it already? Don't they know that the *Wager* was one of his majesty's storeships? That we had on board not only naval stores, but other kind of stores of an immense value? Don't they also know that we went abroad with hopes of acquiring great riches, but are return'd home as poor as beggars? We are guilty of no indecent reproaches, or unmannerly reflexions; though, it is certain, we cannot but lament our being engaged in so fatal an expedition. When persons have surmounted great difficulties, it is a pleasure for them to relate their story; and if we give ourselves this satisfaction, who has any cause to be

offended? Are we, who have faced death in so many shapes, to be intimidated, lest we should give offence to the – Lord knows whom? We never saw a satirical journal in our lives, and we thought that kind of writing was the most obnoxious to give offence.

It has been a thing usual, in publishing of voyages, to introduce abundance of fiction; and some authors have been esteem'd merely for being marvellous. We have taken care to deviate from those, by having a strict regard to truth. There are undoubtedly in this book some things which will appear incredible. The account we give of the Patagonian Indians, and our own distresses, tho' ever so well attested, will not easily obtain credit; and people will hardly believe that human nature could possibly support the miseries that we have endured.

All the difficulties related we have actually endur'd, and perhaps must endure more: till the commodore's arrival we cannot know our fate; at present we are out of all employment, and have nothing to support ourselves and families, but the profits arising from the sale of our journal; which perhaps may be the sum total we shall ever receive for our *Voyage to the South Seas*.