A Privateer's Voyage Round the World

George Shelvocke

SEAFARERS' VOICES

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George Shelvocke

Edited with an introduction by Vincent McInerney

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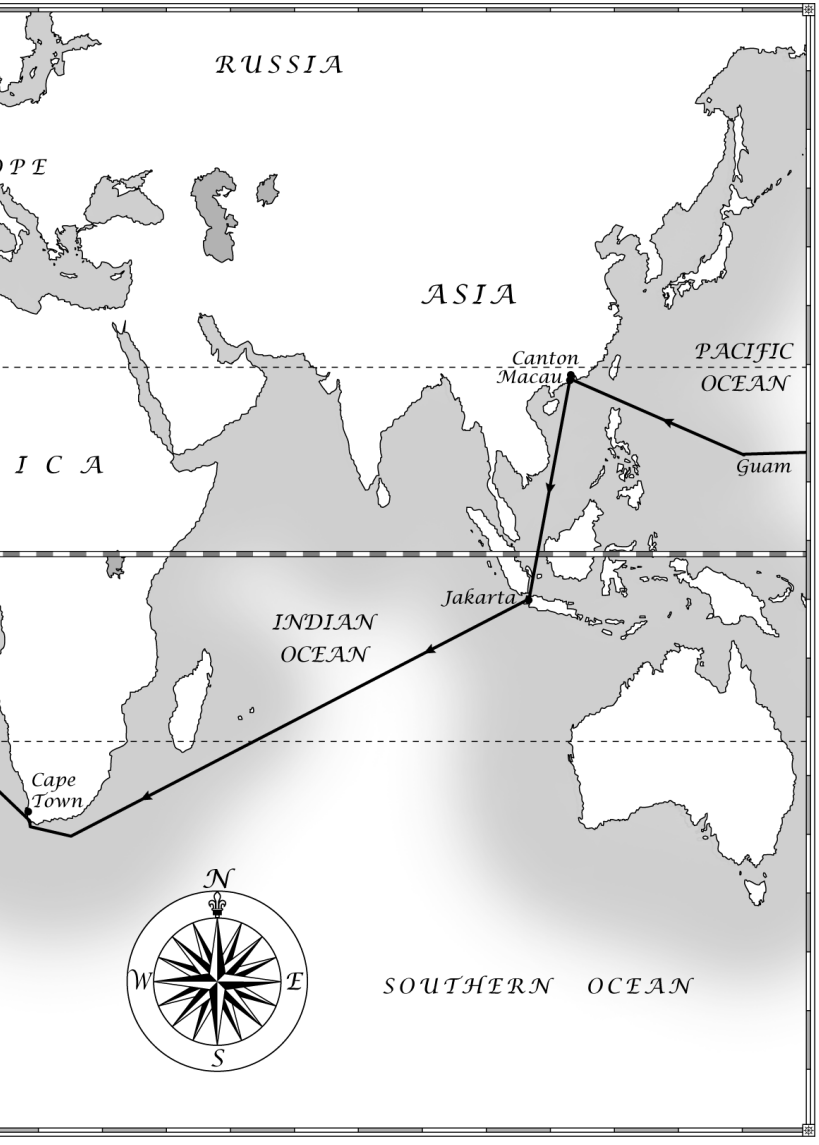
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Editorial Note

The editions used for the main text are George Shelvocke's *A Voyage Round the World by the way of the Great South Sea, performed in the years 1719-1722* (London: J. Senex, 1726); the Cassell Seafarers' Library reprint with the invaluable introduction by Perrin: Shelvocke, George, *A Voyage Round the World*, with introduction and notes by W. G. Perrin (London: Cassell, 1928); and the version given in Kerr's collection of travels and voyages of 1894: Shelvocke, George, *A Voyage Round the World in 1719-22* in Robert Kerr's *A General History of Voyages and Travels, Vols X & XI* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and London: Cadell, 1824). The first edition of Betagh, William, *A Voyage Round the World* (London: Combes, Lacy, Clarke, 1728) was used.

The work has been reduced from about 90,000 words to 40,000. Losses have been in the lengthy descriptions of native peoples, flora and fauna. This may have been an attempt by Shelvocke to be seen as a scientific observer rather than a privateer, especially as 'the author followed the custom of his age in . . . too often

plagiarising from earlier adventurers'.[1] Some aspects of the sea passages have also been edited. Spelling and punctuation and paragraphing have been adjusted to meet current expectations.

Introduction

> To investigate seafaring and colonial life is to find oneself in a world of hard men . . . never slow to take the shortest way with other men whose presence might mean danger.[2]

In spite of its sedate title, *A Privateer's Voyage Round the World* written by George Shelvocke is an exciting tale full of adventure and privateering in the Great South Sea. First published in 1726, Shelvocke's work was most probably written in a spirit of self-justification and as an attempted defence against accusations of piracy, and although the title would seem to hint more at journeys of education and exploration made by a gentleman traveller, this seaman's yarn encompasses both the shipwrecks and sinkings of his buccaneering exploits, as well as providing sensitive and vivid accounts of the peoples and places he encountered on his travels. As the second book in the series of Seafarers' Voices, we once more find a seagoing voice from the past taking us back to a time of danger and adventure, in this case one where the protagonist treads a fine line between the legality of privateering and the criminality

of the pirate. As with the first book in the series, Jean Marteilhe's *Galley Slave*, it seems that the author was keen to persuade the reader of the justice of his cause, and both accounts show us a barbarous world, although perhaps the barbarity was a little more explicit in Marteilhe's account of religious persecution. In Shelvocke's self-defence against any imputations of illegality, the sufferings of those on whom he preys are elided in the presentation of himself as a gentleman adventurer, albeit in a world where there is a strong sense of lawlessness, and authority is predicated on firepower.

George Shelvocke (*c*.1675-1742) took on the privateering command we read about in the following account in his mid-forties, after a career in the Royal Navy beginning in 1690. In 1703 he was appointed master of the thirty-two gun vessel, *Scarborough*, and in April 1704 Robert Harland, commander at Portsmouth, gave Shelvocke an acting commission as lieutenant which was confirmed by the Admiralty in November 1705. In December of that year Harland appointed his clerk, Edward Hughes, to the post of purser in the *Scarborough*, and Shelvocke and Hughes became shipmates, this being a connection Shelvocke would make use of when he fell on hard times later in life. Then in January 1706 Shelvocke was made third lieutenant of the ninety-gun *Association*, and he then moved to the *Britannia*, from which, in October 1706, he was paid off at Chatham as second lieutenant.

Unable to obtain another appointment at this rank, Shelvocke in July 1707 was appointed purser of the *Monck*, the previous holder of the post having been granted 'leave to resign' because of the ill-health of both body and accounts – it is unclear which indisposition came first. Shelvocke's new position was less prestigious that that of lieutenant, but far more lucrative, most pursers being reputed to possess the great alchemical gift of being able to turn seawater into gold; however, it seems that Shelvocke was unable to make his fortune in this post. His wife died in 1711 while he was still on the *Monck*, leaving him with a son, George Shelvocke the Younger, who later accompanied him on his privateering voyage around the world. In 1713 peace was declared with France, and Shelvocke was dismissed from the service and fell into poverty and want, lacking the 'interest' or connections necessary to procure him a pension or other suitable naval employment. As Hoffmann wrote, 'If they would take my advice, parents would never send a boy into the service without 'interest' . . . If they do, their child, if he behaves, may die possibly as a lieutenant, with scarcely an income to support himself; and should he be married with children, God help him, for no one else will!'[3]

In 1718, desperate, Shelvocke applied for help to his old shipmate, Edward Hughes, now a gentleman of property, and the principal shareholder in a consortium of merchants, the 'Gentleman-Adventurers', which was

fitting-out two privateers to 'cruize', or prey, upon Spanish treasure ships in the Great South Sea, as the Pacific Ocean was then known. Privateers were privately-owned armed merchantmen acting under an official commission from the state, validated by a document allowing them to attack and plunder vessels belonging to enemies with whom that state was at war, the document being known as a 'letter of marque'.

The authorisation bestowed by the letter of marque put a vessel and its crew on official war-footing. The first letter of marque on record was issued by Henry III in February 1243 to one George Pyper, and privateers then operated until the signing of the Declaration of Paris in 1856 when the practice was officially discontinued. Over the centuries that privateers operated, the crew of a prize ship would be made prisoner and its cargo confiscated. If geographically feasible, the capture would be sailed to a friendly port, often containing an admiralty court. At this court the vessel would be 'condemned', or assessed at a price, and auctioned to produce prize money. If taken in enemy waters, the prize might be ransomed back to its captain, or to its owners, any monies from the ransom or sale of a prize being divided among those groups with a financial interest in the privateer.

This financial interest in the profits of privateering was generally divided between the venture capitalists who owned and fitted out the vessel, the crew of the

privateer, and finally the crown or government of the country to which the privateer belonged. The entrepreneurs and the crew generally divided ninety per cent of the profits on a basis previously agreed, usually in a ratio of two to one. The final ten per cent would be due to the state which provided the letter of marque. In effect, privateers were a way of producing fighting ships and crews without the state having to spend public money, or commissioning naval officers. Privateers played a further role in forcing an enemy to use warships to convoy their own merchantmen, so tying themselves up as birds of passage rather than birds of prey. Privateers and their crews, it might be argued, represented a lesser form of total war, their object in any confrontation being to capture an enemy vessel with as little damage as possible, rather than to destroy it completely, the more complete the prize and its cargo being, the greater the potential profit.

Crews of privateers tended to be much larger than those of non-combative merchant ships, sometimes even outnumbering those of naval vessels, as the ability to furnish enough men to control a prize was crucial. Once an enemy merchantman was taken, a crew from the privateer had to be put on board to guard the crew of the prize, and to deliver the prize ship back to the appropriate port. There were cases where a privateer would take two, three, or more ships, all of which then had to be manned by personnel from the privateer, and

this meant a large complement was necessary. We see this in Shelvocke's account, when he leaves too few of his crewmen on a prize ship together with their Spanish prisoners whilst he sails off to pursue another ship, only to return to find his men overpowered and murdered.

There were two ships funded by Hughes' consortium: the *Success*, a vessel of 350 tons, with a complement of thirty-six guns and 180 men, and the *Speedwell* – 200 tons, twenty-two guns, and 106 men. After a meeting with Hughes, Shelvocke emerged with a twenty-pound loan, having been given the captaincy of the *Success*, and made commander-in-chief of the expedition. The captain of the second ship, the *Speedwell*, would be John Clipperton, who had sailed with William Dampier (1651-1715) on Dampier's famous privateering expedition in 1703-04 to the Pacific Ocean – Clipperton was thus familiar with that part of the world to which they were headed.

Unfortunately for Shelvocke and his backers, England was not at this moment at war with Spain, although the expectation was that war was imminent. In the event, it was decided to take a shortcut that could be made available within the world of the letters of marque: 'it was possible to obtain a licence from a foreign sovereign to attack and rob *his* enemies.'[4] The foreign sovereign in this case was Charles VI of Austria, who was already at war with Spain. In November 1718, Shelvocke was sent to Ostend, then under Charles VI's control, to acquire this commission, hire some Flemish

seamen, and stock up on 'liquors' for the voyage. The document, stating that '[t]he said Captain Shelvocke may make use of the Imperial Commission in warring against the Spaniards', was successfully obtained.

It is at this point we encounter the first tensions inherent in Shelvocke's story. There is another account of Shelvocke's *Voyage Round the World* which provides an insistent counterpoint to his account of himself and his adventures: this version, written by his captain of marines, another former purser named William Betagh, was also entitled *Voyage Round the World*, which was published two years after Shelvocke's in 1728. Shelvocke and Betagh seem to have had a disagreement of some sort at the beginning of the venture which is never explained fully in either account, Shelvocke merely writing, in August/early September 1718 off the southeast coast of South America that Betagh apparently said 'he felt I was prepossessed in his disfavour for words he spoke to me seven or eight months agone.' Whatever this initial argument, it appears to have been enough to provoke a fierce enmity between the two, and the two men provide parallel but conflicting versions of events as they sail around the world and back, a web of assertion and counter-assertion which is impossible to untangle.

Betagh's account is critical of Shelvocke's conduct right from the beginning of the venture. According to him, when Shelvocke returned to the Downs during the first week in December 1718, Hughes and his co-

investors found that Shelvocke had hired more Flemings than authorised, had flown imperial colours, 'made entertainments' and 'fir'd away five barrels of powder',[5] and broached the wines and spirits. Shelvocke was immediately demoted, and Clipperton appointed as expedition commander and given the flagship, the *Success*. Shelvocke was left with public humiliation, the *Speedwell*, and a smouldering violent resentment against Clipperton, whom as he saw as not having been trained in 'the only nursery for sea officers,' the Royal Navy.[6]

Then on 17 December 1718, war was formally declared between England and Spain, which meant that the Flemings and their letter of marque could be packed off back to Ostend, and an English letter of marque obtained: this happened on 1 January 1719, at a cost of £41 17s 4d. Originally it had been intended that the *Speedwell* and *Success* would leave in November 1718 to double Cape Horn, passing through the Straits of Magellan or the Straits of Le Maire by December 1718 or January 1719, the southern summer. Normally the exact choice of route would have been left to the individual captain depending on factors such as the weather, currents, or time of year, and in the owners' 'Scheme of the Voyage' they suggest the Straits of Magellan, but Shelvocke chose the Straits of Le Maire, blaming Clipperton for having appropriated all the charts, although, of course, it could also have been a deliberate