A daring buccaneer — William Dampier

Englishman William Dampier may not have been the most orthodox navigator, but he was one of the most interesting. Exciting accounts of his travels, along with his detailed drawings of Australian plants and animals, earned him worldwide acclaim.

Dampier was born in East Coker, near Somerset, England, and joined the navy before becoming a privateer. In 1685, he joined the crew of the Cygnet under the command of Captain Charles Swain. He was a legitimate privateer turned pirate thanks to his out-of-control crew who were intent on plundering Spanish vessels.

WITH ANGRY SPANIARDS in pursuit, the Cygnet's best chance of escape was west into the Pacific. The trip usually took an average of 60 days, but food was scarce, so Dampier navigated the ship to Guam in just 51 days — luckily for him, because he later found that the crew had intended to eat Captain Swan and himself if they ran out of food! The sailors later became mutinous again and abandoned Captain Swan in the Philippines, forcing Dampier to stay on board under the command of John Reid. When the ship was washed ashore on the west coast of Australia in 1688, Dampier and the crew spent two months camping near King Sound, in the traditional country of the Bard people, before setting sail for Cocos Island.

The A FLORAL TRIBUTE Dampier made many notes about the plants, animals and people he encountered, also illustrating them. The plant genus Dampiera is named after him.

BY THE TIME DAMPIER arrived back in England, he was a poor and penniless ex-privateer, but within six years his travels A New Journey Around the World would make him not only rich, but famous. He took up a position with British Customs; however, the thrill of discovery still beckoned. Dampier urged the Admiralty to fit out a ship that could be used to further explore the coast of New Holland. They decided that Dampier would be just the man for the job.

RETURNING IN THE ROEBUCK

Now a legitimate and respected navigator, Dampier was given the command of the Roebuck, a British warship, and in 1698 received instructions to sail in search of new lands via the Cape of Good Hope. He was to:

Survey all islands, shores, capes, bays, creeks and harbours fit for shelters as well as defence, to take careful soundings as he went, to note tides, currents, winds, and the character of the weather … to observe the disposition and commodities of the natives.

By this time, with years of experience under his belt, Dampier was a canny seaman and a trusted navigator. He took on board with him 20 crew members and provisions to feed them for 20 months, as well as twelve guns. In January 1699, the Roebuck set sail.

CAPTAIN DAMPIER STRUCK TROUBLE before they reached the first port. His second-in-command, Lieutenant Fisher, was insubordinate, so Dampier threw him off the ship when they reached Bahia in Brazil. Fisher was impressed there without a way of getting home — a fact that was to cause Dampier an unexpected headache when he returned to England. In 1702, Fisher had him court-martialed in England and Dampier was ruled not "a fit person to be employed as commander of any of Her Majesty's ships". Despite this falling out with the Admiralty, Dampier went on to command the privateer St George less than a year later and many more ships after that. However, back in 1699, with the wind of discovery in his sails, Dampier had no way of knowing what his decision to sack Fisher would bring, and set off south in the hope of discovering great wealth.

UNRELIABLE ROEBUCK

Dampier sailed east from the Cape of Good Hope to the west coast of Australia, and named Shark Bay, before heading north as far as Roebuck Bay. On the way, he made many worthy observations; however, frustrated by the lack of available water and the limitations of the Roebuck (which was beginning to leak badly), he sailed to Timor for provisions and then on to New Guinea. The Roebuck was rotten and fast deteriorating by the time they reached Ascension Island in the Atlantic, where the crew abandoned the ship and had to be rescued by a passing ship to return to England.

FAME & FORTUNE

On his return to England, Dampier became very famous. His book, A New Voyage Around the World, A Supplement to the Voyage Round the World, Two Voyages to Campeachy, A Discourse of Trade Winds and the two-part Voyage to New Holland, were widely read and brought Dampier much acclaim.

SO WELL KNOWN were Dampier's exploits that author Jonathan Swift made out that his fictitious character, Lemuel Gulliver, in Gulliver's Travels, was Dampier's cousin.

ANOTHER FAMOUS BOOK also has a link to Dampier — Robinson Crusoe. In 1709 Dampier captured the ship that rescued Scotsman Alexander Selkirk from the Juan Fernandez Islands, off the coast of Chile. Selkirk was the real Robinson Crusoe, who went on to provide the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's famous tale of shipwreck.