

TALES FROM THE CAPTAIN'S LOG – The National Archives. Published in hard covers by Adlard Coles Nautical [www.adlardcoles.com] at £25.00. 304 205mm x 255mm pages, richly illustrated with maps, drawings and facsimile documents. ISBN 978-1-4729-4866-3. Also available for Kindle

Every day, often every hour, over hundreds of years, in every ship on the Seven Seas, someone has made an entry in the log. Much of this vast mountain of information is preserved in the National Archives and housed on its 126 miles of shelving. Tales From The Captain's Log contains snippets, tasters, samples from these logs chosen by archivists each with a particular area of expertise.

The book is divided into five chapters: Exploration and Discovery, Mutiny and Piracy, Science and Surgery, The Navy, and Emigration and Transportation. Within each chapter are five or so essays. The first essay in the book is on Grenville Collins, who systematically charted the British coastline. Of Falmouth, home to our Commodore and guarded by Black Rock, he says in 1677: 'You may sayle in or out of either side of the Rock...which Deepe place is called Carrack Road and is the place for Great Ships to ride att'. Still true 340 years later.

* A slightly derogatory word for a tourist, thought to have originated in England's westcountry.

The logs quoted are carefully chosen, most written by celebrated sea dogs or relating to famous voyages and events. So in Chapter 1 we read of Samuel Wallis in Tahiti discovering that his men were exchanging the ship's nails for sex and consequently worrying about the integrity of his vessel. When Captain Cook later found syphilis among Tahitians he, of course, blamed the French. When William Parry was iced-in and wintered aboard HMS Fury while seeking the North West Passage, he staged theatrical productions but also wrote in his log 'a school was established for the instruction of such of the men who were willing to take advantage of this opportunity of learning to read and write'. James Clark Ross charted much of the Antarctic coastline and in 1839 took with him tinned food. We learn in his log that, while a fan of the new technology, he complained that they should be 'of a much stouter tin'.

The mutiny on the Bounty is so well known that the account here, excellent if brief, tells us little new. But it is still interesting to review a facsimile of Bligh's log, to see his neat handwriting and to read his personal explanation of what occurred. By contrast few people will know of the mutiny on HMS Hermione in 1797. Hugh Pigot had risen by patronage, and once a captain became a savage and unstable sadist. He started the irrational practice of flogging the last seaman down from the yard; men died falling from the spars trying to descend in time. When his ship collided with an American vessel he flogged the American commander, which started an international incident. He was finally hacked to death by his crew and thrown overboard – a certain justice one might think. 1797 was also the year of the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, which at least led to

improvements in conditions for Jack Tar.

I was drawn to the medical essays. The horrors of yellow fever are described in fearful detail by those very men, the naval surgeons, who witnessed them at the time. 'Of more than 200 persons sent from the Alfred to Port Royal Hospital, not a third survived the day'. An attempt to help victims by blood-letting recorded 'extreme debility followed and death soon after'. Similarly, a case of pneumonia was treated with vigorous blood-letting with the inevitable fatal result. Apparently a tarantula bite caused 'a sedate melancholy accompanied with nausea' and was treated by applying rum and oil to the affected part.

Chapter 4 provides descriptions of four famous battles including Trafalgar and the Battle of Navarino Bay. The latter, fought in Greece in 1827, was the last naval engagement between fleets of sailing vessels.

In Chapter 5 we read of the First Fleet, the name given to the six convict transports that left Portsmouth for New South Wales in 1787. Of nearly 1000 people aboard, only 28 souls succumbed. Later, conditions on ships deteriorated and many died on passage until, in 1815, a Royal Navy surgeon was placed on board every transport ship with significant improvement.

Tales From The Captain's Log is well produced on fine paper between hard covers, and the illustrations are beautifully presented. Astonishing paintings and drawings of flora and fauna, charts, coastlines and diseased men adorn the text. The facsimiles of the log entries add authenticity. Most are handsomely written with no crossings out or ink blots – line upon line of neat handwriting like the ripples of sand left by the ebbing tide. They were often set down at sea so the detail, of weather and gales, of battle plans, of disease symptoms, of treachery, is remarkable. It is a shame but inevitable that some of the logs are difficult to read – a magnifying glass helps.

The essays are short so the informed mariner will learn little extra about the celebrated people and events (Cook, Nelson, Trafalgar) but they contain sufficient lesser-known detail to make delving worthwhile. Multiple archivist authors has led to some repetition especially on Cook's first voyage and in the chapter on emigration.

Tales From The Captain's Log is too superficial to be a history text, but deserves more than the coffee table. With the advent of air travel we have lost a sense of our maritime heritage and its importance in the history of nations, especially Britain's. This book helps to reconnect us to our maritime past. I recommend it to any sailor, you will not be disappointed.

MHT