The Missing Captain

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Robert Holden

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA
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The perils of a certain kind of historical writing are painfully demonstrated in The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, billed as ‘The Life of Australian Whaling Captain, William Chamberlain: A Tale of Abduction, Adventure and Murder’.

According to the limited information available about Chamberlain, he had an exciting life. Born in Australia in 1803, he was for some reason taken away from his home town of Port Jackson in 1811 on the Frederick. The French captured this whaling ship on its way back to England, and killed the captain. Chamberlain was taken prisoner with the rest of the crew, and was rescued by the British navy. He was cared for by a naval surgeon, who eventually sent him to school in Scotland for a couple of years. Later, he was on board one of the battleships that participated in the Battle of Algiers in 1816, where he was wounded. It was only then that it occurred to anyone to return the boy, now thirteen, to his family in Australia. After a few years, Chamberlain went to sea again, first on a sealing ship and then on a whaler. He worked his way up to become captain of a whaling vessel, married and had several children. He and his family settled in Hobart, where in 1856 his youngest son was raped and murdered by a ‘bunyip’ skull exhibited in Sydney in 1847 seems to have more to do with Holden’s pre-existing interests (his last book was Bunyips) than those of his subject. Chamberlain does not take on any distinct characteristics, though he seems implausibly impressionable and sentimental for a nineteenth-century whaling captain, judging by his reaction to a fictional play based on his youthful exploits. The death of his son, which Holden imagines as ‘the impetus for … William Chamberlain to tell his own story in a desperate attempt to come to terms with his grief’, is told quite effectively with quotations from the Hobart Mercury.

The problems inherent in The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea arise from failures in both language and imagination. Holden has tried to put himself in Chamberlain’s shoes and write from his point of view, but he has not made the imaginative leap necessary to write true historical fiction. Like many others before him, he has mistaken long words and convoluted sentences for genuine nineteenth-century prose. Phrases such as ‘my chirography should expand into a veritable bat-talion of capitals’ do not conform to any historical style I know. Even worse is the insidious creep of contemporary sentimental platitudes. The word ‘caring’ is used far too often in its sickly modern sense, as in ‘our family renewed its caring bonds’. In the end, Holden lacks both the material to write a biography and the imagination to write an historical novel, and has fallen uncomfortably between two very high stools.