

## Adrian Mitchell, *Dampier's Monkey* (Wakefield Press, 2010)

The name William Dampier is not the first to come to mind when one thinks of explorers of the South Seas. Many, such as James Cook and Matthew Flinders, are better known. Yet, according to this book, Dampier's derogatory description of indigenous people he met, when he went ashore in north-west Australia, as 'the miserablest people in the world' influenced the attitudes of later explorers such as Flinders and Joseph Banks and those of early European settlers. Mitchell believes that, because this attitude also found its way into school textbooks, its negative effect was longlasting.

Dampier preceded Cook by almost a century, and his published accounts of his voyages to various parts of the globe were widely read and studied in his time. Half of Mitchell's book consists of his transcript of Sloane MS 3236, Dampier's unpublished personal journal, copied by a scribe. The transcript includes notes Dampier made in the margins, phrases struck out and words inserted, but Mitchell does not modernise Dampier's language or spelling. He is right to believe that English of the 1690s is close enough to modern usage for it to present no problems to an interested reader.

The first part of the book describes Dampier's eventful life and voyages, and the time of transition in which he lived. Mitchell not only gives insight into the somewhat enigmatic character of Dampier himself, but also elaborates on his contacts with members of the Royal Society, his dinner at the house of Samuel Pepys, his introduction to the monarch, his modest background in Somerset and his life as a buccaneer. Mitchell states that 'the work that follows is neither history nor biography. Yet undoubtedly it is a little of both'. His professed interest is to 'read something of the man and his times through his writing', and to further appreciation of 'just how complex apparently plain prose can be' (6).

Dampier's was a time when old superstitions and fanciful stories about travel competed with a new scientific approach. Mitchell describes the resulting tensions and clashes in some detail, and devotes great attention to the bitter quarrels and a trial which Dampier was involved in.

Mitchell is particularly interested in the discrepancies between Dampier's and other accounts of the same events: Dampier states that he has adjusted his style in *New Voyage Round the World* (1697) to the requirements of his readers. Mitchell emphasises the distaste Dampier expresses for the at times brutal behaviour of his fellow seamen and buccaneers, while Dampier himself glosses over the number of natives killed on his expeditions, and the fact that he was actively engaged in the lucrative slave trade. Mitchell shows that what Dampier calls 'plain' speaking in these accounts is therefore not as plain as one might expect. Admittedly Dampier also wrote about natural phenomena such as winds and currents in an admirably observant and scientific manner, but, during his lifetime as well as later, he kept the tainted reputation of a buccaneer and pirate, even after he had changed his lifestyle.

Mitchell shows that Defoe is greatly indebted to Dampier for his Robinson Crusoe character. Swift was also familiar with Dampier's writing, and refers to him as 'cousin Dampier' in *Gulliver's Travels*. In addition Dampier introduced a significant

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number of words into the English language. These were not his own inventions, but borrowed from people who used them for objects or situations for which English as yet had no word, and they were often modified by the sailors into a more useable approximation. *Barbecue, maroon, avocado, chopsticks* are all words first used by Dampier.

In chapter two Mitchell plunges the reader into what he calls *in medias res* before turning to Dampier's childhood in Somerset in the next. He writes of buccaneers, privateers and pirates, but, oddly, it is only later in the chapter that he gives a definition of these words. While his readers may have a general idea of the meaning of the word 'buccaneer', it gets more complicated when it is contrasted with 'pirate' and 'privateer', and all three deserve to be explained and defined *before* they are extensively used, even if there was often an overlap between the three. Similarly, Mitchell's reference to Dampier's 'jogging' about the East Indies makes little sense until one later reads that jogging is a term used by Dampier himself.

For an understanding of the book's title we have to wait until page 74. It is there that we learn that Dampier's *monkey* is the inhabitant of New Holland, where he briefly landed in 1688 and 1699. Here we come to the central part of Mitchell's interest and research: Dampier's negative attitude to the barren land where he could find no food or water, no trade and only a few natives who 'stood like statues, without motion, but grinn'd like so many Monkeys, staring one upon another' (74). These people are described as totally unprepossessing, and worse than the generally despised Hottentots of Africa. Later Mitchell quotes Dampier's antagonistic and fearful response to a band of monkeys in the Americas (79). Mitchell also mentions Dampier's curious reference to a monkey left on an otherwise abandoned ship (105). After his brief encounter with New Holland, Dampier went on to discover New Britannia (New Britain) and felt more at ease with the large crowds of natives he encountered there, in spite of their initial aggression.

As Mitchell points out, Britain lagged behind other powers in exploration and trade in the East, and was intent on remedying this situation. The Council of Trade and Plantations as well as the Admiralty had an interest in Dampier and other explorers, hoping to gain advantage from their voyages of discovery. It is therefore hardly surprising that the sighting of a land which had no obvious treasures and unresponsive natives was a severe disappointment to an explorer keen to return home with promises of easy and bountiful profits for the taking. It is unfortunate that Dampier did not discover more accommodating parts of Australia, and that the negatives he recorded achieved widespread recognition, but in the circumstances, and given the attitudes of his time, his reaction is hardly surprising. Mitchell appears to approach this part of Dampier's account very much as a modern inhabitant of Australia, who resents such slights upon his pleasant abode and its indigenous population. Moreover, in describing Dampier's contemporary Edmond Halley as 'lowering, like a second-rate German composer' (21), Mitchell himself appears not to be entirely free of the prejudice he dislikes in Dampier.

Mitchell's account is clearly aimed at a well-educated, if not an academic, audience. At the same time there is a distinct attempt to introduce a lighter note, to attract perhaps a wider reading public. In the description of Sir Francis Bacon, we learn that 'he died of a cold caught while experimenting with, and observing, a frozen chook' (197). An expression such as 'a large force of hard cases' (9) is another

example. The French being 'active in coming over the top' (11) might have benefited from a clarification of which 'top' was meant. In a book which also employs words like 'miscegenation', 'fleering' and 'chimerical' such casual expressions look misplaced, and are unlikely to assist the quest for a wider audience.

Mitchell has obviously conducted his research with admirable thoroughness to present Dampier and his times as objectively and accurately as possible. One might wish for a slightly more systematic organisation and a more consistent stylistic approach. One might also feel that Dampier receives a rather disproportionate amount of blame for the brief descriptions of his unfortunate landings on the coast of north-west Australia. After all, later explorers had the opportunity to rectify his descriptions. Nevertheless, this interesting book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of Dampier's turbulent life and times through a detailed study of his written accounts.

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