
*Dampier’s Monkey* is, in Adrian Mitchell’s own words, “neither a history nor a biography”. Indeed, it evades categorisation. One might describe it as part history, part literary study. Essentially, it is an attempt to determine what William Dampier was like - “what sort of man it was who could choose to sail with buccaneers for twelve years, and yet who had observed the world accurately enough, and organised his thoughts well enough, to be invited to present them to the Royal Society; who was given an audience with the monarch just after he had been court-martialled, but who was all but forgotten by the end of his life”. This is certainly a question worth investigating and, if it is not answered in precise terms and the journey is rather circuitous, ultimately, the reader is nonetheless rewarded with an intriguing view of Dampier and his world.

The “devil’s mariner” undertook four voyages to the South Seas between 1679 and 1711 and published his experiences and observations in a series of voyage accounts. However, these highly-edited narratives provide very limited access to their author. In order to “find rather more” of Dampier, Mitchell has delved into the archives and read the *Voyages* against records such as the ship’s log, a scattering of formal correspondence and, in particular, Dampier’s manuscript journal – the foundation of his first voyage narrative. He publishes his transcription of this journal, complete with marginalia, here for the first time.

Dampier’s writing forms the main thread throughout Mitchell’s study; however, this thread emerges more distinctly and with greater effect as the work progresses. The initial chapters of *Dampier’s Monkey* contextualise the life and work of the “sea dog” in the expanding world of late seventeenth-century England. Mitchell describes Dampier’s early life in East Coker, and goes on to situate the mariner in turns amidst the rough-and-ready environment of early colonial America, the sophisticated milieu of London’s intellectual elite, and the slippery worlds of piracy, slave trading and maritime exploration. Moreover, along the way he draws some significant
connections between Dampier’s contribution to the early modern understanding of the world and those of his contemporaries Edmund Halley and John Locke as well as his predecessors John Mandeville and Marco Polo. The reader is taken off on one tangent after another and, indeed, may easily lose the thread of the enquiry. However, Mitchell eventually settles down to examine certain events up close – events such as the encounter between Dampier’s expedition and the Aborigines of Western Australia – and to concentrate on their representation in Dampier’s journal. It is thus in the later chapters that his skills in literary analysis come to the fore and the study becomes more coherent and engaging.

What Mitchell does well is to peel back the layers of composition and self in Dampier’s travel writing. Voyage narratives are notoriously manufactured publications – there is typically a significant disconnect between the original journal and the published account. In the case of Dampier’s *Voyages*, much of the mariner’s own voice was edited out by scribes and the content generally was tidied up for a broad readership. While walking through the process of editing then, Mitchell searches for signs of the author’s personality – his religious faith, his ambition, his knowledge – and considers the degree to which Dampier had been influenced by and conscious of these characteristics as he wrote. The key to this search is the marginalia in Dampier’s manuscript journal. Therein Mitchell finds the means to “measure...the degree of the suppression of Dampier’s own opinion, if not his life; the extent of the erasure”.

Indeed, upon finally reaching the transcription of the journal, one may, as Mitchell claims, “discover [Dampier] literally in the margins”. Furthermore, having made it through the preceding analysis, one may read Dampier’s writing, generally, in a new light. One finds not just the difficult language of an early modern “seadog” and the often tedious details of life at sea. The layers have been stripped away. Instead, the reader sees a man retreating from the rowdy crew out on the deck (though he is often as rough as them), sitting at a desk or perhaps a dining table - dirty plates and half-full glasses of wine pushed aside - to record his observations and the events of the day. He is a complex man, and ambitious. He writes for prosperity, certainly, but also for the extension of knowledge.
Mitchell’s enthusiasm for his subject is somewhat infectious. It needs to be, if it is to compensate for the discursive style and incoherent structure that can leave the reader at sea. *Dampier’s Monkey* could certainly have been an easier read but in its attempt to uncover “what Dampier was like”, it is undeniably a triumph.

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