

William Dampier: Naturalist, Pirate

Steven Shepard

Steve@ShepardComm.com

20 October 2013



This is the kind of story I love to read.

William Dampier was born in 1651 in the town of east Coker, Somerset in the UK. Very few people have ever heard of Dampier, in spite of the fact that he was the first Englishman to explore what is now Australia and the first person to circumnavigate the globe not once, not twice, but three times during his life. Widely recognized by academic historians as a great naturalist and the first naturalist to dedicate himself to the continent of New Holland (now Australia), he was held in high esteem by such people as Hooke, Nelson, Darwin and Humboldt. He is also known as the man who rescued Alexander Selkirk after being shipwrecked on a remote island. Selkirk was the inspiration for Daniel DeFoe's Robinson Crusoe.

Interesting guy, right? Actually there's more to the story.

Dampier joined the navy but was forced to leave after serious illness caused him to be bedridden for many months. Once recovered he did a variety of jobs until 1679 when he signed on as a crewmember with Bartholomew Sharp, a buccaneer who ran regular raids against the Spanish Armada in what is now Mexico. This led to his first circumnavigation, followed by further privateering along the coast of Virginia with John Cooke.

In the early 1680s Dampier changed flags yet again, this time working for Charles Swan. Together they set out across the Pacific to raid Guam and the Philippines, as well as parts of China, the Spice Islands and New Holland (Australia). In 1688, while beached in New Holland for ship repairs, Dampier began to take notes about the animals and plants as well as the indigenous people that he found in the area.

He returned to England in 1691 broke but with his extensive journals in-hand. Shortly after his arrival he began to write *A New Voyage Round the World*, a detailed account of his journeys. Published in 1697 the book "went viral" (or as close to going viral as it was possible to do in 1697) and caught the attention of the British Admiralty. As a result Dampier was made commander of a 26-gun ship, the *Roebuck*, and was directed to explore eastern New Holland. He left England in January of 1699 but arrived too late in the season to traverse the stormy Cape of Good Hope. Instead he took the Dutch Indies Route and landed on the west side of the continent and immediately set about producing the first detailed and beautifully illustrated record of Australian wildlife. He continued from there to other points along the Australian coast before sailing for Indonesia and New Guinea, collecting samples along the way and taking detailed notes at each stop.

Dampier made two more circumnavigations in his lifetime, although there were rocky moments in-between. When he returned from the Roebuck expedition (during which he lost the ship thanks to an inept carpenter and had to be rescued) he was hauled before an Admiralty Court and summarily court-martialed for cruelty, after kicking his first officer off the ship and having him jailed in Brazil.

Not about to let something as silly as a court martial get in the way of life, Dampier published a second book, *A Voyage to New Holland*, and then signed on as the commander of the *St. George* in 1701 to fight in the War of the Spanish Succession. Along the way he once again circumnavigated the globe, capturing Spanish ships here and there. He returned to England at the end of 1707, and in 1709 was once again engaged to serve as Sailing Master aboard *the Duke* commanded by Woodes Rogers. The "expedition" (raidng party?) was extraordinarily successful, yielding about \$20 million in current value. But as luck would have it, Dampier died before he collected his share - but where, when and how remain a mystery.

Hey, why can't you be a naturalist AND a pirate?

Thanks for reading.