

Robert Cockburn

Antipodes

The tidal reach of New Brunswick's Magaguadavic River was settled by Scots from Perthshire and Caithness. A number of men from these shores who earned their reputations in Maritime sailing vessels rose, between the 1870's and the 1914-18 War, to command some of the great steel square-riggers out of Britain. This poem commemorates one such captain and the seafaring tradition of a place that has been, for many years now, an obscure backwater.

I

Only in the pibroch's music,
transcendent with loss,
sounding across cold waters,
can we hear their voices in that spring of 1817
when they saw their last of glittering Schiehallion,
farewelled the Strath of Appin, Lochearnside, Moor of Rannoch,
the cloud-swept void of dark Glen Lyon.

One north for another: the smell of peat
became white pine; the snow-fed waters of the lochs
turned salt but no less piercing.
These five unsettled miles of granite shore
they named for lost Breadalbane.

II

The boldest and most restless of their sons
and grandsons, and their sons, went into sail.
Born to these fields and apple trees above the herring-weirs,
they saw Callao, Rangoon, Calcutta, the Cape of Storms,
the steaming coastline of Sumatra;

ate sparrows from sticks in Barcelona, and heard the bells
of Sailor's Church sounding a welcome to their ships across the Mersey.
One, Andrew Drummond, paid a boy of five a penny
to bite a live rat's head off
on Pacific Street in San Francisco;
another, William Campbell, told (when he returned years later)
of white slave trafficking in Buenos Aires.

Shanghaied by crimps, ill-paid, half-fed,
they drank and fought their way around the world:
from South Street to the brothels of the Ratcliffe Highway,
from Valparaiso to Melbourne to Cardiff's Tiger Bay.
Yoshiwaras, gambling-hells, fandango-houses
were their home-from-home.
Off soundings, in the dog watches, they remembered
the Golden Compasses, the Neptune Palaces, the Flags of All Nations;
The China Dog in Yokohama, and the Nectarine,
the Barbary Coast's Bull Run and fabled Nymphia.

And in the nitrate ports of Chile they watched on farewell nights
the hoisting of the Southern Cross up to the main yard-arm of their
ships;
five hurricane-lamps fixed burning to a wooden cross.
Then, far overhead, against the midnight blue, the swirling stars,
ships' rockets flared to waterfalls of green and scarlet
and they waved the local torches of saltpetre in salute.
With morning, their voices rang as they manned the capstan
and sang "Homeward Bound."

Of those gone missing,
not all were lost at sea.
A rumour would come back
of a brother, a cousin, a youngest son
stabbed in some torrid cotton port along the Gulf;
or dead, somewhere on the China Coast, of fever;
or last seen heading inland
in New South Wales.

Finally,
gone for years,
they became mere names
on the lips of aging women.

III

Of those who lived,
 the most renowned, when master of the steel barque *Corryvreckan*,
 would write from Cape Town, Valparaiso, Yokohama, Sydney:
 "My Dearest Wife . . . do see that you ask Sandy Innes
 to repair the roof. How is the crop of hay this year?
 Make sure the boys lay in sufficient firewood against the winter.
 Yesterday I met with Captain Crowe of Yarmouth
 and we drank your health. Yet here I am again in Sydney Harbour
 before I have been home. I am anxious
 to see New Brunswick, our house, my sons, and you.
 We sail from here for Liverpool in one week's time,
 and if there is no heavy ice around Cape Horn
 should make the passage in about a hundred days.
 God and the owners willing,
 I expect to come home for two months
 and should hold you in my arms by late December."

Inside his house above the river
 the vessels he commanded still sail across the walls:
 above the triton, conch, and cowrie shells, the elephant of ebony
 from Ceylon, the balls of ivory, one inside the other,
 he brought home from Hong Kong in 1880,
 the small framed photograph of the grave he'd climbed to see
 that time they'd put into St Helena for repairs;
 above the weather-buckled books
 and the dusted rolls of charts
 containing all the coasts and waters of the world.

In August, 1896, he sailed from Surabaya, Java, with sugar.
 Five months later, he brought the *Corryvreckan*,
 rust-streaked, iced, her sails in shreds, the crew cold-crippled,
 into Boston. His wife was there, the only time
 she ever met him in mid-voyage.
 A week later, she was home;
 warming her hands before the kitchen stove,
 she is said to have confessed,
 "Your father looked
 as if he had been to Hell
 and back again."

He would live until the Thirties,
long enough to have half-forgotten hearing
Gaelic spoken on this shore, long enough
to see the farms grown up in spruce, the last schooner ghosting
into the fog outside the river's mouth.

His best-loved grandson
plays pipe-music on the violin.
The Captain's favourites
were "My Home," "The Green Hills,"
and the four-part march
"The Atholl and Breadalbane Gathering."

But his true home, his own green hills,
were transmarine, antipodean; so spectacular, so strange,
that one can only half-imagine them, or him.
For in his dying year, he spoke as if this world
of walking men, and trees, and houses, was itself unreal.

"A thousand miles due east of Cape Horn,"
he whispered, "far south of the Falklands,
I once came upon an island
which the great easterly current
had made the boneyard of lost ships:
there, acres of that beach of stone
were piled with wreckage — lower masts, mainyards, topmasts; bones,
bones of ships and of men . . . teak stanchions, brasswork,
broken skylights, cabin doors, the rudders of ships' boats, splintered
oars.

I saw, staring from that chaos,
the faces, the figures, of women and of men, of gods, and creatures,
some from well before my time,
but others, others which I knew. That clouded, freezing water
surges with planks and sea-chests, with the smashed remains
of Downeasters, barques, and full-rigged ships
who failed to make their westing
of the Horn.

"So many ships gone missing. If I were God," he whispered,
"I could see them all, down, down, under the wastes of the Southern
Ocean,

at the bottom of the Gulf of Guinea, the Torres Strait . . . the Tasman, the South China, the Arafura seas. Then I could see figureheads, jibbooms, and bowsprits standing toward the smoky sungreen of the upper fathoms, and small fish cruising through the eye-holes of the drowned.

"I have seen," he grated in the roaring winter nights, "I have seen the ribs of ships in places that no man before me saw, nor any since! On Desolation Island, below Cape Pilar, On Desolation Island

"Where," he would murmur from his pillow, staring past his sons, through the creaking walls, into the black winds, "where is the *Drummuir*, the *Morayshire*, the *Lammermuir*? Where are *Morning Star*, *Hesperides*, *Golden Fleece*, *Wild Deer*? Where is the *Caliph*, overdue these sixty years? And the *Guiding Star*, last seen embayed in ice . . . is the *Dalgonar* still rotting on her coral reef off Mopihaa? Where are *Windermere*, *Slieve Bawn*, *Clan Grant*? *Blair Atholl*, *Bangalore*? The *Champion of the Seas*," he whispered, "foundered off the Horn, and the *Dreadnought* disappeared in those same waters. The *Aberdeen* has not been heard from since she departed Cardiff for Bombay in 1884. The peerless *Thermopylae* sailed under somewhere in the Atlantic, down down with the *Queen Margaret* . . . with *White Wings* . . . *Aberdare*."

In the neglected graveyard beside the narrow blacktop road, his stone says only: 1840-1938. There, long roots of cedar are streaming over him; telescope and sextant, as he wished, flicker greenly on his chest of bone.

At the end he breathed
of far-off archipelagos, iridescent
under towers of cumulus;
of remembered landfalls, and aromas that reached out
miles to sea; and of places
where the water
was so clear,
so clear
that he could see them all.