

A SHEFFIELDER VISITS NORTH AMERICA 1768-69

By W. H. G. ARMYTAGE

IN the great westward migrations of the last hundred and eighty years, many pilgrims have been buoyed by the glittering prizes which have been held out by visitors to the North American Continent. In the sooty new industrial towns of the north of England, there were many who felt that the brave new world across the Atlantic afforded that possibility of realizing their wishes which restricted, crowded, class ridden Lancashire and Yorkshire could not offer.

What knowledge they had of the lands across the Atlantic was got from travellers' tales in books. For the book was the carrier of ideas, the fomenter of actions, the key of visions. And in Yorkshire one of those books was *A Voyage to North America performed by G. Taylor of Sheffield in 1768 and 1769*. Written in the very last years of the old colonial system, when all North America was under the British Crown, it is both macabre and gripping.

The story of a sea captain drew Taylor there. He thought "in these critical times, an Englishman might have a fine opportunity of settling to far greater advantage than at home," and so took his chance. He was at Whitehaven when he made up his mind, and took ship to Dublin, where he soon found a skipper William Benton, master of the *Julian*, who would take him across.

The *Julian* might, in the vulgar parlance of those days, be called a "kid-ship"—a ship that took indentured servants across the Atlantic to their masters. Many of these so-called indentured servants were held to have been kidnapped, though Taylor makes no mention of the fact. He merely recorded that the *Julian* carried fifty of these unfortunates, plus the owner of twenty of them. In addition, there was the profligate son of an Irish clergyman who had been bought a commission in the army of North America. Taylor was the only Englishman aboard.

Twenty of these indentured servants were women, eighteen of whom were, in Taylor's words "girls of the town who were now going on a pilgrimage as a penance for their past folly." Evidently they didn't think so, for before the *Julian* had been four days at sea, the ship's carpenter was making a bulkhead

to keep out the men. This bulkhead proved very ineffective. During a storm, the Captain, failing to get all hands to the pumps, went down to the women's quarters. Taylor writes:

This unexpected visit from the Captain, and the wave breaking in upon them, interrupted their diversions, raised them to a perpendicular posture, and fixed them four feet in water. The Captain with a rope end lays profusely upon the ladies, and drives them upon deck; some with only a petticoat on, others more naked. He swore he would tie them all to the main mast and wipe 'em down with a *couple of dozens*."

That gale blew for forty-eight hours, and washed away three coops of fowls and a large pot of Burgoo (the oatmeal mixture which formed the breakfast of the crew).

No adequate care had been taken to provision this ship. After they had been at sea for thirty-two days they were reduced to being rationed for food. At first it didn't seem hard—two pounds of bread, four pounds of beef, and six quarts of water per week. But as the days wore on, the lack of water made itself apparent, and people began to drink salt water. By the 17 June (a week after they had first been rationed), the rations were halved, and tempers rose. "Some cursed their hard fate in coming as servants, others swore that the captain ought to be hanged at the yardarm for not bringing more provisions, or for keeping so many good things for himself." Catching sight of other vessels did no good either, for on the 22nd, they chased a sail for 6 hours, but their quarry got away, probably, noted Taylor ruefully, "thinking that the *Julian* was a pirate. This put a great damp upon all hands."

By the 24th, things looked ugly. There was an angry scene outside the captain's cabin, people insisting on seeing what sea stores were available. Investigation showed how bad things really were. By giving half a biscuit, half a pint of stinking water every twenty four hours, supplemented by two ounces of flesh a week to every soul on board, it was reckoned that the rations would last for three weeks. Faced with such a prospect, the *Julian* sailed into the hot weather.

By the 2nd July, everyone on the ship was in a frightful state. Prolonged drinking of salt water made them roll about the deck "some, with lamentable cries, desired to be heaved overboard, others attempting to scramble over the side of the ship into the sea to make an end of their wretched lives." In the midst of such suffering, Taylor lived insulated from discomfort by hiding a bottle of claret among his pillows, and another

in his hammock. "I could now and then refresh unseen" he noted. "I had a little sweet biscuit secreted between the lining of my waistcoat." But he was not blind to it all. Looking over the side of the ship on the hot noon of the fourth of July, he saw a shark, and called the captain. The captain, quick to respond, ordered two pounds of stinking beef kept for the purpose to be baited to a hook and cast over the ship's side. But the meat was pretty high for, wrote Taylor "The shark smelled it several times but left it. Had he been as hungry as we, he would have taken it without smelling." An hour later, as Taylor stood by the line, it swallowed the bait. Taylor gave the rope a quick jerk (the end was tied to the mast) and to his great surprise was nearly pitched into the sea. His wallet fell from his pocket, and he cried "I have lost my all". Luckily a sailor heard him and pluckily dived overboard to recover it, narrowly missing being swallowed by a second shark.

On the 11th of July, however, everything edible had been eaten and the captain gave the dreadful order that lots had to be cast as to who was to die. It fell upon a girl called Ann Connor—who was just twenty two years old. When killed she was found to be young with child. Taylor could not bear it. He sent the cabin boy to decline whatever might fall to his share. Three days later, a child was born to another woman on the ship. The half crazed husband of the unhappy mother came to Taylor in great secrecy, asking if there was anything she could have. Taylor, swearing him to greater secrecy, found him half a bottle of claret, a pound of oatmeal biscuit, half a nutmeg, and some cinnamon.

On the fifteenth of July, a fresh order was given, but just as they assembled to draw lots, a sail was sighted. When hailed, it proved to be a West Indian Ship, homeward bound. The captain was more than generous. He gave the unhappy *Julian* two barrels of beef and one of pork, some bread, one live pig, six geese, four ducks, 4 chicken, and two puncheons of water, plus sixty gallons of rum. Taylor and the other gentleman on board (who owned the servants) went on board the West Indian since the Captain of the *Julian* daren't leave his ship. On Taylor recounting their story, he was begged to return home, but refused. As a parting gift, he was given a box of sugar, two dozen sweet oranges, two pineapples, six cocoanuts, and a hundred limes.

This revictualling lasted them for another three weeks with the usual ration—half a biscuit, half a pint of water, a glass of rum,

and four ounces of flesh for each person every twenty four hours. Then they saw another sloop on 4th August, which gave them more provisions. But by the 25th August, the situation had again deteriorated and orders were once more given that lots should be cast as to who was to die. Taylor records the impression it left on him

What with the wickedness of the people, besides the famine and destruction that threatened us, I thought myself in the infernal regions. Some swearing over a pack of cards; some cursing their fathers that begat them and their mothers that bore them; blaspheming their Maker with such horrid oaths that no mortal man can conceive; sometimes threatening to murder each other . . . The sailors grown so weak that they were not able to work the ship and swore that she might run to hell for them."

In that terrible state, the captain cast lots. Taylor, who was included, escaped and the "bloody ticket" went to Walter Bishop, a coachman who had become an indentured servant. The crew had no mind to exempt the captain from this grisly ballot. Only the thought that his skill in navigating the ship stood between them and even more certain disaster, restrained them from hanging him at the yard arm.

Eventually a plot did brew. On September 1st, the men decided to kill the captain, the master of the indentured servants, the profligate clergyman's son, and Taylor. A weaker conspirator came to the captain's cabin, and, on bended knees, disclosed it all. The ringleaders were put in irons.

At last they saw a fishing vessel. This ran before them like so many of the others they had seen, and, when eventually overhauled, the captain confessed that he feared that they might have the small pox on board. From the fishing vessel, the *Julian* learnt that it was near Nantucket. This they made for. The inhabitants, however, were by no means pleased to see them at first, believing that the *Julian* was a man of war which had come to execute the Revenue Acts.

Taylor landed, and stayed at the same inn where Governor Barnard's representative was being received with such coldness. This man, Proctor, stayed but a short time trying to wear down the coldness of the inhabitants, and then left. Soon after, so did Taylor.

Taylor parted company with the *Julian* at Nantucket, and took himself to New York via Plymouth, Providence, and New Haven. With the contents of his wallet (which the sailor had

so bravely rescued for him in mid-Atlantic) he purchased a quantity of goods—blankets, rum, muskets, powder, ball, and women's trinkets. His intention was to strike North to Montreal and catch the Indians at the great fair.

So on 25th September, he set out on horseback, accompanied by five other Englishmen and two Indian interpreters, to cover the 435 miles. They made good progress. In the first two days they covered nearly half the distance. Taylor had time to notice the habit of collecting maple syrup from the trees, and, being a Sheffielder, to notice the difference in the axes used in the woods through which he passed from the ones usually made in England. The furs of the animals caught his eyes too. Yet for all his inspection, they made Montreal by 3rd October.

There he found that his landlord came from Nottingham, and confessed how pleased he was. The town was full of traders, some of whom had come from nearly a thousand miles. He remarked on the great solemnity of the market, which had been inherited from the French. The Commanding Officer had put out a guard to restrain the Indians "who," wrote Taylor:

"sit on the ground in the streets in circular form, men, women, and children. They have rum in a keg, the bung of which they set to their mouths, and they do not set it down till it is empty."

The rum habit he continues "brings out a temporary madness, and so long as it continues they are guilty of the most enormous excesses." Little did he realise that traders of his kind, by bringing rum with their blankets, guns, powder, and ball, were helping to contribute to this state of affairs.

His greatest asset was that he was an Englishman. Had he been Irish, all would have been impossible, for, he notes:

"If an Englishman happens to affront an Indian at these times, the Indians call him an Irish rogue, imagining nothing can be so bad."

He indulges in a brief description of Montreal as it appeared in 1769, remarking that the guns commanded the streets of the town from one end to the other.

After a week he left for Quebec. His partners, together with the Indian interpreters, returned by the way they had come; while he intended to sail down to Philadelphia and meet them there. With him he took the goods which he had purchased at Montreal. As he sailed down the St. Lawrence, he noted the assets of the country, especially the Newfoundland

fishery, which he opined was "a mine of greater value than any of those in Mexico or Peru."

On 29th he sailed into Halifax Harbour—"the compleatest in North America for its security and convenience, having water sufficient for the largest ship that swims." So, after brief glances down the coast, to Boston whose thriving industries met with his approval and admiration. By 26th November he reached Philadelphia, five days after his partners, who had brought beaver, racoon, and martin skins on their way south.

Having disposed of them, he decided to finish his tour of the continent by sailing round to New Orleans and up the Mississippi. He set off on 17th December, and was soon up at Illinois. Here he was as impressed as later travellers were to be.

What a pity (he wrote) that such a fine part of his majesty's territory is not inhabited by more of his subjects. It only wants inhabitants to make this part of America the most fruitful and wealthy for Trade and Commerce, and it could not be excelled by any in this quarter of the world.

Similar appraisals occupied him till 29 June 1769, when he once more sailed for home — this time in a ship loaded with pipe staves, oak planks, and mahogany. He had played his little part, and, we presume, made his little pile, and he came home to write the story of his travels. Before he vanished into the limbo of unrecorded men, his ship foundered just as it reached the Irish Coast. Luckily for him, its cargo of wood planks enabled him to save his life. He was rescued by a West Indiaman bound for Glasgow. So he returned to the comfortable obscurity from which he had emerged.