

Joseph Holt is known through the many books and articles written about him and his involvement in the 1798 Rebellion. His return to Ireland on the *Isabella* in 1812-3 is the subject of a fascinating book *The Wreck of the Isabella* by David Miller (Lee Cooper Publishers, 1995), which is subject of this review.

The *Isabella* left Port Jackson (now Sydney) for London on the 4th December 1812 carrying captain, mate and eighteen crew, 20 passengers, 14 Royal Marines and a cargo of c. 19,000 salted fur and hair skins, 91 caskets of sperm and black oil, 17 tons of pearl shells, sealskins and ox hides. The crew were mostly from the UK with two Americans and one each from Germany and Spain. The passengers were a mix of military and civilians, many of the latter were ex-convicts.

Joseph Holt was travelling with his wife Hester, their thirteen year old son Joseph Harrison, and three servants, John Byrne, Philip Harney and Edward Kilbride. Holt had sold his property for over £2,000, which funded the £150 for the tickets, the cost of erecting a cabin (10×8 feet) in steerage, and provisions including water, biscuits, salted meat, raisins, tea, wine, twenty gallons of rum, 21 parrots and a cockatoo.

Another passenger was Sir Henry Hayes from Cork who had been sentenced to death, pardoned and transported for his notorious abduction of Miss May Pike, a Quaker heiress, in 1797. He received a pardon for assisting Governor William Bligh (of Mutiny of the Bounty fame) in the Rum Rebellion, 1808-10. He was an eccentric character; he built Vaucluse House on a snake-infested island in Sydney Harbour, which he protected by a moat of 500 bags of turf brought from Ireland; since St. Patrick had banished snakes from Ireland, no snake would dare cross the holy turf!

Other civilians included a pardoned convict, Samuel Breakwell, and stowaway William Mattinson. The latter was a malicious drunken troublemaker who had run up large gambling and alcohol debts in the colony. Though he was discovered before departure and delivered to his creditors, they annulled all his debts provided he never returned. Even though the captain refused him back, he was smuggled on board and not discovered until later.

Captain Richard Brooks was a naval officer who was travelling back to England to take command of a new ship and bring his wife and children to Australia. He was highly experienced though had his share of controversy as captain of the *Atlas* in 1801 when seventy Irish convicts died of privation on the journey to Australia.

One military officer was Capt. Robert Durie of the 73rd Regt., his seven months pregnant wife Joanna Ann, a widow he had married in Scotland in 1809 and their 18 month old daughter, Agnes. In Australia he was troop commander and resident magistrate in Paramatta; they were returning on leave. He is described as being weak and ineffective compared to his wife who was said to have 'the sympathizing heart that distinguishes the tigress'. Another was Lt. Richard Lundin, a Scot in the 73rd Regt. returning home on leave with dispatches for the Colonial Office.

The fourteen Marines were returning home after having spent eight years forgotten in Tasmania, much to the embarrassment of the authorities in London. Of the forty seven original soldiers seven had died, 28 elected to remain as settlers and these had decided to return home. The remaining passengers were four single ladies, who apparently had

been prostitutes in Port Jackson. Of these one moved in with the captain, another with Lundin, and the others stayed with the crew and were very fond of rum. The crew were a mixed lot, the captain, the alcoholic George Higton was incompetent and one of the sailors suffered from psychotic episodes whose black rages caused serious injuries to his fellow crew.

After being nearly shipwrecked off Campbell's Island, New Zealand, they safely passed Cape Horn over Christmas. However disaster struck when strong winds drove the ship on to a rocky beach on Eagle Island, Falkland Islands, which were then uninhabited. There was chaos on the ship with the crew drinking everything they could lay their hands on. The long boat was launched and then commandeered by Mattinson, Hayes, Breakwell and a marine who rowed ashore abandoning everybody. In the meantime Brooks organized the women and children on a bosun's chair and got them ashore while Holt organized the transfer of his provisions; luckily there were no fatalities or injuries.

The following morning the beached ship was discovered to be not too badly damaged; it could have been refloated had the crew not further holed it in search of more rum. Surviving provisions were unloaded and it was calculated they had enough food for all and a daily ration was worked out that would last a year. This was supplemented by wild birds, mainly ducks and geese, elephant seals and wild celery (an important antidote for scurvy). As a gesture Holt released his parrots but when most were eaten by local hawks the remainder were allowed refuge in his tent at his wife's insistence.

A camp of fourteen huts was built using earth, turf, materials from the boat and tussock grass that grew up to five metres tall, providing shelter from the incessant wind and rain.

Two weeks later, with the assistance of Hester Holt and Anne Spencer (Lundin's lover), Joanna Ann Durie gave birth to a daughter without complications and was christened Eliza Providence after the name Holt gave their camp, Newtown Providence. A few days later the seventeen-foot long boat was launched with Brooks as commander, George Davis (mate), Lundin, a marine and two sailors to seek rescue since they had little chance of being discovered otherwise. Later Mattinson and three others left in the smaller boat to search for other boats around the Falklands.

On April the 4th, sixty-three anxious days later, a ship was spotted and, much to their relief; spotted them and sent a boat ashore. It was the *Nanina* from New York on a sealing hunt, which had been in the Falklands since September and included a shallop, yawl and small boat. The usual procedure was to catch seals, sell the skins and oil in Canton (now Guangzhou), China, and return to the USA with Chinese goods, which provided a handsome profit for the captain, crew and investors. The plan was to hunt during the summer, leave a crew to overwinter while the ship went back and be replaced with a larger vessel that would return the following year; they would hunt more before going to Canton in the autumn. The captain was Charles Barnard a Quaker of Hudson accompanied by his father, Valentine, three officers, mate, four seamen, steward, carpenter and cook; of the foremast hands all were black, except the cook. Last, but not least, was Cent the captain's dog.

In the meantime war had broken out between the USA and the UK in June 1812, it lasted until February 1815, and affected maritime trade in that all US merchant shipping was vulnerable to seizure by the British Navy and UK whalers carrying Letters of Marque that licensed them to take ships of hostile nations as prizes, which was the reason the *Nanina* was keeping a low profile.

By a curious coincidence one of the officers, Capt. Edmund Fanning, was a United Irishman and recognized Holt's beard as being in the same revolutionary style as his own and greeted Holt "How is the settlement of the world?" and received the correct reply "Very well". Later that evening Mrs Durie and the Holts entertained the visitors with a meal, told them what had happened and discussed the possible fate of Brook's and Mattinson's rescue attempts. Over the next few days they agreed that the *Nanina* would transport them to South America in exchange for making over to Bernard *Isabella's* cargo as compensation. This was agreed by all except the outvoted Hayes who said that they should use force instead.

This took some organization because many of *Nanina's* crew were elsewhere on the islands sealing and unaware of the rescue. In the meantime Mattinson's boat made it back just as they were leaving Eagle Island. Bad weather then affected plans over the next few weeks and then Mattinson forcibly took control of the ship while Barnard and crew were out hunting; Durie let it happen though it was completely illegal. They sailed back to Eagle Island to collect those left there and found a British ship whose own contingent of marines then boarded and took control.

It turned out that the Brooke's boat had made it to Buenos Aires after spending two weeks unsuccessfully searching the islands for settlement but finding only the abandoned Spanish village of Port Egmont. They decided to risk the 1,200 mile journey and made one of the 'most courageous and remarkable journeys in maritime history' and arrived safely after 26 days of bad weather and heavy seas with little protection. Lundin's account was published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1846.

On arrival the naval authorities immediately ordered the HMS Nancy, under the command of William Peter D'Aranda, to go to the rescue even though the ship was not seaworthy and was to be sold after sustaining storm damage some weeks previously. After a difficult voyage of 27 days it arrived at the shipwreck settlement in mid-May. During the bad weather, when they were carrying out repairs, D'Aranda had Captain Fanning and other Americans arrested as prisoners of war, ordered various marines punished for drunkenness (24, 36 & 48 lashes) and confiscated the *Isabella's* cargo ignoring the agreement with Barnard.

When the *Nanina* returned, it was captured and looted by the British and squabbles then broke out as to who had the right of capture of the ship between D'Aranda, Hayes, Durie and Mattinson. However there were serious misgivings among many, including Holt, who felt the Americans had been badly treated given that they had agreed to rescue them.

After repairs were completed the two boats left at the end of July. The *Nancy* headed for Buenos Aires with the Duries, Hayes, Higton, while the *Nanina* was to sail directly to England with the remainder including the American prisoners of war. Holt was given the choice of ships but chose the latter as he did not wish to delay in getting

home. However they left five men behind, including Charles Bernard, as they could not be found before departure.

The *Nancy* arrived in 23 days surviving heavy weather with the pumps being manned day and night where it was eventually sold for 1,100 Spanish dollars. The *Nanina* having been looted did not even have navigational equipment, was full of prize cargo, insufficient supplies, 44 persons and was captained by an inexperienced midshipman, John Marsh; luckily the American officers assisted him during the voyage. It was decided to head to Rio de Janeiro due to lack of supplies and arrived three weeks later.

On arrival Holt delivered a letter on behalf of the Americans to their consulate while Marsh met up with Admiral Dixon who released the Americans the following day. Intense, but unsuccessful, negotiations took place between them and the Admiralty regarding the disposition of the *Nanina* and its cargo and the rescue of the stranded men in the Falklands; in the end it was sailed to England. The Holts made their way back independently.

Meanwhile the five stranded men on the Falklands, Bernard, one American and three British seamen including the psychotic Ansell, had to survive living on wild hogs, seabirds, eggs from skuas, albatrosses and penguins and sea lions, scavenging what they could and realized after a month that they had been abandoned. In October under Ansell's influence the crew abandoned Bernard taking all his possessions and Cent. After another two months they relented and returned after having made it to the *Isabella*. Two weeks later Ansell was stranded on another island for two months due to his erratic and dangerous behaviour. It was 534 days before they were finally rescued by two British whalers in November 1814, after having survived starvation, privation and many potential disasters.

It was another two years later before Bernard arrived home having travelled via Peru, Mas á Fuero Island, Sandwich Islands and Canton; he wrote of his adventures in 1829. In 1818 the case of the *Nanina* came before the Prize Appeal Court in London who found for the American claimants, much to the disgust of D'Aranda; he remained in naval service until 1854. Hayes returned to Cork and unsuccessfully attempted to regain his social position but was avoided by most women. The Holts returned to Ireland and regretted having left Australia; his son, Joseph Harrison, returned immediately after his father's death in 1826.

The *Wreck of the Isabella* is a very entertaining read full of plots, sub plots and fascinating characters. I fully recommend this excellently researched well-written fast moving book that will keep you turning the pages well into the night.