

Horrible Shipwreck! A full true and particular account of the melancholy loss of the British convict ship Amphitrite Andrew C.A.Jampoler. Naval Institute Press. Annapolis, Maryland 2010. ISBN 978-1-59114-411-3

Reviewed by Larry Robbins

On 31 August 1833, the British convict ship AMPHITRITE foundered off Boulogne in France. 133 lives, mainly female convicts and their children bound for New South Wales from London, were lost. Only two of the crew and one of the convicts survived.

An unfinished work by the artist J.M.W. Turner has been entitled “A fire at sea” by an unknown curator but Jampoler notes that this is not correct. The inspiration, he suggests, was probably the uproar in the British press following the loss of the female convict transport AMPHITRITE in the English Channel in 1833. The painting was started the next year but never completed. However, some 25 years later an engraver, John Cousen, added the finishing touches and his own interpretation to the picture which was subsequently published in various works. It was not until the late 20th Century that the title was agreed as being a misnomer.

With the history of this work of art, the author introduces the tragic story of the loss of AMPHITRITE, an “authentic sea story” which the dust jacket promises “rivals the best fiction.” The jacket promises a “fascinating cast of characters”. The book delivers on these promises.

An ultimate result of the loss of the British colonies in America in the late 18th Century was the establishment of penal colonies in New South Wales (NSW), Australia to take the felons banished as a condition of pardon. “Transportation” or banishment to NSW initially commenced with escorted convoys, but after three such “fleets” individual ships were chartered for these duties.

Jampoler covers the history and rationale for the policy of transportation in some detail in the early chapters. We are provided with a fascinating insight into the rationale for the policy and the solid bureaucratic processes which were developed. Ultimately 779 voyages were undertaken in the 80 year history of transportation to 1853 and over 150,000 men and women were transported to Australia. The AMPHITRITE disaster was one of only 5 such voyages which failed to make the journey safely in both directions.

AMPHITRITE, a small vessel 92 feet in length with a crew of 14, some official passengers, and her large complement of female convicts and their children, sailed from London in August 1833. During a ferocious storm a few days later she was blow ashore close to Boulogne-sur-Mer. She could be clearly seen from the shore. Rescue attempts failed.

AMPHITRITE was 32 years old. A small ship, she had been lengthened some 10 years before the wreck and converted to a three-master bark, qualifying her for government charters. Her master, John Hunter, was young but reasonably experienced. He was new to

the ship, as were most of her crew. Hunter was also the ship's owner, a fact that Jampoler suggests may have had an impact on his decision making when initially adverse weather, and then tragedy, struck. Convict ships were required to carry a surgeon in charge of, and responsible for, the convicts. Dr James Forrester sailed in this role. He had received a "tepid assessment" earlier in a somewhat variable career and may have been selected due to the dearth of qualified and proficient surgeons. His wife, who was to feature later in the story, was the only civilian female onboard.

AMPHITRITE was one of a very large number (an average of 6 per week!) of British merchant vessels lost that year but the uproar following her loss was immense. Jampoler suggests – and goes on to demonstrate – that "callous poop-deck leadership and inept seamanship, coupled to contracting corruption and a civil servant disinterest" lead to both the tragedy and the "general outrage" which caused this wreck to stand out from the hundreds of others.

Four days after sailing, AMPHITRITE ran into bad weather in the Channel. Initially reefed, and then under bare poles, she was blown inexorably towards the French coast. The weather went "from thick to violent" (Jampoler suggest this to be about Force 11 on the Beaufort scale) and the ship ran aground at low water. Twice Hunter ignored advice from local fishermen to abandon ship, arguing that she would be overcome by the rising tide which had a range of some 16 feet. The heroic actions of the French, including a local lifeguard who swam and waded out to the ship in an effort to secure a line to lead the survivors to shore, could, and should, have saved many onboard, but these opportunities were spurned.

The Admiralty investigation which followed the wreck looked at suggestions that the captain and surgeon feared that the convicts would escape custody and that no boat was launched as the surgeon's wife refused to go in a boat with convicts. Fingers of blame were pointed at the British consul and also at the French customs officers whose actions inhibited rescue efforts.

It is a gripping, and wide-ranging story which has been meticulously researched.

The title of the book is perhaps unfortunate as "Horrible Shipwreck" - the title is taken from a broadsheet published in Britain a week after the wreck - may be perceived to trivialise what is otherwise a solid and detailed but very readable discourse. It is far more than just the story of a tragic shipwreck, ranging as it does across the history and organisation of transportation, politics and the social context of the early nineteenth century to the wreck itself and the events which followed. Jampoler explores the backgrounds and histories of the main characters and brings them to life.

This is a worthy addition to the oeuvre of Andrew Jampoler whose reputation goes before him and is enhanced by this work.