

The wreck of the *Antelope* and the murder of Martha Reay

"Horror sat depicted on every countenance". But what is the murdered London opera singer Martha Reay doing in the account of a shipwreck in the south China seas?

The last decades of the 18th C must have been a great time for publishers. The three voyages of Captain Cook instigated a publishing fever in the 1770s, replicated in the 1790s with the account of the great Macartney Embassy to China. All this resulted in grand official accounts, pirated editions, unofficial accounts by various members of the voyages and missions, scurrilous arguments and claims among authors and critics, translations, children's versions, and editions that went well into the early 19th C. The public seemed unable to get enough of the exotic, the adventure, and the controversies of the expanding Empire. And then in the 1780s, a far off shipwreck, always a publisher's delight, was thrown into the mix.

An East India Company packet ship¹, the *Antelope*, under Capt. Henry Wilson, left England on the 2nd of September, 1781, arriving without drama in Macao on the 4th of June 1782. Wilson left Macao on his return voyage about 6 weeks later on the 20th of July, but on the 20th of August was wrecked on a reef in the Pelew Islands. The islands, now Palau, are situated south east of the Philippines, west of Micronesia and north of Indonesia.

All the crew but one survived, and set up base on Ooroolong Island (now Ulong Island). On quitting the ship *'one of the crew fell overboard, and was unfortunately drowned, notwithstanding the immediate assistance was given. It was supposed that he met his fate by overloading himself with too much cloaths.'*² They were found by local people, who were naked and friendly, never having seen a European. They helped them build a boat from the *Antelope* wreckage, and Wilson and his crew eventually sailed away in their new craft, called the *Ooroolong*, leaving a single crew member, Madan Blanchard, behind. Blanchard chose to stay, but much later was killed in a fracas with the local people. Wilson arrived back in Macao on November 7. His boat was apparently good enough to sell, fetching about £500, and he sailed back to England on the East Indiaman *Morse*, arriving on 14 July, 1784.

Wilson wasn't alone however. He carried with him Prince Lee Boo, second son of Abba Thulle, the friendly ruler of Koror in the Pelew Islands. Lee Boo caused much excitement in London, was taken in by Capt. Wilson, and



Lee Boo by Henry Kingsbury, published by George Nicol, for Henry Wilson, after Georgiana Jane Henderson (née Keate), stipple engraving, May 1788. National Portrait Gallery, London



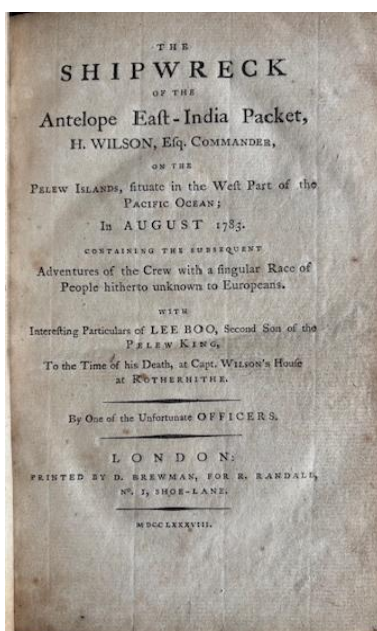
George Keate, engraving by John Keyse Sherwin, after John Plott. 1781. National Portrait Gallery, London.

stayed for some time with the writer and poet George Keate. Sadly, as was not uncommon with foreigners encountering European diseases, Lee Boo died of smallpox only 5 months later, still only 20 years old. His portrait was sketched sometime after his death by Keate's daughter Georgiana and used in subsequent publications.

This fine tale, with its survival story and touches of the 'noble savage', was all told initially by the above George Keate in his book *An Account of the Pelew Islands...* published in 1788.³ Keate was primarily known as a very minor poet, the *Antelope* account standing out amongst his poetry publications. He compiled the book from journals, interviews and logs, and in his introduction, records how he had contacted Wilson to propose writing up the account based on Wilson's papers. The latter continued to sail for the East India Company, eventually dying at his home in Devon, called Oroolong, in 1810.

Keate's popular book went into 20 or more editions and translations, through into the early 19th C. But it wasn't the only account. An anonymous narrative, now very rare, was published in the same year (1788), printed by Draper Brewman for R Randall, a well-known publisher of scandalous and popular material, at 1 Shoe Lane.

The shipwreck of the Antelope East-India Packet, H. Wilson, esq. Commander, on the Pelew islands, situate in the west part of the Pacific Ocean; in August 1783. Containing the subsequent adventures of the crew with a singular race of people hitherto unknown to Europeans. With interesting particulars of Lee Boo, second son of the Pelew king, to the time of his death, at Capt. Wilson's house at Rotherhithe. By one of the unfortunate officers. London. D. Brewman for R. Randall. MDCCLXXXVIII [1788]



A Native of Pelew putting a Captive to Death. Frontispiece. Unknown artist

There is no confirmed authorship. However, the general belief among bibliographers is that it is the second mate Peter Barker, possibly along with the carpenter John Polkinghorn.⁴ This is based on the knowledge that Barker had previously worked in a shipyard and took a leading role, presumably along with Polkinghorn, in building the vessel that the crew used to

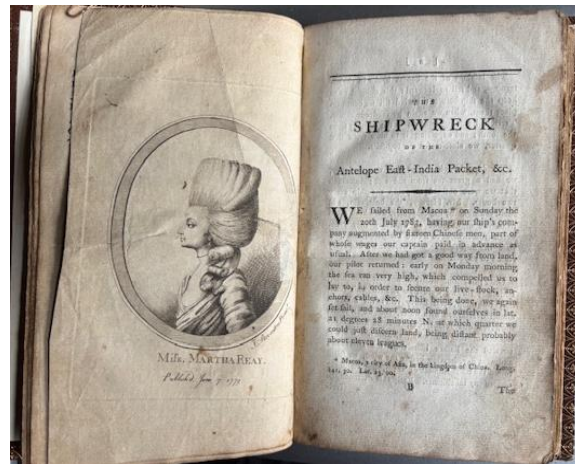
sail back to Macao. Also, the anonymous authorship given as an 'Unfortunate Officer' confirms that the author had to be one of the officer class. There is no mention of the second mate in the book, although most of the other officers are named and mentioned at various times, again supporting Barker's authorship. Since Keate's account was officially sanctioned, any other would probably need to be anonymous to avoid problems with the East India Company. Barker is mentioned in Keate's account, but is not specifically acknowledged as a source of journals or diaries.

Barker's short book is a delight to read, straight-forward, immediate, and with the occasional personal style showing through. The ship strikes a reef at midnight. *'While the sails were reefing, the look-out man cried – Breakers! – and in less than a minute every soul on board was alarmed at the striking of the ship on a rock. The fear and consternation this event universally infused, is beyond description: horror sat depicted in every countenance.'*⁵ And later on the island, after being reassured that the natives who arrived in canoes and discovered them meant no harm: *'The people were entirely naked, not having the least covering whatever: they were of a deep copper colour: and their skins were soft and glossy, owing to the external use of cocoa and oil.....Whatever emotions the singularity of these people might excite in our breasts, they were no less wrapt in admiration at our appearance. The whiteness of our colour attracted them so much, that it was evident they had never before seen any Europeans.'*⁶

The author greatly admires Capt. Wilson, recording his firm handling of the crew, clear orders at the time of the shipwreck, and deft handling of the native people. He even manages to persuade the crew to destroy their booze: *'A small inconvenience having been sustained, in consequence of some of our men drinking too freely of the spirits on board, the captain proposed to the officers that the vessels be staved; fearing otherwise that a repetition of drunkenness might occasion unhappy quarrels among themselves or with the natives, which might prove of the most pernicious consequences.Our captain, with that manly firmness for which he is distinguished, harangued the sailors on the occasion and used a variety of arguments and entreaties to induce them to acquiesce: when, at length, their readiness to promise, could be exceeded by nothing but their eagerness to put his commands into execution; and when the business was performed, not a soul wished to embrace a parting-glass. Under such circumstances as we then were, this voluntary sacrifice amounted to a degree of heroism, and is probably the first instance of the kind ever celebrated.'*⁷ The heroism was repaid later when a left-over cask of arrack was found in the wreck and the captain allowed the crew to drink a pint at the end of the day when their ship-building labours were over. Wilson and his crew proceed to build their boat, help Chief Abba Thulle fight his enemies, and observe and record the ceremonies, manners, food and skills of the local people. Within a few weeks the crew had introduced iron, gunpowder and cloth to the islanders, goods always at the forefront of European encounters.

Its worth noting the frontispiece engraving. According to the label it shows the Pelew islanders putting a captive to death, with reference to pages 76 and 77. The description on those pages is of the islanders killing prisoners of their enemies from an adjacent island, their defeat helped by Wilson's crewmen. The drawing shows a European, one of the Antelope's crew, alarmed at the killing going on behind him. Given that Barker, as the author, was on the canoe and wrote up the description of the event, it would be nice to think that it is he who is depicted. The artist is unknown.

Well, a lot could be written about the shipwreck and the books, and has been, but this is really about how a Miss Martha Reay came to appear in Barker's book. It's always nice to be surprised, and there opposite p.1, after the final pages of the Preface listing the *Antelope's* crew, is a full page portrait of 'Miss Marth Reay. Published June 7 1779.' Running around the edge of the oval frame is 'J Steventon Pinac' 'Pinac' is short for '*pinacotheca*', latin for '*painted it*'. This J Steventon was the artist.



Who was the famous Martha Reay? Reay, or Ray, (1746-1799) was a celebrated opera singer and mistress of the 4th Earl of Sandwich, living with him and producing nine children.⁸ She was introduced by Sandwich to a soldier named James Hackman, who became infatuated with her, proposing marriage, but was declined. In 1779, Hackman left the army and joined the church. On April 7 1779, Martha Reay attended a performance of Isaac Bickerstaffe's comic opera *Love in a Village* at Covent Garden.⁹ Co-written with the composer Thomas Arne, *Love in a Village* is regarded as the first comic opera. For Martha Reay it was the last. On leaving the opera and entering her carriage, Hackman appeared and shot her dead with a pistol. He then tried to shoot himself, only managing to graze his body, and then tried to beat himself to death with the pistol. His failure was rectified after a trial, when he was hanged on April 19. The great scandal was the source of popular pamphlets written at the time, and much more was written then and has been since.



Martha Reay, painted by Nathaniel Dance (later Sir Nathaniel Holland, Bt), published 1779. National Portrait Gallery.

A pamphlet on the scandalous murder was first published in 1779 by G Kearsly:

The Case and memoirs of the late Rev. Mr. James Hackman, and of his acquaintance with the late Miss Martha Reay..... London, G Kearsly, 1779.

Kearsly and Draper Brewman, who printed the *Antelope* book, were close publishing and printing associates. Brewman was a printer and newspaper proprietor trading from Shoe Lane, and George Kearsley a prominent publisher round the corner in Fleet Street. This pamphlet on Hackman and Reay went through many editions in the same year, and prompted another pamphlet, refuting some of the claims in the Kearsly publication:

Case and memoirs of Miss Martha Reay, to which are added remarks, by way of refutation, on the case and memoirs of the Rev. Mr. Hackman. London, M. Folingsby and C. Fourdrinier, 1779.

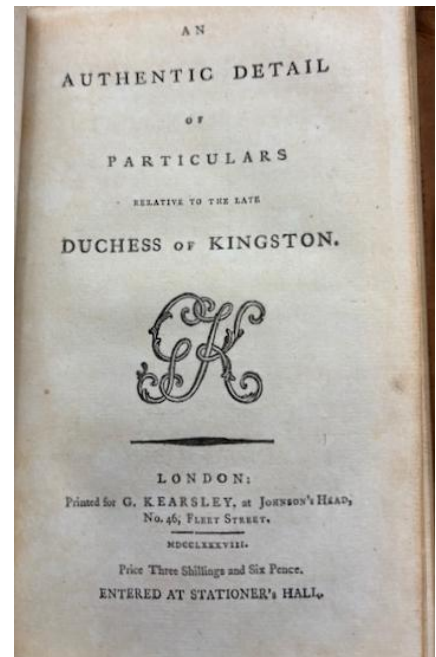
This was published by Margaret Folingsby and Charles Fourdrinier, and illustrated by J Steventon, about whom little seems to be known. The Steventon frontispiece is of a portrait of Reay and a vignette of her murder. This has not been sighted to date, since copies are behind subscription-based services of various institutions. There is no shortage of portraits of Martha Reay from the 1770s. However, the Steventon plate is quite crude, almost a caricature with its exaggerated hair style, compared, for instance, with that painted by Nathaniel Dance-Holland in the London National Portrait Gallery, and commonly used in other publications. It is not clear if this rogue plate in the *Antelope* book is the portrait in the Folingsby and Fourdrinier pamphlet.

But, to come back to the question that opened this piece, why was Steventon's portrait of Reay in Brewman and Randall's book on the wreck of the *Antelope* in the first place? It was not uncommon for contemporary works, particularly pamphlets of contemporary sensations such as those on Martha Reay and the *Antelope* shipwreck, to be bound together, either by closely associated printers and publishers or book owners who would bind topical pieces in the same binding.

There is one example of this with the *Antelope* wreck. The fine copy of Brewman and Randall's *The Shipwreck of the Antelope* in the Auckland Museum and Institute Library, is bound alongside Kearsley's *An Authentic Detail of Particulars Relative to the Late Duchess of Kingston, London, Kearsly, 1788*, a popular account of another sensational society trial.¹⁰ This is bound in after the *Antelope* account (pp ii, 1-178) with a salacious engraving of 'The Duchess of Kingston as she appeared at the Venetian Ambassador's Ball in Somerset House'. It seems the Venetian Ambassador knew how to throw a good party. This portrait of the Duchess in the book was engraved by Francis Chesham after a painting by Thomas Gainsborough, who was near the end of his life (he died in 1788).

A third pamphlet appears following that of the Duchess of Kingston: *Royal Recollections on a tour to Cheltenham, Gloucester, Worcester, and places adjacent, in the year 1788. The thirteenth edition. London, James Ridgeway, MDCCLXXIX. Pp 1-106*. This is an account of a tour by George III.

Reay's portrait appearing in the Brewman book is clearly not a joint venture. The single page is of smaller size and probably pasted in rather than bound, although the pasting is not particularly obvious. It doesn't make sense to think of it as an accidental binding. The sheet might have been an example of single leaves printed at the height of a scandal. Brewman particularly specialised in pamphlets and prints of scandals of the day.¹¹



Pamphlet on the bigamist Duchess of Kingston, bound in the same book as Barker's account of the Antelope shipwreck. Both published by Kearsly in 1788. Auckland War Memorial Museum Library Collections.

What is more likely is that the insert of the portrait is a minor example of extra-illustration or Grangerisation.¹² This became something of an art form, initiated by James Granger in the 18th C, involving manual insertion of leaves, illustrations and other printed material into published books. At its extreme, the practice resulted in expanded and much altered volumes with illustrations carefully pasted in or cut into the text. At its least, it was probably much as shown here, with just a portrait of great contemporary interest pasted in. It might be driven by a desire to personalise a copy, a more intrusive form of owner's signature or bookplate perhaps, or to combine evidence of things (murders, shipwrecks) that were captivating the public at the time. How many times have we found second-hand books with newspaper clippings inserted?

Whatever it's reason, the portrait has made a rare book even rarer, for those with such an interest, and enlivened an already lively account of a shipwreck, a first meeting of two peoples, and remarkable survival, the latter something denied Miss Martha Reay.

¹ A packet ship was a medium sized sailing ship designed for rapid delivery of mail, despatches and light freight.

² [Barker, P.] *The Shipwreck of the Antelope East-India Packet*. London, Brewman, 1788. pp 10-11.

³ Keate, George. *Parts of the Pacific Ocean, Composed from the Journals and Communications of Captain Henry Wilson and some of his officers, who, in August 1783, were there Shipwrecked, in the Antelope*. London, G. Nicol, 1788.

⁴ See e.g. Sothebys (<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/exploration-discovery-library-franklin-brooke-hitching-l15411/lot.707.html?locale=en>), and the entry for the Wellcome Collection (<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dr6stmcm>)

⁵ [Barker, P.] op. cit. p 6.

⁶ Ibid. pp 19-20.

⁷ Ibid. p 30.

⁸ Levy, M. J. *Love and Madness: The Murder of Martha Ray, Mistress of the Fourth Earl of Sandwich*. London, HarperCollins, 2004.

⁹ Isaac Bickerstaffe (1733-1808) was an Irish playwright who had considerable success with comic operas on the London stage in the late 18th C.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Pierrepont (née Chudleigh), Duchess of Kingston (1721 –1788), was found guilty of bigamy by 116 peers, without dissent, in a sensational trial in 1776.

¹¹ Late 18th C examples are: J Sharp. *The Life, Opinions, Character, and Tragic Death, of Count R---au, Commonly Called F. G. Meyer. Condemned to the Gallows, May 26, 1796, at Rotterdam, for Five Unparalleled Burglaries.* London, D. Brewman, London, 1797; (Williams, Renwick). *The Trial of Renwick Williams, (Commonly Called the Monster) for Assaulting and Wounding Miss Ann Porter.* London, D. Brewman, [1790].

¹² See: Peltz, Lucy. *Facing the Text: Extra-Illustration, Print Culture, and Society in Britain, 1760–1840.* US, Huntington Library Press, 2017; Smyth, Adam. *The Bookmakers. A history of the book in eighteen remarkable lives.* London, Bodley Head, 2024. Chapter 7 pp188-215.