

WILLIAM DAMPIER IN NEW HOLLAND, 1688 AND 1699

At the Kimberley Society meeting of 4 August 2004, Alex George spoke about William Dampier collecting natural history specimens. Alex is a well-known West Australian botanist and author who started work in the WA Herbarium in 1959 under the equally famous Charles A Gardner, Government Botanist at the time. In 1968, Alex travelled to Kew in the UK and examined in detail all of Dampier's 25 remaining Western Australian plant specimens. On his return, he wrote a paper on this subject and it was published in the WA Naturalists Club Journal in 1971.

In 1998, Alex and Dr. Phil Playford took berths on STS *Leeuwin* from Carnarvon and landed on Dirk Hartog Island, retracing one of Dampier's voyages. Because it was close to the 300th anniversary of Dampier's second visit to Western Australia, Alex got the idea of writing a book about him, not only of the plants collected, but the fauna and all aspects of natural history that he described and illustrated in his account of the long and arduous voyage. Alex completed the book, which was well received. Of course he wasn't the first to write about this fascinating man. Lesley Marchant was among those who had already completed accounts.

To get back to Dampier's story: He was born in 1651 at East Coker, a village in SW England. He had a good schooling but both his parents were dead by the time he was 12 years old. He went to sea as an apprentice in 1669. He then joined the Royal Navy in about 1672 or 1673 and was in a battle against the Dutch. He left the Navy and in 1674 was in Jamaica on a sugar plantation, then in the timber trade, and occasionally privateering. A privateer attacks enemy ships only. A buccaneer attacks any ship of any nationality so, strictly speaking, Dampier was not a buccaneer as in the Buccaneer Archipelago (in the Kimberley), which is named after him.

He returned to England in 1678 and married a woman named Judith, of whom we hear nothing further. He travelled back to the West Indies in 1679 and continued privateering, then to Virginia (USA) in 1682, and the next year to Africa and the west coast of South America. In 1686 he crossed the Pacific to Guam, sailing from Mexico to Guam in 51 days, then cruised among the islands and visited Thailand and China.

Late in 1687, he and others sailed south and made landfall on the west coast of what is now the Dampier Peninsula on 14 January 1688, probably anchoring off Salural Island. They landed on several others before beaching their boat, the *Cygnēt*, in Karrakatta Bay, after rounding Swan Point and sailing into King Sound. Dampier was not the first Englishman to land on Australian soil even though he beat James Cook by 81 years, a fact that is not often appreciated, especially by some Eastern Staters. In 1622, the British ship the *Tryal* was wrecked on the rocks now

named after the ship (off the north-west coast) and some of her crew survived and landed on the rocks and were later rescued.

It is not known what rank Dampier held in January 1688. Most scholars think he was probably the navigator on the *Cygnets*, whose captain was John Reed. Dampier did not collect plant specimens in that time, but he mentioned dingo tracks and the Dragon's Blood tree which, from his description of it, sounds like a red gum or bloodwood, now *Eucalyptus* or *Corymbia dampieri*. The gum was useful for caulking a boat's timbers. The *Cygnets* left New Holland in mid-February or March 1688 and pulled into the Nicobar Islands where Dampier, being sick of the crew, left the ship. He reached England towards the end of September 1691 and wrote an account of his travels including a discourse on winds etc. It was very popular. People wanted to know about these journeys into the unknown.

Dampier persuaded the British Government to give him a ship for further exploration of New Holland and this was the *Roebuck*, not HMS because that didn't come till 100 years later. We have no picture of the *Roebuck* but we know that she was a 6th rate ship of the Royal Navy. Dampier departed England on 24 January 1699 and was meticulous in keeping his diary. He travelled via Brazil, collected plants there, and kept observations all through the voyage. For instance, they observed a Cape Petrel off the Cape of Good Hope and it followed them all the way to New Holland, which they sighted just north of the Houtman Abrolhos. They sailed up past the Zuytdorp Cliffs, to Shark Bay, named after the many sharks seen there. They also landed on Dirk Hartog Island and anchored at Dampier Landing, 5 km south of Cape Inscription in a calm bay. He recorded a plant like English samphire, *Nitraria*, which he didn't collect. He tended to throw away bits that didn't press well. He went ashore looking for water and was enthralled by the island so it must have been a good season. They collected firewood from the native *Pittosporum*, and plants such as: *Beaufortia dampieri*, *Triodia* (Spinifex), a *Brachyscome* (daisy), *Calandrinia* (parakeelya), *Acacia rostellifera*, and *Dampiera incana* which is common on the island and which was named by Robert Brown in 1810. Dampier pressed his specimens in a book and they suffered no mould, surprisingly.

Dampier was intrigued by the fauna, especially the Bobtail Lizard, which he described in detail and wrote that it appeared to have a head at each end. He also mentioned the Banded Hair Wallaby, the red necked avocet, tiger sharks, rays, cuttlefish, squid, sea weeds and sea snakes. He stayed here from 16 to 24 August, rounded the North West Cape and onto the Dampier Archipelago to spend one day on East Lewis Island where he collected the aromatic daisy *Olearia axillaris*. Here he also collected the now famous Sturt Desert Pea, *Willdampia formosa*. Alex visited East Lewis Island especially to see this pea.

Dampier then sailed north east to Lagrange Bay where he saw a partial eclipse of the moon. It was very rocky at low tide but he went up Mangrove Creek. He collected many shells etc but only his plants survived. Of that, more later. He saw termitaria or termite mounds for the first time and called them Hottentot Huts or rocks, not knowing what they were. The bush flies were very bad. On 15 September, he departed for Timor and New Guinea, then turned for home. By the time they got to Ascension Island, in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, the ship was leaking badly and finally sank. Dampier, who managed to save his plants, was picked up and returned to England in 1701, where he wrote a "Voyage to New Holland" which was published in 1703. Later, he did two more voyages around the world, making it three in all. He was also reputed to have rescued Alexander Selkirk alias Robinson Crusoe.

Dampier's collection of 25 plants went to John Woodward who divided them between John Ray and Leonard Plukenet. A *Ptilotus* was illustrated, also *Acanthocarpus preissii*. He probably had Woodward's guide book for collecting specimens on board and kept his own journals in lengths of bamboo. Dampier was very observant of people, customs, landscapes, natural history, weather and tides, and he compared plants and animals with those seen elsewhere.

Of course there are memorials to Dampier, especially in and around Broome, eg at Bedford Park. He didn't go to all of the places that are named in his honour, eg Roebuck Bay and Cygnet Bay. He was not a good captain and was court martialled twice. He eventually died in London in March 1715, aged 64. The latest book about him is called *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind* by Diana and Mike Preston. There's that pirate again!

Daphne Choules Edinger

Further reading

Alex S. George, *William Dampier in New Holland: Australia's First Natural Historian*, Bloomings Books, Hawthorn (Vic), 1999.