

GORDON SAYRE, Associate Professor of English at the University of Oregon, is a specialist in colonial and early American literature. Among his publications are *“Les Sauvages Américains”*: *Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (1997) and the anthology *American Captivity Narratives* (2000).

GLYN WILLIAMS is Emeritus Professor of History at Queen Mary, University of London, and specializes in the history of maritime exploration. His most recent publications include *The Prize of All the Oceans: The Dramatic True Story of Commodore Anson’s Voyage Round the World and How He Seized the Spanish Treasure Galleon* (2000) and *Voyages of Delusion: The Search for the Northwest Passage* (2003).

Introduction

OIL PAPER, INK, AND COMING HOME

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

WHEN the school-of-hard-knocks seaman Luke Foxe, sputtering mad, urged readers in Stuart England to choose his own plain talk and callused hands over the florid prose and bookish pallor of his rival in New World exploration (Thomas James—they had each written narratives of their competing quests for a northwest passage), he offered an argument that brings a modern reader up short: “For as Oyle Paper layd upon the object, makes it more transparent, so does Experience show Art [how] to see without spectacles. . . .”

How’s that again? Oil paper versus spectacles? Is this juxtaposition really supposed to sell us on the value of gritty, real-world experience—the kind of experience that distinguishes what Foxe called the true “painefull Sea-man” (who had suffered under sail for many years) from those popinjays who merely packed off to sea brimming with book learning (that is, “art”)? Hmmm. Since when did looking at an object through grease paper clarify anybody’s view? Who, exactly, would choose to forfeit a good pair of reading glasses in exchange for the vision-enhancing qualities of a well-used doughnut wrapper?

Perhaps the bluff North Country Foxe was simply outfoxed by his own slippery simile. Or perhaps, wily and wise, he meant to suggest that closing the distance between art and its objects was the only way to see things clearly. Maybe early modern English spectacles were a whole lot worse than we ever imagined. Or perhaps, just perhaps, Foxe, in a strange way, was letting us know that the *painful* seaman, properly weathered by long journeys, saw brightly through his rheumy, clouded eyes.



Reading through this issue of the *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, a volume that brings together a set of texts about travel, transgression, and narrative, I found myself returning several times to Foxe’s “Oyle Paper,” which makes its appearance in I. S. MacLaren’s opening essay on the “booking” of Hudson Bay exploration in the early

seventeenth century. As each contribution that followed played out a tale of exile and return, and of the fraught story-making that ever attends the return of a native, “Oyle Paper” began to seem more and more like a perfect, luminous, milky figure for all the hopeful, coniving, and desperate pages composed by those trying to write their way back after traversing strange territory: explorers, soldiers, castaways—all those who crossed borders by choice or compulsion and then, later, found themselves inking the page with their experience. Like oil paper laid upon the world, these sheets admit a certain view, at once murky and bright, and they leave traces on what they touch.

For instance, as Glyn Williams shows in “George Anson’s *Voyage Round the World: The Making of a Best-Seller*,” a clutch of South Sea sailors offered dramatic narratives of their harrowing experiences in the Royal Navy in the Pacific in the early 1740s; each promised “a plain simple Relation of Facts”—a veritable tracing from the world unembellished by curlicue or coloration. Each book would merely lay translucent paper over life and follow its lines with a slavish pen. But in the end, of course, each tale was at the same time a concerted effort, as John Bulkeley and John Cummins put it candidly, “to clear our Characters.” Self-justification haloed the page. Those characters traced in ink with such care could bleed, and did: readers keen on the vicarious pleasures of textual adventure demanded as much, and were thereby made partners in crime on the high and distant seas.

A similarly blood-marked palimpsest of memory and self-justification comes to light in John W. Comfort’s account of the “Affair on Wounded Knee.” With cartographic precision, from the comfort of his writing desk, the old gunnery soldier reconstructs for his brother the geometry of a fateful massacre. Or perhaps it was a proper battle. This is how he remembers it, at least, recalling his view down the barrel of a Hotchkiss cannon mounted on the high ground. His map, included here, is nothing if not a tracing of the world on an oily page, and we look at it (through it?) to glimpse ghostly images of a sepulchre in South Dakota. Unlike the sea tales treated by Williams and MacLaren, Comfort composed his reminiscence for private consumption, and indeed in defiance of the hurly-burly world of print-politics, which he decided had failed him and the Indian fighters who warred against the “Ghost Dance.” But the intimacy of this text, and its renunciation of the public conversation, do rhetorical work for Comfort, seemingly the least rhetorical of the narrators in this volume.

Nowhere is the double sense of “character”—an ethical persona, a textual person—more conspicuous than in Gordon Sayre’s reading of Sarah Morton’s *Ouâbi*, where we are encouraged to imagine a sequence of substitutions that transform a stylized frontier romance into a still more stylized autobiography. Whether Sayre is right or wrong about the fingerprints he thinks he sees on this poem, there can be little doubt that Anglo-Europeans consistently used tableaux of savagery to see as in a glass, darkly. So, the author of “Azakia” worked out the troubling old story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba by conjuring up a world of happy, noble wife-swapping—proving in the process that ethnography and pornography have always been, well . . . bedfellows.

And finally, it is in Nathaniel Philbrick’s note on the putative *Essex* log lodged in Firestone’s F. Wallis Armstrong Collection that we are reminded of just how deceptive the view through oil paper can be, since confidence men and shysters have faked watermarks and sacked libraries to sell tall tales of homecomings that never were.



Fingerprints. If each of these stories of transgression and return lays a kind of oil paper on the world for our benefit, scribbles characters thereupon in ink, and hands us the result as a tissue through which we will see more clearly, more brightly—if this is the gambit of those painfully experienced persons who try to write their way home (as well those popinjays who would play upon us with art), we would do well to remember that each tale leaves a little something, a residue, on our hands. Read on and see.