Children at Sea: Lives Shaped by the Waves

by

Vyvyen Brendon
**Synopsis**

The author of Children of the Raj and Prep School Children examines the historical lives of eight children who grew up out on the oceans. Children at sea faced even more drastic separations from loved ones than those sent “home” from India or those packed off to English boarding schools at the age of seven, the subjects of Vyvyen Brendon’s previous books. Captured slaves, child migrants and transported convicts faced an ocean passage leading nearly always to lifelong exile in distant lands. Boys apprenticed as merchant seamen, or enlisted as powder monkeys, or signed on as midshipmen, usually progressed to a nautical career fraught with danger and broken only by fleeting periods of home leave. “Solitary among numbers,” as Admiral Collingwood described himself, they could be not just physically at risk but psychologically adrift—at sea in more ways than one. Rather than abandoning sea borne children as they approached adulthood, therefore, Vyvyen follows whole lives shaped by the waves. She focusses on eight central characters: a slave captured in Africa, a convict girl transported to Australia, a Barnardo’s lass sent as a migrant to Canada, a foundling brought up in Coram’s Hospital who ran away to sea, and four youths from contrasting backgrounds dispatched to serve as midshipmen. Their social origins as well as their maritime ventures are revealed through a rich variety of original source material discovered in scattered archives. These brine-encrusted lives are resurrected both for their intrinsic interest and because they speak for thousands of children, cast off alone to face storms and calms, excitement and monotony, fellowship and loneliness, kindness and abuse, seasickness and ozone breezes, loss and hope. This book recounts stories that might otherwise have sunk without trace like so much juvenile flotsam. They are sometimes inspiring, sometimes heart-rending and always compelling. Children at Sea embarks on a fresh voyage and explores a world of new experience.

**Sort review**

About the Author Vyvyen Brendon read History at St Anne’s College, Oxford. After a career in teaching she retired as Head of History at St Mary’s School, Cambridge, to take up full-time research and writing. With the successful publications of _Children of the Raj_ and _Prep School Children_, Vyvyen has become an acknowledged expert on the subject of youngsters past and present. _Children at Sea_ is her third book. She keeps in touch with the rising generation through her work as chair of the trustees of a nursery school and through her five grandchildren. --This text refers to the paperback edition.

*Download to continue reading*...
This voyage of discovery could not have been accomplished without the support of a willing crew, to whom I owe my thanks. I am especially grateful to those who helped to salvage some of these children at sea by supplying me with valuable source material. Alison Duke of the Foundling Museum gave me a transcript of George King's autobiography and allowed me to see the battered original. Othnel Mawdesley's journal was kindly lent to me by Bridget Somekh, whose ancestor, Lieutenant Mitchell, was his companion in captivity. Anthony Barlow, a descendant of William and Charles Barlow, entrusted me with vital correspondence about William's death. Megan Parker of Barnardo's put me in touch with Ada Southwell's Canadian grandson, Chris Beldan, who generously sent me letters, photographs and the results of his own research. He and members of his family have encouraged and endorsed my telling of Ada's story. My course has been guided by the expert staff and volunteers of museums and archive collections: Angela Broome and Michael Harris of the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro; Paul Cook of the Paper Conservation Studio at the Caird Library; Amanda Martin of the Isles of Scilly Museum; Louisa Price of the Charles Dickens Museum; and knowledgeable teams at Chatham Historic Dockyard, the National Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives and the Oriental and India Office Collections. Others have been generous with their time and expertise by answering queries and providing references: Christopher Andrew, Roger Banfield, Michaela Ann Cameron of the University of Sydney, Kevin Egan, Vic Gatrell, Pat Gillibrand, Katie Herbert of Penlee House Gallery, Jackie Millen, Katherine Moulds of the Caird Library, Colin Mumford, Jennifer Murphy of the Representative Church Body Library in Dublin, Stephen Taylor, John...
Tyler and Phoebe Wyss. My brother Rod Davis and cousins, Diana Page and Ruth Vickery, aided me in the quest for family records. It has been exciting to visit places associated with these young sailors, often in the company of obliging friends and relations. Georgie, Gayle and Lucas Brendon accompanied me to St Agnes Lighthouse and other Scillonian sites. Beau, Sonny and Anya Brendon explored Portsmouth Harbour with me. Judith Findlay has been my travelling companion on expeditions to Penzance, Chester, Broadstairs, Ramsgate, Chatham and the Cove of Cork. On my behalf, Rupert and Christine Brendon spent an extremely hot day at Williamstown cemetery in South Australia, where they identified and photographed the grave of Captain Charles Davis. My husband Piers has accompanied me throughout the whole enterprise, often bringing his own sharp pen and sword to my aid. The publication of the book was made possible by the enthusiastic efforts of my agent Laura Morris. The friendly efficiency of Claire Hopkins, Lori Jones, Karyn Burnham, Emily Robinson, Rosie Crofts and Laura Hirst has made it a pleasure to work with Pen & Sword Books. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders for images and text used in the book. The publishers welcome information on any attributions which have been omitted.

Introduction: A Historian at Sea
This book tells eight stories of lone boys and girls crossing the seven seas. They travelled as slaves, convicts, sailors or migrants, cast adrift from what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called their 'sweet birth-place', to live among strangers. 'Alone on a wide, wide sea', far from any kind of child protection, they faced storms and calms, disease and abuse, piracy and war, as well as hazards of the imagination – 'the curse in a dead man's eye', or a vision of 'a thousand thousand slimy things … upon the rotting sea'.

I was drawn to this subject by a strong affinity for the sea. During the first four years of my life my father, Royer Davis, was serving with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR). Of course, I didn't understand then the danger he was in as he escorted supply ships across the Arctic Sea to Russia on the Murmansk Run, though I was perhaps conscious of my mother's anxiety. He survived the fury of the elements and of German attacks – though he would never afterwards speak of those times. Some of my contemporaries also braved the perils of wartime oceans as they were evacuated from beleaguered Britain to the safer shores of America and the Dominions. But I survived the bombs which fell on Exeter and Plymouth to spend my childhood on Devon's coast, roaming the cliffs and beaches close to the village where Coleridge spent his early years. Sometimes I would listen to my grandfather, Harold Davis, tell of his boyhood in the Isles of Scilly. He liked to show me a photograph taken in the 1870s of his father, Captain Charles Royer Davis, who poses with three of his brothers. He told me that they were all merchant sailors who had been apprenticed at about the age of 14, taking one of the few opportunities for employment available on the Isles, where their father was Keeper of St Agnes Lighthouse. Seated beside Charles are Edwin and John, both Master Mariners like himself. Their hard years of seafaring had clearly aged them and it is difficult to believe that they were all under 35. Behind them is their teenage brother Samuel, still a fresh-faced cabin boy. The picture was apparently taken in Calcutta, where they had met
by a remarkable coincidence: their separate vessels had been forced to take refuge in the port from storms in the Bay of Bengal. The bare floorboards and background suggest to me now that the picture was taken not in a studio, but in the Sailors’ Home overlooking the Hooghly River which provided temporary board and lodging for the officers and crew of the British Merchant Marine. The photograph was precious to Grandpa because it was the last one taken of a father he never knew. In November 1877, Charles was given command of the sailing ship Macduff for a voyage from Melbourne to London. Macduff belonged to a fleet of wool clippers bound for South Australia around the Cape of Good Hope, carrying passengers who were replaced by cargoes of wool for the journey back to Britain around Cape Horn. These ‘rolling kings’, as the sea-shanty dubbed them, were famed for their great speed and demanded great navigational skill from the captain.² Their long voyages were fraught with danger, as the recent experiences of this very ship illustrate. On the outward voyage earlier in 1877 it had been quarantined as a result of eight cases of smallpox (including that of the captain); it had collided with a fishing smack in the English Channel; and it had lost a sailor who fell overboard. Charges were brought against her captain, T. T. Watson, both for not halting his ship when ‘cries of distress were heard’ from the fishing boat, and for not taking ‘the proper steps to save the lost man’s life’.³ All these ‘worrying cases’ appeared in the Melbourne press, which reported that they had rendered the wretched man ‘almost entirely imbecile’, with the result that he was superseded by Charles for the return journey.⁴ In July 1878 27-year-old Captain Davis was appointed to take the ship back to Melbourne with thirty-one passengers ‘in most superior accommodation’.⁵ This sixteen-week voyage was to be his last. Davis family tradition recounts that as the ship approached Melbourne in early October along the notorious ‘shipwreck coast’ of western Victoria, he ‘fell overboard, was saved by his crew but died the next day on board his vessel’.⁶ My own research reveals a less dramatic story. The Melbourne Argus reports the passage as ‘comparatively uneventful’, apart from the serious illness of Captain Davis: ‘Rapid consumption appears to have set in and marked him for its own.’ On reaching Melbourne he was ‘in a very weak and exhausted condition’ and died on board Macduff. His death certificate confirmed a diagnosis of ‘phthisis pulmonalis’, a condition no doubt exacerbated by a life spent in vessels ‘swept from end to end by every roaring sea’.⁷ The newly constructed telegraph line soon took the sad news back to the Scillies, where ‘great sympathy’ was expressed for his young widow Ambrosine and baby son Harold, who had been born a few months before his father’s departure for Melbourne. Charles was buried in Williamstown Cemetery on Hobson’s Bay, where all the vessels ‘hauled their flags at half-mast in memory of the deceased’, and the gravestone ‘erected by his fellow shipmasters and other friends as a token of respect’ can still be seen.⁸ Charles is also commemorated on his mother’s weathered headstone in St Agnes churchyard close to the island’s rocky shore. Edwin and John Davis survived Charles but both were subsequently shipwrecked, the former off India in 1881 and the latter off Beachy Head in 1889. No longer would Edwin’s intrepid wife Janie be able to join her husband whenever he was in a European port, ‘generally taking one of the children’.⁹ Two more of the lighthouse keeper’s seven sons had already perished at sea,
Thomas and the youngest, Lewis, who was drowned on his first voyage after leaving school at 14. The only two sons to escape a marine death were his first-born, William, and cabin-boy Sam, both of whom abandoned seafaring and took up their father's profession, thus helping to prevent the loss of other sailors' lives. Apart from the photograph and family legends passed down through the generations, the evidence for this story is sparse. There are apprenticeship indenture papers, grave inscriptions, newspaper reports and registers of deaths at sea, but the Davis family wrote no memoirs and preserved no letters. In any case, it is always difficult to research maritime lives and deaths in those days since 'seamen were not documented'. They carried no passports and they were not usually included in census returns or parish death registers. If they died on a voyage their bodies would often be washed up on some other shore 'without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd and unknown', as Byron put it, while families simply knew that sons, brothers and husbands failed to return from their mysterious watery world. Added to this elusiveness is the problem of discovering how children thought and felt at a time when they were supposed to be seen and not heard. Thus I found myself a historian at sea, grasping at such flotsam and jetsam as came my way to recreate the lives and deaths of Keeper Davis's sons. Nevertheless, I was inspired to investigate further tales of those who embarked as children on voyages which would shape the rest of their lives. Brine was evidently in the blood of those born and bred in a lighthouse, yet no one in Britain lives more than sixty miles from the sea. 'Men and sea interpenetrate', wrote Joseph Conrad in 1898 'the sea entering into the life of most men … in the way of amusement, of travel, or of breadwinning.' And it has always seeped into the lives of British children, dreaming of watery adventures as they read exciting maritime tales like Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, heard tell of mermaids and leviathans, wore sailor suits, launched toy boats, explored rock-pools and built sandcastles on the beach. In her memoir of a childhood spent on the Great Western Beach at Newquay Emma Smith describes an ocean as 'everpresent and omnipotent as God … both feared and loved, as God is supposed to be feared and loved; endlessly interesting in its unchanging changeability; always, inevitably there.' Charlotte Runcie's memories of Scottish seaside summers put her, too, in awe of the 'delicate and powerful' element 'forming the weather, the place we evolve from, providing everything the planet needs for life'. Wherever she lived, the sea was always calling her back. Sometimes children fell victim to this 'greedy god' who had to be 'appeased with regular doses of sacrificial souls'. On any West Country shore in earlier centuries, children ran the risk of being kidnapped by Barbary pirates to become white slaves across the Mediterranean in North Africa, and to feel all their lives 'the pull of captor society', even if they were rescued. At the same time, British slavers sailed from Western ports to capture multitudes of African children for the trans-Atlantic trade. There were further hazards for youngsters in all the coastal towns and villages of Britain. They could be spirited off across the Atlantic as indentured labourers, press-ganged into the Royal Navy as cabin boys and powder monkeys, or lured, like the young Walter Raleigh in the iconic Millais painting, by 'tales of wonder' told by old sailors. Juvenile law-breakers were frequently incarcerated in prison hulks off the coasts of Britain before being...
transported over the seas. Long after this practice died out, so-called ‘charities’, Dr Barnardo's being the best known, continued to supply young labourers to the colonies. Until 1967, ‘waifs and strays’ were gathered up from the streets of Britain's cities for long sea migrations, from which they rarely returned. The offspring of more affluent families were piloted by requirements more of their own (or their parents') choosing. Aspiring naval officers were meant to join a ship by the time they were 14, and children from sultry parts of the Empire were ensconced in Britain's bracing boarding-schools by the age of 7 or 8.

All the subjects of my stories were born in Georgian and Victorian times, when the sea was still the key element of Britain's national existence, vital to defence, commerce, culture and empire. This meant, of course, that I could not interview them as I did some of the Raj children and prep school pupils who featured in my previous books. In two cases, however, such oral history had already been created. In 1807 the musician Joseph Emidy told his 18-year-old flute pupil, James Silk Buckingham, about his extraordinary journey from slavery in Brazil through forced labour in the British navy to an independent and settled life in Cornwall. Buckingham later included this story in his autobiography along with his own maritime adventures. Growing up in Falmouth in the 1790s with a ‘strong and unconquerable predilection for a sealife’, Buckingham had served on several Lisbon-bound packet-boats while still a boy. By the time he was 10 he had engaged in smuggling, got dead drunk on sweet Portuguese wine at the hands of the ‘rough wag’ of a boatswain, been held in ‘painful captivity’ aboard a French privateer, and fallen in love with a dark-eyed Spanish señorita. It was only his experience as a 15-year-old volunteer in the Royal Navy which put him off the sea. After witnessing such common naval practices as a mutineer hanged by the yard-arm, and a deserter flogged to death, he jumped ship and was lucky enough to escape recapture by the press-gang. His own background gave Buckingham a particular interest in his music tutor's life story, but he was told no details of Emidy's abduction from Africa, transportation in a slave ship and bondage in a Portuguese colony, experiences too painful to recount in the course of a flute lesson. I have had to reconstruct them from ample documentation about the infamous system, including the reminiscences of other young victims. It was also important to modify Buckingham's rather distorted account of Emidy's service with the Royal Navy by comparing it with naval records. The musician's later career was easier to trace, as he was frequently mentioned in Cornish newspapers and memoirs.

Child migrants were not much more likely than slaves to tell their own stories. They usually repressed in adulthood the pain and humiliation of being separated from their families and despatched abroad. Thus Barnardo's child, Ada Southwell, did not reminisce about her transatlantic transition from East End kid to Canadian indentured servant, which can only be reconstructed from the charity's sparse and closely guarded records, and the correspondence of a conscientious older sister. After Ada's death, however, her Canadian husband told an attentive daughter about his life and marriage, unwittingly revealing some of the effects the childhood severance had had on his wife. By such indirect and chancy means a child's voice can sometimes echo down the generations. The least distinct voices are those of child convicts transported to Australia. After all, the whole point
of choosing this newly-discovered penal destination was its distance from the civilised world. These unwanted subjects would find it all but impossible to communicate with their disgraced families and disgraceful companions, let alone to make the return journey. They could simply be forgotten. In recent years, however, historians and descendants have tried to discover what lives the convicts made for themselves in their new world – but it’s not easy. Early Australian records of births, marriages and deaths are patchy and unreliable. Accounts by the marines who guarded the convicts rarely mention convicts’ names, let alone record their feelings or reactions to their plight. And the prisoners themselves did not have the leisure and materials or, in many cases, the ability to write their own history. Thus it is has been especially difficult to reconstruct the fortunes of a young first-fleet passenger such as Mary Branham. The full story of her loves and losses may never be salvaged. In the case of four of my five naval subjects, however, I discovered a treasure trove. Marine Private George King wrote an autobiography, a much rarer achievement for one of his lowly rank than for the young gentlemen of the upper decks. It recounts his experiences as a Coram boy, a Trafalgar man, and an old salt. Restrained and literate though it is, I had to make sure that he was not spinning a series of sailors’ yarns, by comparing his tale with ships’ musters, captains’ logs and contemporary accounts. Similar sources helped to authenticate the careful diary kept by Midshipman Othnel Mawdesley when he was taken prisoner off the Spanish coast two years after the Battle of Trafalgar. Mawdesley did not, however, write of his Chester childhood, which could only be reconstructed through sites in this well-preserved city, and documents in its Record Office. Another find was the huge correspondence of the Barlow family, carefully gathered by Sir George Barlow, a high-ranking and long-serving officer of the East India Company, and preserved now in the India Office Library. The collection includes the juvenile and adult letters of William and Charles, his two sailor sons, often bearing signs of their salty passage and hardly read since they were first opened by their recipients. The wayward William wrote sketchily and inaccurately only when he felt obliged to, while his serious brother maintained an earnest and informative correspondence with his adored father and sisters – yet both collections have their own historical value. So it’s all the more of a pity when family correspondence is destroyed. In 1860 Charles Dickens made a bonfire at Gad’s Hill of all the letters he had ever received from his family and friends. They included those written by his sons from their boarding school over the Channel in Boulogne, and from the more distant parts to which they were dispatched in their later boyhood. The only son who joined the Royal Navy was Sydney, whose shipboard letters went up in flames with the rest, leaving the historian with only his father’s responses. Fortunately, Dickens wrote so much and so well that I have been able to build up a picture of Sydney as a boy and as a young man. Certain characters in the novels, for example, throw up a flare which helps to illuminate his tempestuous passage from cherished ‘Little Admiral’, to a wretched son denied access to the paternal home. Such sea-changes took place in the lives of all the youngsters whose further careers are traced in this book. As children they were more vulnerable than their older shipmates, susceptible to bullying and easily led astray. On some, however, youth bestowed the vitality to
face danger in embattled and stormy waters, the adaptability to join ‘the brotherhood of the sea’, and the optimism to face an uncertain future on distant strands. For them, ‘the good, strong sea, the salt, bitter sea’ could represent, as it did for Joseph Conrad’s character Marlow, ‘the endeavour, the test, the trial of life’. Others, like a ship’s boy he observed, ‘wept as if his heart would break’ at ‘the weirdness of the scene’, and might never recover from an untimely voyage away from home and family.22 Ashore or afloat, such a traveller would remain ‘all at sea’.