

"THE CENTURION": A.J. Kuhn  
ANSON'S VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD Kit-Kat Club  
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During much of the 18th century, England engaged France and Spain in war declared or undeclared. The stakes of course were the two Americas and the Pacific Ocean, two-thirds of the whole globe. Their conquest was seen as a new stage of human history, indeed according to the good Bishop Berkeley in 1752, the fifth and final act of history.

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The four first acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.

Now, whether the conquest of the new world has indeed proved to be the noblest and the last act of history (though California often says so), I'll put aside here to recount an exploit in that westward course of English empire. It is one of the most dramatic voyages in maritime history. In its facts it defies fiction. And, as is often the case in noble human achievement, there was great suffering, stupidity, and terrible loss. It is Commodore George Anson's voyage around the world in 1740-44 in THE CENTURION.

The competition between Spain and Hanoverian England was mainly about colonial trade, silver. The war declared between them in 1739 was trumped up pretty much around the circumstance of an English captain, Jenkins, having had his ear cut off by the Spanish, itself an act of reprisal. Mutual piracy thus became war, and one of the initiatives of Robert Walpole's last ministry under George II was to equip

and send a squadron of warships into the South Seas (the Pacific), there "to annoy and distress the King of Spain". So read the Orders.

More specifically, "our trusty and wellbeloved" George Anson, commander-in-chief, was to proceed around Cape Horn into the South Sea, attack Spanish coastal settlements, incite the native Indians against the Spanish, seize enemy and especially treasure ships, at Panama make possible contact with British forces in the West Indies, at Acapulco or Manila look out for the largest of Spanish treasure galleons, and by way of Macao (Hong Kong) and Capetown proceed home.

For this Anson was to have six warships, five frigates and a sloop, led by THE CENTURION 60 guns, the GLOUCESTER 50 guns, SEVERN 50 guns, PEARL 40 guns, WAGER, TRYAL sloop, and two small store ships. Five hundred marines for land operations were to board, the whole business to be top secret. And here their troubles began.

The orders were issued in January, 1740. But the squadron did not sail until nine months later, delayed by fitting and manning and a peacetime bureaucracy at once laughable and lamentable. Just getting enough crews to work the guns and sails of six men-of-war (about 1000 sailors) was no small chore when one depended mainly on press-gangs--often literally a sort of authorized kidnapping--and by raiding the crews of other ships. The 500 landforces were even

harder to come by. In a stupid and tragic manoeuvre the government supplied these from invalided, pensioned former troops from the Chelsea Hospital. About half of these-- those who had the wit and strength--deserted on their way to embark at Portsmouth, to be replaced then by mainly raw recruits who had never fired a rifle. Not a single one of those old soldiers returned to England alive.

This bungling was hardly the the golden enterprize for "Peruvian Treasures" the Commodore had in mind. So that he had good reason to groan, in the published account of the voyage, that government bureaucracy had "occasioned a delay and waste of time, which in its consequences was the source of all the disasters to which the enterprize was afterwards exposed: for by this means we were obliged to make our passage around Cape Horn in the most tempestuous season of the year; whence proceeded the separation of our squadron, the loss of numbers of our men, and the imminent hazard of our total destruction" (28). Nearly even more fatal was the fact that the expedition was no longer a secret. Indeed English newspapers had printed several accounts of the mission months before it sailed. And French spies alerted the Spanish, who sent a squadron directly to Brazil to intercept Anson.

Fortunately, if the delays brought Anson the worst possible weather to round the Horn, it treated Admiral Pizarro, the Spanish commander of six heavily armed ships,

with equal ferocity. Off St. Catherine's on the coast of Brazil, Anson narrowly missed an engagement (January, 1741) with the Spanish, one of his ships having blundered within gunshot range, then saved by fog, tide, and luck. No such luck saved Pizarro's fleet, which, Anson was to learn much later, was smashed to pieces rounding the Cape.

It was nearly as fatal for Anson. Navigation then was an art only a bit less primitive than for Magellan two centuries earlier, for the marine chronometer to find the longitude was not yet developed. (John Harrison was awarded a prize for it in 1759 after many bureaucratic struggles, and it was tested on Captain Cook's voyages.) So that, fighting his way through the Straits of Le Maire and rounding Cape Horn, through blasting storms and mountainous waves, Anson's track in doubling the Cape was about 300 miles off the longitude his data showed.

That is to say, he was lost: and threatened with far worse. Laments the narrator of the voyage: "And that no circumstance might be wanting which could aggrandize our distress, these blasts generally brought with them a great quantity of snow and sleet, which cased our rigging, and froze our sails thereby rendering them and our cordage brittle, and apt to snap at the slightest strain, adding great difficulty and labour to the working of the ship, benumbing the limbs of our people, ...mortifying their toes and fingers" (85).

The plight of the whole squadron was aptly symbolized in the account of one of the sailors being canted overboard in fearful seas: "we perceived that notwithstanding the prodigious agitation of the waves, he swam very strong, and it was with the utmost concern that we found ourselves incapable of assisting him; indeed we were the more grieved at his unhappy fate, as we lost sight of him struggling with the waves, and conceived from the manner in which he swam, that he might continue sensible for a considerable time longer, of the horror attending his irretrievable situation" (87). William Cowper wrote a powerful poem imagining what it was like for that doomed sailor, to be thus castaway from ship and man and God (THE CASTAWAY, 1799).

More than forty days of furious storms thus during March-April 1741 entirely disabled and separated Anson's squadron in doubling Cape Horn. THE PEARL and THE SEVERN turned back to Brazil. The WAGER was wrecked off Cape Noir, the remnants of its crew, after a mutiny and many months of desperation, returning to England--and court martial. THE CENTURION and the three remaining ships struggled separately toward rendezvous at Juan Fernandez, not merely with crippled ships now but decimated by the dreaded scourge of scurvy. In the one month alone THE CENTURION lost 43 men, most of the rest of the crew incapable of working the ship, so that the chaplain tells of himself having to stand at the helm.

He also describes the symptoms of scurvy as large discolored spots on the body, swelled legs, putrid gums, fever, lassitude and dejection, and, incredibly, he reports that the disease reopened the scars of old wounds, as in the example of an old soldier who had been wounded 50 years earlier at the Battle of the Boyne. The disease hit the new marines and old soldiers hardest. And with all that sickness between decks, believably, the ship was filthy, "intolerably loathesome" (105-6).

Now the Admiralty knew there was a general connection between scurvy and diet, but its main remedy (beside concern for the ventilation of ships) was still pretty much a purgative pill: doubtless an earlier version of those powerful purging pills that Lewis and Clark, on their expedition, called "Thunderclappers". Appalled by the mortality of the disease on Anson's voyage, it was Dr. James Lind who published A TREATMENT OF SCURVY in 1753, identifying citric juices (lemon, lime, etc) as the most effective anti-scorbutics, and whence of course later the origin of the slang word "limey". Diet, Lind established, was of critical importance in long sea voyages, a lesson Captain Cook learned so well only a generation later that he lost not a single soul from scurvy. That wasn't quite the end of scurvy, however, so dumb we remain about diet.

At Juan Fernandez--Robinson Crusoe's solitary island off the coast of Chile--Anson regrouped his remaining squadron

of four ships, two frigates (CENTURION and GLOUCESTER) and the sloop (TRYAL) and pink (ANNA). He had no idea, and wouldn't know for many months, what happened to the others. He set about recovering the health of his crews, and cleaning and caulking his ships. The island was even more fruitful than Crusoe's fictional account, restoring them soon with fruits and vegetables and fresh water. It was, the Chaplain wrote, a paradise of rills and vallies: where "unassisted nature may be said to excel all the fictitious descriptions of the most animated imagination" (119). Still, Anson took time to plant seeds, including some peach and apricot trees (which thrived, he was later told). But he was hardly at ease. His sickly crew, he well knew, could scarcely have managed against any hostile force at all. And so far as he knew, Pizarro might still be in pursuit.

Nearly four months they spent at Juan Fernandez. It was now almost a year that the squadron of eight ships had sailed from England, and here it was, depleted virtually to a single frigate's crew, about 350 men and a number of these being small boys. Still, it was time to annoy and distress the King of Spain. So Anson made some raids along the South American coast, burning one small town, Paita, in Chile, and taking some plate and treasure. This poor village had been high on the hitlist of English captains, having been raided and burned, twice, by Captain Shelvocke only twenty years earlier. Surely these captains' names remain curses down there still today. Anson also seized a few small vessels

loaded with hides and cheap cloth, but little silver. For prizes in those waters were scarce because, as they later learned, their presence in these seas was well known up and down the South American coast. It was time to seek elsewhere, indeed for the biggest prize of the western ocean, the Manila-Acapulcho Spanish treasure galleon.

These galleons were the pride of all Spanish commerce, and had been for three hundred years. They made an annual trip between Manila and Mexico--8000 miles in latitudes of the trade winds, a six months' continuous voyage, regarded as the longest and most dreadful in the world. Leaving Manila, winds willing generally in June, loaded with spices, silks, goldsmiths' work, wine (for Communion, it was said), the galleon arrived at Acapulcho about December, returning to Manila a couple months later loaded with silver, mainly, and people. Cargo value both ways was estimated at millions in then hard cash money.

A vision to thrill a pirate! and in fact Thomas Cavendish had taken one of these galleons for Queen Elizabeth in 1587, and Woodes Rogers had taken another in 1709. For the English to pluck such a prize was not merely to distress the King of Spain but also to annoy "the Holy Father" as well. But no fools in ships, the Spanish put their best design and wood and armament into the galleons and defied anybody to break their monopoly.



Anson cruised off the coast of Mexico for the galleon in the winter of 1742, aware that the time of the customary arrival of treasure ship had already passed. Some captured natives told him that it was already in port: thus giving expectations, says the narrative, of taking "the most desirable prize that was to be met with in any part of the globe" (214). But to wait out or attack Acapulcho was beyond Anson's strength, his crews now again sickening, his supplies and water going fast. Westward, said his Orders, and to the west he turned. But the winds were laggard, and the scurvy worsening. His surviving frigate THE GLOUCESTER proving unseaworthy, he set afire and scuttled her, consolidating all his forces into a single ship. THE CENTURION was now alone, on a wide, wide sea.

His plan was to make the best of his way to a port where he could recover and refit, and then perhaps to strike at Manila. In desperate condition in late August 1742 the ship came upon Tinian, in the Marianas, a haven proving like Juan Fernandez deserted and fruitful, a place of trees and lawns "as if laid out by art", with plenty of wild cattle and produce. A hospital was set up on shore for more than half of the barely 200 men remaining now of that original complement of 1,500 men who had embarked two years ago. The Commodore himself was ill.

From the fresh fruits and plants they began to recover immediately, but their whole fate was nearly sealed by a

freak accident. While the Commodore and crew were on shore gathering supplies, a sudden typhoon broke THE CENTURION loose from her anchor, driving her to sea with only a skeleton crew. She disappeared into the south Pacific. Days passed into desponding weeks and still no trace of her. She was surely lost, thought Anson, who prepared for desperate remedies. They would saw their longboat in half, double its size, sail to China. Inspiring their energy and ingenuity, the Commodore had them chopping, planing, caulking, rigging: and this without a drop of rum, or having told them that there was neither compass nor quadrant on the island.

But God does temper the wind to the shorn lamb (sometimes). Nearly three weeks after she had disappeared, THE CENTURION hove into sight, to the shore's wild cheers, and doubtless curses. Her absence was pretty much explained by the lack of crew to work her. It was October, and with alacrity all hands turned to for departure, to Formosa and refitting at Macao, where they arrived in November, 1742.

Anson's intention was a complete refitting of THE CENTURION, careening, cleaning, sheathing, the whole works, for which of course he intended to pay the Chinese, but not too much. The narrative of this part of the voyage has a low opinion of the Chinese-- "the tricky people" stereotype in fact--influenced mainly by the English mistrust of glowing French missionary reports about China, ("Jesuitical fictions," said the English).

Now if the bureaucracy of the British admiralty was sluggish, that of the Chinese was positively glacial. For months Anson couldn't get anything done, threatening once indeed to blow up the whole place. They were rightly suspicious of a warship in a commercial harbor. He had to be respectful of the British East India Company interests there. And there were language difficulties in negotiating. An amusing Chinese view of this encounter was published afterwards, which has Anson "red-haired" (which he was not), grovelling on his knees to the local viceroy (which he most surely did not).

Finally, in April, 1743--after nearly six months in Macao--Anson was completely provisioned and refitted. He had carefully let it be known he was going home: through the Sunda Strait, round Good Hope, and Portsmouth. He even took some mail bound for England. On the 19th of April THE CENTURION stood to sea, and out of sight, turned directly east, for Manila. Anson was going to cruise again for the galleon.

Fair skies, health, and visions of wealth, and then almost daily gunnery practice cheered the crew. The Manila in-route of the galleon was Cape Espiritu Santo, on Samar, and here out of sight of land, THE CENTURION cruised, north and south, for nearly two and half weeks in June, 1743.

On the 20th of June, at sunrise, they sighted a sail. Oddly, it bore directly down upon THE CENTURION, firing a

signal gun. The Commodore fired one in return, says the narrator, "to amuse her". (The Spanish captain later deposed that he thought Anson was the convoy come out of Manila for his escort.) The ships closed at noon. Marksmen from the tops of THE CENTURION swept and cleared the maindeck of the galleon, Anson at the same time directing, not broadsides, but a successive cannonading of the enemy. After an hour and a half, returning but little fire, the galleon struck her flag. Thus, states the narrative proudly, "was the CENTURION possessed of this rich prize, amounting in value to near a million and a half dollars" (340).

The treasure in fact was 1.3 million in pieces of eight, and 35,600 oz. of virgin silver, with other goods. Of a total crew of over 500 the galleon, THE COVADONGA, had 67 killed in action, 84 wounded, including Admiral Montero. (He by the way had ordered the ship to be blown up instead of surrendering. That was ignored.) THE CENTURION lost 2 men, with 16 wounded. The English narrative of the battle--and the illustration of it in the text-- says THE COVADONGA was much larger than THE CENTURION (340). That was not true. The galleon was 700 tons and 36 guns, a trading ship; THE CENTURION was a 1000 tons and 60 guns, a man-of-war. Rubbing it in, the Anson narrator says the Spaniards were mad as hell "at being beaten by a handful of boys." In other words, it was a new David-Goliath story.

The treasure transferred, Anson sailed for Macao with his prize, proving to the Chinese that their first suspicion was not imaginary. He wanted stores now to go home so he bought goodwill by releasing the Spanish prisoners, helping the Chinese put out a serious shore fire, and generally being diplomatic: though he once did personally warn their Chinese pilot that if THE CENTURION ran aground in the Canton river he would see him hanged. The galleon Anson sold to merchants. And after nearly four months of delay, on 15 December, 1743, he sailed for England around Good Hope. On 15 June, 1744, THE CENTURION anchored off Spithead, concluding her voyage of three years and nine months: proving, declares the last sentence of the narrative of the voyage, "That though prudence, intrepidity, and perseverance united, are not exempted from the blows of adverse fortune; yet in a long series of transactions, they usually rise superior to its power, and in the end rarely fail of proving successful" (372-3).

All Britain was agog with Anson's success, word of the treasure having preceded his arrival. The rising nationalism-- evident in London in 1744 in Handel's music, the art of Hogarth, the poetry of Pope, the oratory of the rising William Pitt, and of course the new war with France-- was fired by Anson's triumph, so that the anthem "RULE BRITANNIA!", which was but recently composed, seemed prophetic indeed.

To acknowledge Anson's triumph, the British did what they do best in the world: they put on a public ceremonial. Thirty-two wagons loaded with THE CENTURION'S treasure and trophies of honor, guarded by seamen gaudily dressed in captured Spanish finery, preceded by musicians, paraded from Portsmouth into London, to the Tower of London: said one observer, a sight rare and Roman! The show eclipsed the tragic cost, for the time being. Only one vessel of the eight that sailed, and only 145 of the original crew of 1500 had returned.

Not surprisingly, where big prize money was to be divided, big law suits followed quickly about who was entitled to what. (It's difficult by the way to put a modern value on the total prize, but probably about 10 M. in today's dollars). One issue was, were the officers transferred to THE CENTURION from the scuttled ships equally due their stipulated shares? No, said the court martial. There were the original officers of THE CENTURION, and everybody else. As for the surviving tars, newspapers for a long time after carried stories of drunken fights and stabbings and life misspent--all sadly sordid in view of their former heroism and dreams of Peruvian treasures.

Anson himself was promoted, made a peer, and soon became First Lord of the Admiralty. He was First Lord (again) shortly after the court martial of the unfortunate Admiral Byng, who was shot on his own quarterdeck for failure of

duty at Minorca. Said Voltaire of this, writing home to Frenchmen: the English find it "necessary from time to time to shoot an admiral, to encourage the others." Anson was one of the most distinguished admirals and administrators in the history of the Royal Navy. The rating of ships and standardization of equipment are his initiatives. He is credited with the modernization and professionalization of the whole sea service. Many of the officers who served under him-- Denis, Howe, Keppel, Brett, Byron--were in the honor roll of admirals of the next generation. His voyage had an immediate effect on improvements in navigation, naval health, and the British desire to return to the Pacific.

And his book made him famous world-wide, and deservedly. Published in 1748, A VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD, IN THE YEARS MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV, BY GEORGE ANSON, was an immediate bestseller, four editions in its first year, and then translated into several languages. A classic of travel literature, it is vigorously and readably written, even when it is grinding some of Anson's personal axes or puffing him. It contained much new navigational, geographic, and economic information. And it had 42 charts and maps and plates of the exotic South Seas. The titlepage says the book was "compiled" from Anson's papers of the voyage by Richard Walter, the Chaplain of THE CENTURION. But Anson also engaged Benjamin Robins, an engineer, to help revise and finish the book. The Chaplain's immediate experience of the

adventure is vivid; we are on board; Robins gave it technical breadth and depth.

Reading Anson now, one can appreciate--as indeed Thomas Jefferson foresaw--the interconnection in the voyage of THE CENTURION (1740-44), Captain Cook's three voyages into the Pacific (1768-79), and the expedition of Lewis and Clark (1803-6) and their profound consequence for the westward course of empire. In one lifespan, 66 years, two-thirds of the globe had turned its face into full view.

Anson died in 1762, aged 65. Pitt in the House of Lords in 1770 praised his great wisdom and experience "in the glorious successes of the last war", well aware that Anson's whole career coincided with the rise of the British empire. Duty, courage, honor, and loyalty Anson indubitably had in heroic measure. But he was also blessed in his rugged and invincible flagship, THE CENTURION. With the ARGO, it deserves a berth among the stars. One of the first things Anson did on returning to England was to have a large wooden model made of it. When you are in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, I recommend you see it.

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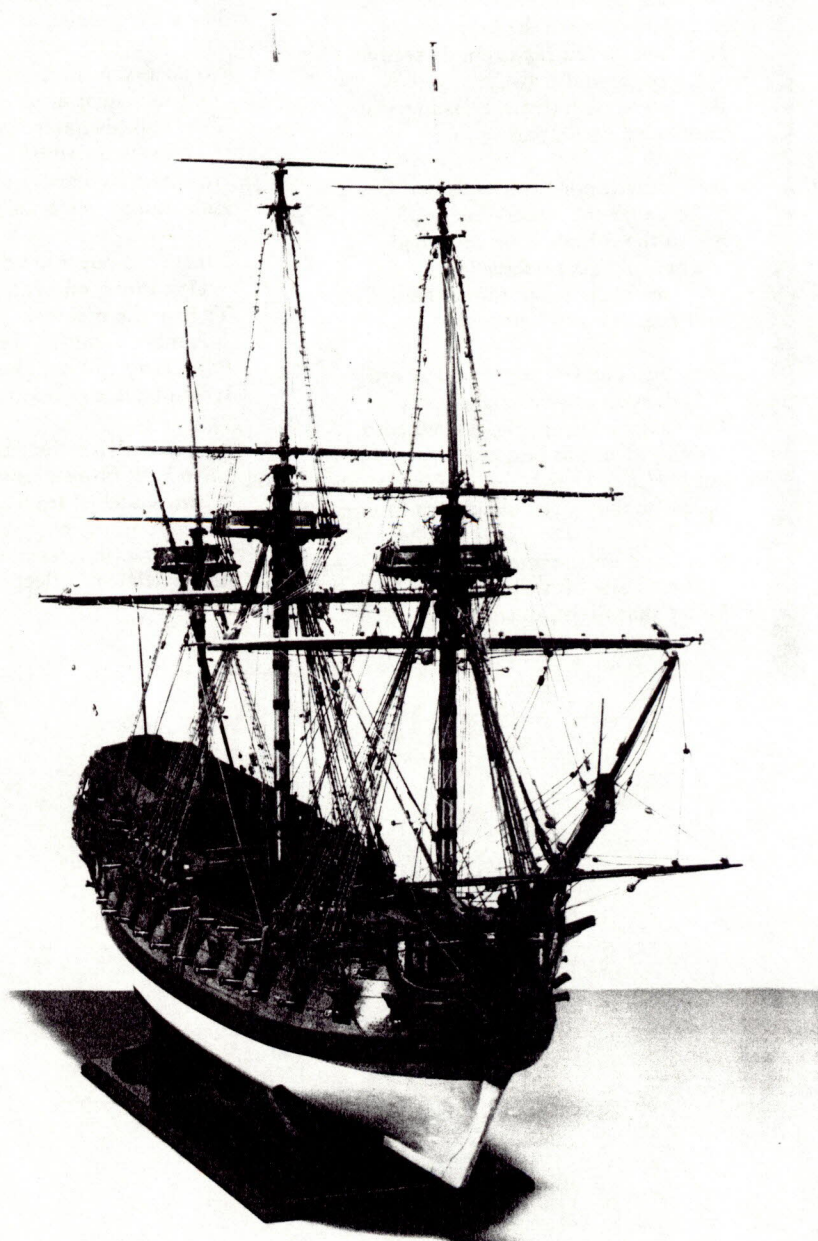
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WOODEN MODEL OF  
THE CENTURION,  
BUILT AT PORTS-  
MOUTH, 1732

L 144 feet  
B 40  
D 16  
1005 ton  
60 guns  
reduced to 50

Courtesy National  
Maritime Museum  
Greenwich



## WILLIAM COWPER

## THE CASTAWAY

Obscurest night involved the sky,  
 The Atlantic billows roared,  
 When such a destined wretch as I,  
 Washed headlong from on board,  
 Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,  
 His floating home forever left.

No braver chief could Albion boast  
 Than he with whom he went,  
 Nor ever ship left Albion's coast,  
 With warmer wishes sent.  
 He loved them both, but both in vain,  
 Nor him beheld, nor her again.

Not long beneath the whelming brine,  
 Expert to swim, he lay;  
 Nor soon he felt his strength decline,  
 Or courage die away;  
 But waged with death a lasting strife,  
 Supported by despair of life.

He shouted: nor his friends had failed  
 To check the vessel's course,  
 But so the furious blast prevailed,  
 That, pitiless perforce,  
 They left their outcast mate behind,  
 And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford;  
 And, such as storms allow,  
 The cask, the coop, the floated cord,  
 Delayed not to bestow.  
 But he (they knew) nor ship, nor shore,  
 Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

Nor, cruel as it seemed, could he  
 Their haste himself condemn,  
 Aware that flight, in such a sea,

Alone could rescue them;  
 Yet bitter felt it still to die  
 Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour  
 In ocean, self-upheld;  
 And so long he, with unspent power,  
 His destiny repelled;  
 And ever, as the minutes flew,  
 Entreated help, or cried, "Adieu!"

At length, his transient respite past,  
 His comrades, who before  
 Had heard his voice in every blast,  
 Could catch the sound no more.  
 For then, by toil subdued, he drank  
 The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him; but the page  
 Of narrative sincere,  
 That tells his name, his worth, his age,  
 Is wet with Anson's tear.  
 And tears by bards or heroes shed  
 Alike immortalize the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,  
 Descanting on his fate,  
 To give the melancholy theme  
 A more enduring date;  
 But misery still delights to trace  
 Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allayed,  
 No light propitious shone,  
 When, snatched from all effectual aid,  
 We perished, each alone;  
 But I beneath a rougher sea,  
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

[1799, 1803]