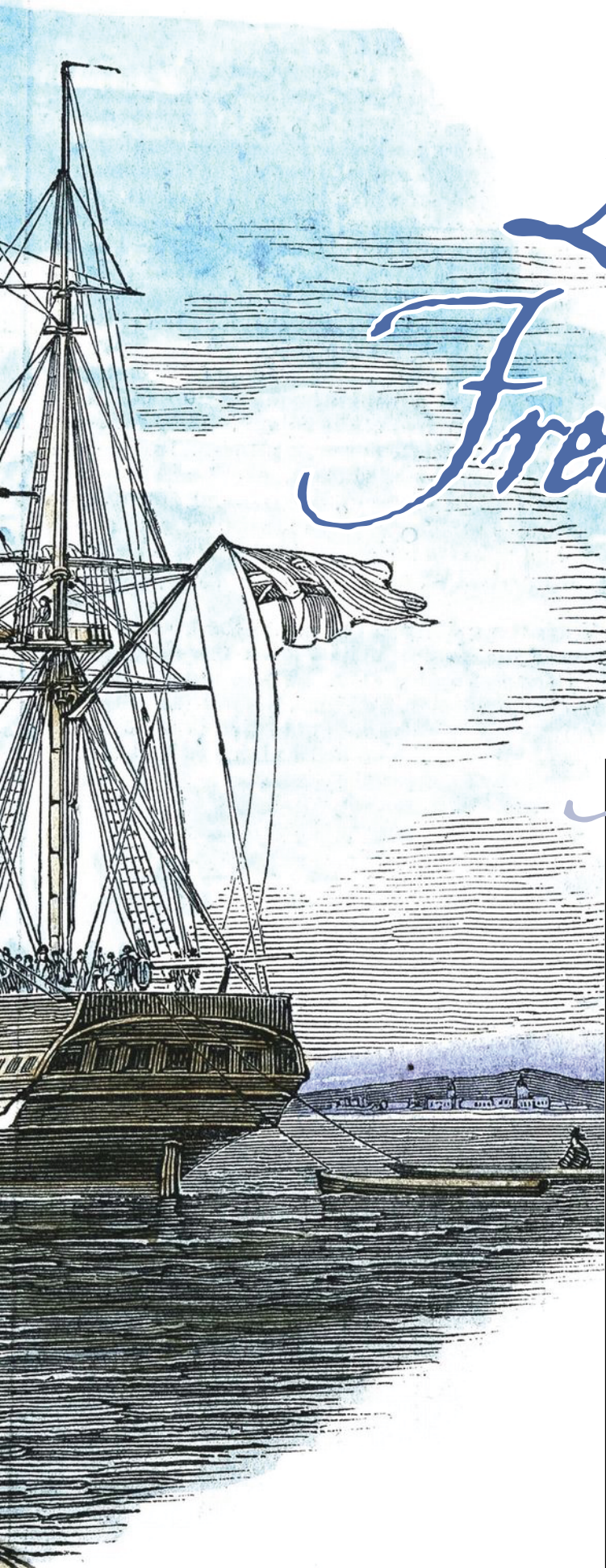


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Let Freedom Ring

By David W. Pettus

It was two a.m. in San Francisco on July 13, 2006, when I learned that the manuscript was mine. Despite unexpectedly spirited bidding at Sotheby's in London, my agent had successfully acquired for me an important trove of nautical history, the 1851 Journal of Lt. Gilbert Elliot Jr., R.N.

I've been collecting books on nautical subjects for many years. When one of my favorite book dealers here in California learned that this unique document was being offered for sale by the family—the first time the journal had ever been seen in public—he immediately called me. Naturally, I was interested, and we engaged an agent in London to inspect and authenticate the journal on which we intended to bid.

I was drawn to this remarkable volume for several reasons. First, illustrated log books are lovely artifacts in their own right. Additionally they have always been important source material for great literature of the sea. And in this case, the seaman's pen-and-ink drawings, interwoven throughout the journal, looked to be excellent and particularly evocative. But most important, I was captivated by the idea of studying this young officer's personal reflections on his mission: to stop the slave trade off the African coast.

Here was a British naval officer charged with overturning the pernicious institution his nation had—after much soul-searching—decided to eliminate from the civilized world, having outlawed slavery on its own shores in 1807. Elliot's journal, it seemed to me, was a vital link in understanding the moral crusade upon which the English people embarked—a mission that, in 1851, cost this young British naval officer and his whole crew their lives at sea.



Pages from the Journal with pen & ink illustrations in the author's hand.

"...I should like very much to freight a ship with Philanthropists"

The description from the Sotheby's catalogue offered tantalizing quotes from the journal, noting that Elliot was a "confident, critical, and highly articulate" observer of life in the British navy, of West Africa in general and of the slave trade in particular; likely he would have published his journal had he made it home alive.

I was quite taken with this account and determined to acquire the journal and to write the full saga of this young man's life as it exemplified this crusade by the British nation.

The auction lot included not only the journal—which Elliot had left aboard HMS "Sampson" when he left the ship—but also Elliot's commission papers, along with letters from the British Admiralty to Elliot's family, informing them of their son's death. The bidding on auction day was, as I said, spirited. I feared I might be up against another individual collector with desire and resources to outstrip my own. In the end the other bidder turned out to be a major institution (I later discovered) with limitless desire, but not a matching purse.

I was simultaneously shocked and pleased when the hammer came down: shocked at the price [£16,800]; glad to have succeeded. I experienced, also, a sense of having committed myself to a project of singular importance.

My pleasure dimmed somewhat when I learned that the British Crown had decided, the following day, to declare the journal a National Treasure. This status meant I could own the journal, but not remove it from Great Britain. However, after expert negotiations by my agent, during which I established my scholarly bona fides, I obtained an "export license" for the item. The terms required me to provide the British Library with a digital copy of the journal. In return, I negotiated a 10-year exclusive right to the contents of the journal, after which the British

Library is entitled to make its digital copy public. In other words, I have eight years left in which to write my book!

The export license duly issued, I traveled to London to pick up my prize. I half expected to be stopped at Heathrow and thrown into a royal dungeon. But I made it back to San Francisco, and quickly became enmeshed in the life and times of Gilbert Elliot, Jr., his family (his father was the Dean of Bristol), and the efforts of the Royal navy to eradicate the slave trade.

As for Elliot's journal, it proved all I'd hoped for, and more. The sketches are, indeed, most evocative—of Elliot's shipmates, from Captain "Vinegar" Jones downward, the vessels encountered, and of the "Slave Coast," as it was then called. Elliot's entries have the spontaneous verve of an eyewitness:

"...There is an American barque at Lagos with her papers all right but only two Americans onboard, she is already to ship slaves having even the water onboard; so that when an opportunity offers she will haul her American colours down and having been sold to Brazilians make off with about 1,000 slaves. This the Yankees are very fond of doing."

Elliot records occasional news from home (the opening of London's Great Exhibition) and the daily frustrations of life onboard ship. His reflections on slavery, both literary and heartfelt, reveal a resolve that would be tested by the complexity of his enterprise.

"...I am one of those who believe that while there is a demand there will be a supply, and that nothing will stop the trade unless we ruin the slave owners."

Of the suffering in the barracoons, those abysmal holding pens where the slaves were kept on the coast clogged up by the British blockade, he laments the



Vellum cover of the journal with illustrations.

and send them out to sea...

"...thousands of poor wretches huddled together where no sea breeze can blow on them..."

Morally and philosophically opposed to slavery, Elliot soon found himself at odds with the unintended consequences of British altruism:

"...I should like very much to freight a ship with Philanthropists and send them out to sea—to shew them what their Philanthropy has...caused their countrymen to suffer [and] what dreadful misery it has brought on those poor unfortunate savages whose condition they pretend to better."

Still, the luxuriant natural beauty of West Africa enchanted the young lieutenant. At anchor at Fernando Po, Elliot wrote:

"A steep beach...clothed with very luxuriant and most exceedingly beautiful foliage I do not think I ever saw so many splendid shades of green—from the bright waving palms—to the dark Acacia with its silver stem."

Elliot also provided fascinating glimpses of the cross-cultural contact along the African coast:

"I left [HMS Sampson] in a canoe...a vessel hollowed out of a small tree, and propelled by three paddles, in the stern sheets were...a heap of monkey skins on which I sat...On landing I made for the house of my friend King Tay who received me with great dignity in a house built in the midst of the mud huts of his subjects...The reception room was hung round with English prints – such as 'Spring Fashions', tailors pattern prints &c...a door opened in to a bedroom in which there was a regular 'four poster' with heavy coverlets, curtains &c"

Among the most moving portions of the journal are the young lieutenant's fears and premonitions. Beneath Elliot's confident Anglicanism, one suspects, lay a sensitive soul, unsettled by the width of a cultural divide, tormented by the brutality of slavery, and vexed by the difficulty of ending it. In the months before he died, his journal entry contains references to ghosts, mirages and other apparitions:

"...I thought in the middle of the storm – last night – I heard a voice – a melancholy wail – such as some wandering spirit might have uttered as he was hurried past a ship and knew that there there dwelt things such as he had been before he was condemned to roam over the world. It is said that sometimes as ships pass over spots where some poor sailors have been drowned those in them hear strange cries...I think that I too can hear these voices – the plaintive wail of long enchained souls..."

Little is known about the circumstances in which Elliot and his crew lost their lives. The HMS "Sampson" had captured a felucca slave vessel named "Purissima," on October 31, 1851, off the Island of St. Thomas. Elliot and a small crew went aboard the "prize" and were probably sailing it to Brazil, to sell off the ship and its contents in a prize court. (The "prize" system, long established in Britain and elsewhere, compensated sailors for victory in battle. A captured vessel would be manned with sailors from the victors' ship, and sailed to a friendly country. There, a prize court would condemn the captured vessel along with its cargo as "spoils of war," sell it, and distribute the proceeds to the officers and crew in varying amounts according to rank. This was a useful incentive to valiant action in those days when most crews served as conscripts.)

All we know of the fate of Elliot and his crew is contained in a letter, dated January, 7, 1852, from the British Admiralty to Elliot's family, saying merely that...

"there is every reason to believe that some accident has happened to the Prize felucca "Purissima," in charge of Lieutenant Gilbert Elliot, with Mr. Charles Wood, Midshipman, 5 seamen, 4 Gunners Royal Marine Artillery, 2 Boys and 2 crewmen."

The letter is transmitted with another, dated February, 23, 1852, which

"...express[es] to you their Lordships' great regret at communicating this intelligence."

I now have the letters to Elliot's parents in my hand. If not for these letters, Elliot's journal might simply be an absorbing episode in the progress of mankind toward freedom and justice for all. But the condition of the letters—ripped in half, as if in horror or anger upon reading the dreadful news—provides moving evidence of a family's grief, and recalls to us the price of every life, whether slave or free man. ☞



David Wingfield Pettus, former president of the National Maritime Park Association in San Francisco, has assembled a noted library of nautical fiction over many years of collecting, and often lectures on collecting at universities and libraries. A graduate of the University of California/Berkeley (B.A., History), he served in the U.S. Army and worked at *Life* magazine before starting a real estate investment business. He retired to pursue a writing career and is currently at work on a book about Gilbert Elliot's journal.