
BOOK REVIEWS

Boon Island, Including Contemporary Accounts of the Wreck of the Nottingham Galley. By Kenneth Roberts. Edited by Jack Bales and Richard Warner. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999. Pp. 373. Paper. \$15.95.)

This is the best printing to date of Kenneth Roberts' 1956 historical novel about a 1710 shipwrecked crew off the coast of Maine. Jack Bales and Richard Warner offer the reader a useful collection of material to accompany Roberts' story. They include two versions of the captain's narrative and one version of the first mate's narrative of the sailor's ordeal. Though the two narratives are usually referred to as "Deane's" and "Langman's," the first was actually coauthored by Captain John Deane, his brother Jasper Deane, and Miles Whitworth; the latter was coauthored by First Mate Christopher Langman, Boatswain Nicholas Mellin, and sailor George White. All six were survivors of the Boon Island ordeal.

The editors also offer the reader short articles on the history of Captain Deane and on Kenneth Roberts as a writer. Reading the narratives and the article on Deane before the novel allows the reader to understand the factual basis and controversies surrounding the characters and plot.

From the narratives, printed in 1711, we know that Captain John Deane and a crew of thirteen sailed from London with a cargo of cordage in the autumn of 1710, picked up an additional cargo of butter and cheese in Ireland, and sailed for Boston. Sailing along the New England coast on December 11, they hit the rocks off Boon Island during a stormy night. All of the crew were able to get on the island with great difficulty, but the cook died from injuries or exposure within a few days.

The remaining crew experienced one of the most grueling survival ordeals of modern history. Boon Island is only a jumble of rocks broken from the granite ledge below. The highest rock is fourteen feet above high tide; it is often covered by waves

during a storm. Not even a blade of grass grows on Boon Island. Constantly wet, without any fire, the crew lived minute by minute through December and into January eating raw mussels, sea weed, a gull – and eventually the carpenter when he died.

After twenty-four days of extreme deprivation, people from the mainland rescued the ten remaining crew and nursed them back to health. This outline of the crew's voyage and ordeal is common to both Deane's and Langman's narratives, but the details are vastly different, including accusations of deliberately losing the ship for the insurance, merciless treatment of the crew, malingering, and printing and spreading malicious lies about each other after the rescue.

Roberts' tale is narrated by a young passenger who is the son of Miles Whitworth. From his treatment of the characters in the first chapters, Roberts makes it clear that he sides with Captain Deane's story. He presents Deane as tough, intelligent, honorable, and good. Deane's knowledge, hard work, and constant vigilance saved the crew and set a good example for young Whitworth and modern readers alike. Langman and his followers are evil, lazy, and whining. They are scum who make life on the island even more miserable than that already provided by nature. (For a discussion of Roberts' use of the novel as a morality play, see Edgar Allen Beem, "Politics of Cannibalism," *Downeast Magazine*, August 1997.)

Roberts' style is fluid and readable and his subject is a magnet to many. Yet one is left with the feeling that the novel was not finished; much of the story and its characters want fleshing-out. Perhaps Roberts intended this story, with clearly defined good and evil, for young readers who would not want more sophisticated plots and details.

While most of the historical material appears to be valid, some small details are inaccurate. These do not make the novel less entertaining, but given Roberts' reputation for historic accuracy, his mistakes in this book are surprising. For example, he calls the ship "the galley *Nottingham*," when its registered name was *Nottingham Galley*, and on page 137 he appears to

confuse the English merchant galley with Mediterranean rowed galleys. Though the captain was sailing for Boston, and therefore should have sailed clear of Boon Island, the author has the ship sailing for nearby Portsmouth, probably to exonerate Deane from making such a mistake. Roberts also repeated erroneous information, published by George Wasson in 1949 (*Sailing Days on the Penobscot: The Story of the River and the Bay in the Old Days*), about eighteenth-century pinks and rowing techniques. However, these are all nitpicking, and one should not be deterred from reading this fine book.

This is a good novel about a notable event in Maine history. It is an especially good read for people who are temporarily bed-ridden: It is hard to feel sorry for oneself while reading the circumstances of these fourteen men. Even if one's library already contains a copy of *Boon Island*, this edition, with the appended three narratives and articles, is definitely worth the price.

Warren Riess
Darling Marine Center