

Andrew Norman. *Bound for the East Indies: Halsewell - Shipwreck that Grippped the Nation*. Stroud, UK: Fonthill Media, www.fonthillmedia.com, 2020. 187 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. UK £16.00, US \$24.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-78155-753-2. (E-book available.)

In 1602, Elizabeth I gave her assent to a charter to the Honourable East India Company (HEIC) that granted a monopoly of trade between London and the East Indies. Trade with the East was not without challenge. The Dutch and the French had also made their way to the subcontinent and the rich islands of Indonesia. Although the English Navy defeated the Dutch in the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654), the Dutch stayed entrenched in the eastern trade. The HEIC broadened its horizons, obtained footholds in Asia and the fight between England and France was concluded with defeat of the latter at Arcot in 1751. Internal resistance in Bengal was squashed at Plassey in 1757. While the Royal Navy controlled the seas, the HEIC ruled a large part of the Subcontinent. It was for them the Honourable Company's Ship *Halsewell* sailed the seas and carried their trade. The ship was launched on 24 August 1778, with three masts and three decks, it displaced 776 tons, had a length of 139 feet, 7 inches, and was armed with 26 cannons. The HEIC traded in the best of the products of the East: mace, nutmeg, tea, sugar, silks, cloths, precious stones like rubies, diamonds, sapphires, pearls, red coral, indigo, cotton wool, linen, pepper, rice, ginger, opium, exotic birds, and beasts.

Halsewell's captain, Richard Peirce, was born 1736 in Calcutta, the capital of the Indian State of Bengal. In 1761, aged 25, Peirce was made third mate on HCS *Horsenden*, and sailed to China. A few years later, he was second mate on *Pacific*. In 1767, in London, Peirce married Mary Burston. They lived at Kingston-upon-Thames, in Surrey, raising two sons, and seven daughters. In 1768, Peirce became captain of East Indiaman *Earl of Ashburnham*, making several voyages to China. Appointed captain of *Halsewell* in 1778, Peirce's first voyage to India and China lasted three years and spanned 35,000 nautical miles. On board the vessel was a cargo of copper, plus an army detachment of ninety-three military personnel, plus five women, and two children. The ship called into Madeira, Goree (Senegal), Table Bay in South Africa, Madras, and China. During this voyage Peirce lost a part of his crew to a British naval officer named Horatio Nelson, whose vessel was short-handed. On Peirce's second voyage with *Halsewell* in 1782, he sailed to Cape Verde, East Africa, and the Bay of Bengal, with a cargo of copper, lead, iron, and brass ordnance. On board were 141 military personnel, two women, the painter Johan Zofany, who had painted a portrait of King George III, his Queen and family, and portraits for royals on the European mainland. On the return voyage, the cargo consisted of bales of cotton and sappan wood [an astringent].

On 1 January 1786, *Halsewell* sailed through The Downs roadstead off Deal on the coast of Kent. Aboard were 103 passengers, among them two daughters and two nieces of Captain Peirce. The cargo consisted of silver, ironmongery, sheet copper, metals, canvas, and marine stores. The first stop would be Madeira, for fresh water, fruit, vegetables, and local wine. A day later, with the ship south of the Isle of Wight, the weather started to get worse. At nine in the evening, falling snow and freezing conditions forced Peirce to anchor. Next morning, in a strong gale, *Halsewell* had to cut anchors and run to sea. By ten that night, a violent gale from the south forced water in through the hawseholes (through which the anchor cables pass), allowing a large amount of water to flow onto the gun deck. Meanwhile, the ship already had five feet of water in her bilges. Captain Peirce had his fair share of worries. For much of the storm, many of the crew had been inattentive and remiss in their duty, and with a clear disregard for discipline absolutely refused to obey the officers. By 4 January, the situation on board *Halsewell* was becoming desperate. At two a.m., it was decided to cut away the mizzen mast, by which time there was seven feet of water in the hold. Later, in the struggle to cut away the main mast, five crewmen fell overboard and drowned – but the ship continued sailing in westerly direction. Six hours later, the winds pushed *Halsewell* to the north. At ten o'clock, while approaching the coast, the course was altered again, an easterly course that did not agree with the winds, destroying the fore-top mast and the foresail. Luckily, jury-rigged replacements resolved the immediate problems. Nevertheless, the strong gale was still hammering away on the vessel and its anchors failed to hold the ship near the shore at Aldhelm's Head.

On 6 January, at 2 a.m., the ship met its demise on the worst of places: cliffs of vast heights, at the mouth of a cavern, difficult to access due to the sharp and uneven rocks. It must have been a deplorable scene, *Halsewell* on the rocks, giving way to the force of the sea. The stricken vessel was pummelled to pieces, creaking, groaning, splitting under the strain. The cliffs reached about one hundred feet above sea level. Soldiers and crew tried to climb ashore in the cave on narrow shelves out of reach of the surf. Some succeeded in climbing the sheer cliff, others failed along the way and perished. On the cliffs, a nearby house raised the alarm and local quarrymen came to the rescue. Long before daybreak the wreck was shattered to pieces, the whole ocean covered with fragments of the ship and contents, broken masts, trunks, dead bodies, debris. *Halsewell* had departed with over 240 people on board – only 74 survived the ordeal.

In January 1786, the first divers went to work on the wreck. Customs officers were able to salvage 54 barrels of wine, along with other items. Soon, the site and the remains of *Halsewell* became something of a tourist attraction, as even King George III and his entourage visited the area to see for

themselves. The demise of *Halsewell* was recorded in more than one way in popular culture. Poems appeared on the subject and a composer wrote a music piece. In 1818, artist J.M.W. Turner painted “Loss of an East Indiaman.” In 1853 Charles Dickens authored a short story on the tragedy. Artists created aquatints, engravings, and oil paintings. Although it may not have been seen as a national disaster at the time, the attention drawn by the ordeal most certainly gives that impression. Two centuries later, the wreck still appeals to divers, treasure hunters, and Andrew Norman, who has written a gripping story.

Jacob Bart Hak
Leiden, Netherlands

Michal A. Piegzik. *The Darkest Hour. Volume 1: The Japanese Offensive in the Indian Ocean.* Havertown, PA: Helion & Co, Asia @War Series, www.casematepublishers.com, 2022. 80 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography. US \$29.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-91507-061-6.

Overall, I was quite impressed with this eighty-four-page book detailing the opening moves of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) operations in the Indian Ocean during early 1942. Following the fall of Singapore, in February, the Imperial Japanese Navy continued to push southwards into the Netherlands East Indies and eastwards towards New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. To the west, they planned to secure a safe western flank to support their advance in Burma and towards the Indian border. Ultimately, the Japanese plan was to foment an anti-British uprising in India, which would prevent British forces from attempting to re-capture Burma, Malaya and Singapore. To secure the Burmese southern flank required the capture of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (at the northern entrance to the Malacca Strait) and then, neutralisation of the Royal Navy base at Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) was required. An adjunct to this plan was the seizure of Christmas Island (south of Java) for its valuable phosphate supplies to enhance Japanese agricultural output, but this later action was a minor one.

Admiral Yamamoto continued to seek a decisive battle where he could destroy the US Navy aircraft carriers, which was only going to happen in the western Pacific, so he considered the Indian Ocean sorties a side show. The USN conducted offensive operations in the Pacific during March-April 1942, including the famous Dolittle raid on Tokyo, which reminded Yamamoto that the American navy was still an effective force to be reckoned with. Meanwhile, Japanese submarines were based at the Island of Penang (west coast of the Malayan Peninsula) and commenced offensive operations in the Bay of