Nottingham Galley at Boon Island: History, Archaeology, and Novel

By Warren C. Riess

Cet article examine le naufrage en 1710 de la Nottingham Galley *qui était l'incident le mieux connu dans la vie de John Deane. L'auteur explique comment les récits, publiés au XVIIIème siècle par Deane et son frère en justification de leurs actions face à un compte publié par deux membres d'équipage qui ont accusé les Deane d'intention criminelle et de négligence, ont servi de toile de fond pour un roman populaire en 1956. L'histoire a gagné un public élargi dans les années 90 quand l'auteur a organisé la récupération sous-marine de canons en fer découvert près de l'Île Boon, dans le Maine, où le naufrage a eu lieu. Il décrit ce travail et la recherche qui démontre que les canons sont venus de l'épave de 1710.*

This study is an archaeological epilogue to Richard Warner's portrait of Captain John Deane, providing a discussion of the artifacts discovered on Boon Island more than 280 years after the *Nottingham Galley* foundered. In the late autumn of 1710, Captain John Deane and his crew of thirteen were sailing to Boston on a peaceful mission of commerce, carrying cordage from London and butter and cheese from Killybags, Ireland. Their ship, *Nottingham Galley*, 120 tons, carried ten small cannon to ward off pirates and enemy privateers.[1] In 1710 England was in the middle of the War of Spanish Succession (Queen Anne's War).

The captain's older brother Jasper Deane owned the ship and part of her cargo, and was on board for the voyage. After an eventful voyage, punctuated by the sighting of possible privateers, trouble between the officers and crew, and weathering storms, Deane approached the New England coast off Maine and sailed westward toward Boston, fighting a severe storm for days. At approximately 9 pm on 11 December, in total darkness, the *Nottingham Galley* struck a ledge on the corner of Boon Island, approximately seven miles off the small town of York, Maine.

All fourteen men struggled through the rocks, ice, and surf to the island. Huddled

1 Kenneth Roberts, *Boon Island* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1996). The editors reprinted several primary documents in this edition of *Boon Island*. Citations therefore are to this modern publication when possible.

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together for warmth, they shivered through the night, enduring the storm waves' spray, snow, and freezing rain. In the morning they realized that they were on a low jumble of broken granite ledges, with little food and nothing dry with which to make a fire. The miserable crew could see smoke from the fires of people living on the mainland, yet no one saw the castaways. For days, most of the resourceful crew managed to survive without a fire, eating raw mussels and a gull. When the cook died they cast him into the sea. But when the carpenter died they desperately decided to eat his raw flesh.

The remaining twelve men suffered through the frigid days of December and part of January, without the ability to make a fire. In mid-January, with their last remaining strength, they constructed a raft and sent two men toward the mainland for help. Before they could sail the seven miles to shore, the sea beat their raft apart. The two men drowned, but the local people on the mainland found one of the bodies and the remains of the raft. The next day they sent a rescue team to Boon Island and took the frail survivors into their homes, nursing them back to health.

The survivors slowly recovered, but before they returned to England, some of the crew signed a deposition and were preparing a narrative claiming that Captain Deane and his brother purposely had wrecked the ship for insurance money. We are indebted to them for this act, because it prompted the two Deane brothers to publish quickly their narrative of the story. First Mate Christopher Longman, the boatswain, and another sailor then published their narrative refuting the Deane's story and piling up more accusations against Captain Deane. Among other problems, they wrote that four of the ten guns were inoperable. The Deanes then republished their narrative a few times in the next decades to reinforce their rendition of the events while the mate fell into obscurity. John Deane, made famous by the episode and publications, lived a full and adventurous life.

While most eighteenth-century Britons knew about *Nottingham Galley*'s demise and its crew's trials, the story eventually fell out of vogue until the mid-twentieth century, when Kenneth Roberts used the two opposing narratives as the basis for his last novel, *Boon Island.* He told the story from the perspective of a young man learning the ropes in *Nottingham Galley* on his first voyage and his subsequent survival ordeal. From Roberts' treatment of the characters in the first chapters, he made it clear that he accepted Captain Deane's story, rather than the mate's. He presented Deane as tough, intelligent, honorable, and good. Deane's knowledge, hard work, and constant vigilance saved the crew and set a good example for the young man and modern readers alike. Langman and his followers were evil, lazy, and whining. They were scum who made life on that barren island still more miserable. This set well with reviewers when the novel was published in 1956, but when the University of New England republished the novel in 1996, *Downeast Magazine* headlined their review, "Politics of Cannibalism, Kenneth Roberts' 1956 bestseller turns a cruel bit of Maine history into a right-wing morality play."[2]

Roberts' writing style is fluid and quite readable, and while most of the historical material in the novel appears to be valid, some small details are inaccurate. The erroneous

2 Edgar Allen Beem, "Politics of Cannabalism," *Downeast Magazine* (August, 1997), pp. 29-30.

details do not make the story less entertaining, but given Roberts' reputation for historical 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 he appears to confuse the English merchant galley with Mediterranean rowed galleys. Though he knew the captain was sailing for Boston, and therefore should have sailed clear of Boon Island, Roberts had the ship sailing for nearby Portsmouth, probably to exonerate Deane from making such a navigation error. Roberts also repeated erroneous information, published by George Wasson in 1949, about eighteenth-century pinks and rowing techniques.[3] However, these are all small details, certainly allowable in a novel. The latest edition of the book includes not only the novel, but also two versions of the Deans' narrative, the mate's narrative, and an article each by Richard Warner and Jack Bales about John Deane and Kenneth Roberts.[4]

While hundreds of thousands of people have read Roberts' *Boon Island*, many thought it was purely fiction, not based on a real shipwreck. However, as people began to scuba dive through the kelp beds around the island a few discovered a number of small cannon in 25 feet (8 m) of water, lying on the granite ledge where *Nottingham Galley* met its demise. They reported them to the Maine State Museum staff, who asked the divers to leave the cannon alone because the museum did not have the resources to conserve them. In 1994 the situation changed as sea urchins moved into the area, destroyed the kelp beds, and thereby uncovered the cannon for all to see. J.R. Phillips, director of the museum, heard that a group from Massachusetts was planning to steal the cannon, so he contacted the author at the University of Maine to see if we could identify, recover, and conserve the guns.

Late that year I inspected the site, guided by Tap Taylor and Jeff Campbell, two local commercial divers who were trying to protect the cannon. The cannon were in the right place and seemed to be of the correct size and date to be from *Nottingham Galley*. Nine of the original ten remained. However, they were about to disintegrate where they lay because no sediment protected them from the ocean's dissolved oxygen and salts.

The next summer I returned with a University of Maine team of students and staff to raise and conserve the guns. Knowing their fragility, I constructed a fake cannon with PVC and sand, threw it overboard, and had the team recover it on two practice runs. In the ledge's crevices around the island we found and raised nine corroded cannon tubes, nine iron solid shot (cannon balls), some lead shot for small arms, two cast iron hand grenades, and two lead fishing weights. We found nothing else at the time or when we returned one year later to search for any other possible remains.

After recovery operations, we transported everything to the university's Darling Marine Center and began a long conservation project. Each of the cannon was cleaned, soaked in fresh water, subjected to electrolytic reduction to remove the salts from the iron, washed again, treated with tannic acid, and finally dried and sealed in a hot microcrystalline wax bath. Inspections during the process showed the cannon were so

3 George Wasson, *Sailing Days on the Penobscot: The Story of the River and the Bay in the Old Days* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949).

4 Roberts, *Boon Island*.

corroded there was little metal left, only matrices of graphite and iron in the general shape of cannon.

Two guns still held tampions in their muzzles, partially wrapped with thin linen to serve as gaskets. After a few months of electrolytic reduction had softened the concretions surrounding the iron, it was time to remove the concretion from inside the gun tubes. This was a delicate, slow operation because the concretion in the bores was harder than the surrounding remains of the iron. As we proceeded, we found that the two cannon with tampions, and one other, were loaded with black powder bags and string wadding, but no shot.

The team spent five years conserving the nine cannon and most of the other artifacts. Molly Carlson and Betty Seifert, two professional conservators, worked on the very delicate items, such as the tampions, their linen wrappings, and the grenade fuse plugs. Presently, the Maine State Museum in Augusta curates all of the artifacts. Our analysis of the artifacts to date revealed only one surprise - the nationality of the cannons' manufacturers. The cannon tubes' shape and size indicated English cannon to me. In the late seventeenth century, the Swedish began to copy English gun-casting techniques and supplied England's enemies with cannon. The English liked the new Swedish design well enough to cast their own, generally called *fin bankers*. The English supplied themselves and their allies with fin bankers—this is what I thought we had recovered.[5]

Yet, Leeds historian Ruth Brown, the British expert on the subject, pointed out details in the reinforcement rings and muzzle that indicate the cannon we found were made in Sweden, not England. Generally, the Swedish guns, though very good, were not cast with as much detail as the English. Though interesting, this is not a major surprise for 1710. In the middle of the war, each side captured and used many ships, their cannon, hardware, and cargos. Jasper Deane may have purchased a prize of war or armed his merchant ship with captured or purchased Swedish guns.

All of the other artifacts from the *Nottingham Galley* site were similar to those found elsewhere from that time period. We therefore did not extract any significant information from these artifacts. Instead, their importance is to connect the present to the 1710 episode of shipwreck and gruesome survival; to lend reality to a well-known story.[6] The Maine State Museum's excellent curation also will preserve them for future researchers. The nationality of the guns suggests the need for some further study, however, the nineteenth-century destruction of many official records from that period have hindered efforts to date to learn more about the circumstances leading to the ship's voyage to the New World. Further research in less accessible archives and private collections may uncover more information in the future.

5 Ole L. Frantzen, "Finbankers," *Journal of the Ordnance Society* Vol. 13 (2001), pp. 5-24.

6 Warren Riess, "Field Report, Boon Island, Cannon Recovery and Site Reconnaissance," Report prepared for the Maine State Museum, Augusta, Maine, 1996.