



“To Obviate a Scandalous Reflection”:
Revisiting the Wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*

STEPHEN ERICKSON

LEWIS BANE, coroner of the frontier settlement at York, Maine, was called to duty early on the morning of New Year’s Day, 1711.¹ Through a snowy woods Bane was led onto the broad expanse of desolate, windswept beach at Wells, where a body had washed ashore.² The male corpse was emaciated and its skin was marred with ulcers and blackened in places from having been frozen. Two to three hundred yards away lay “a Raft of Ships tackle.” The makeshift raft and the condition of the corpse close by it would have prompted Bane to look up and out to the horizon, on which sat a barren rock—Boon Island.³

Bane supposed that a ship had wrecked on Boon Island. There was a chance, then, that stranded men were in need of rescuing. He hurried to nearby Cape Neddick harbor, where he found the fisherman John Stover. Even though the weather was

¹At this time, the English recognized 25 March as the civil or legal New Year, but otherwise 1 January was considered the beginning of the year and was frequently accompanied by popular festivals. It was not until 1752 that 1 January also became the legal beginning of the year. During the interim, to avoid confusion, both years were often used in dating documents, such as 1 January 1710/1711.

²Probably present-day Ogunquit Beach.

³The quotation is from the appraisal of John Stover’s shallop found among the Massachusetts Provincial Papers, House of Representatives, 2 June 1711, “typed copy of the petition of Lewis Bane, the appraisal of his shallop, and the House Resolve read and concurred on June 5, 1711, found at the Portsmouth Athenaeum”; the originals are in the Massachusetts Archives Collection, vol. 3, pp. 419–20. Captain John Deane’s 1711 narrative, cited below, places the corpse at a greater distance from the wreckage and mentions a paddle tied around the body’s wrist; the crewmen, in their account, refer to a second corpse up off the beach (see n. 5).

a little rough, Bane commandeered Stover and his fishing boat, a “shallop,” to set out on a mission to Boon Island. Stover may have thought it a dubious exercise, since he carried no food for any hungry shipwreck victims he might find. Indeed, chances were slim of discovering anyone alive in such an inhospitable place as Boon Island in winter.

As they made their way across the eight-mile stretch of water between the mouth of the Cape Neddick River and Boon Island, something bright and white caught the eyes of Stover and the three men accompanying him. When they drew closer, they were astonished to spot panels of sailcloth fashioned into a crude and feeble shelter against the elements. Then, as they moved in, they observed three gaunt male figures standing on the rock, frantically waving. None of the castaways was wearing a coat, even though the temperature was—as it is in Maine at that time of year—near or even considerably below freezing. One of the men identified himself as John Deane,⁴ captain of the late *Nottingham Galley*, which had foundered on Boon Island on 11 December. Deane begged Stover to attempt an evacuation or, if that was too risky, at least to supply the desperate survivors with fire.

The shallop carried a small canoe, which one of the men, after battling the heavy surf, landed on the island. He was rendered speechless by the captain’s “thin and meagre Aspect.” Deane led the would-be rescuer to the makeshift tent. When Deane pulled open its flap to reveal the seven castaways huddled together on a thin bed of oakum, the sight and smell revulsed the fisherman’s senses. Later Deane remarked that the rescuer “was perfectly affrighted at the Ghastly Figure of so many dismal Objects, with long Beards, nothing but skin and bone; wild staring Eyes, and Countenances, fierce, barbarous, unwash’d and infected with Humane Gore.” Some of the shipwreck victims gathered at his feet, tried to clutch at his ankles with swollen, frost-bitten hands, and began to sob.⁵

⁴Sometimes spelled “Dean.”

⁵Information about the shipwreck and the circumstances surrounding it are from four primary accounts, three written by the ship’s captain, John Deane, and one

News of the castaways stranded on Boon Island must have spread quickly, though it was not until three days later, on 4 January, that a break in the weather allowed the survivors of the *Nottingham Galley* to be rescued. During these early days of 1711, the Atlantic world was first introduced to a shipwreck tale that would prove to be in equal parts horrific, controversial, and mysterious. Of the fourteen men who had lived through the shipwreck and become stranded on Boon Island, ten survived the twenty-four days of subfreezing temperatures with no fire or warm clothing and almost no food; one of the four victims had been cannibalized.

written by three of his crewmen, as well as from depositions, generally published with the accounts. The majority of the primary documents associated with the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley* can be found in the most recent edition of Kenneth Roberts's *Boon Island* (originally published 1956), ed. Jack Bales and Richard Warner (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1996), including: the second version of Deane's narrative, *A Narrative of the Sufferings, Preservation, and Deliverance of Capt. John Deane and Company; in the Nottingham-Galley of London, cast away on Boon Island, near New England, December 11, 1710*, ed. Jasper Deane (London: R. Tooke, 1711); the third version, *A Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Nottingham Galley, etc. Published in 1711. Revised and Reprinted with Additions in 1726, by John Deane, Commander* (London: by the author, 1726); the competing narrative written by first mate Christopher Langman, boatswain Nicholas Mellen, and sailor George White, *A True Account of the voyage of the Nottingham-Galley of London, John Deane Commander, from the River Thames to New England. Near which place she was cast away on Boon Island December 11, 1710, by the Captain's Obstinacy, who endeavour'd to betray her to the French, or run her ashore; with an Account of the Falsehoods in the Captain's Narrative. And a faithful Relation of the Extremities the Company was Reduc'd to for Twenty-four Days on that Desolate Rock, where they were forced to eat one of their Companions who died, but were at last wonderfully deliver'd. The Whole attested to upon Oath, by Christopher Langman, Mate; Nicholas Mellen, Boatswain; and George White, Sailor in the Said Ship* (London: S. Popping, 1711); a joint legal deposition taken out by Langman, Mellen, and White in Portsmouth, N.H., 9 February 1710/11, and their individual depositions taken in London, 1 August 1711, and published with their original *Account*. For convenience, page numbering for these sources is from the Bales and Warner edition of Roberts's *Boon Island*. The only major primary document not included by Bales and Warner is the first version of Deane's narrative attached to a sermon published by Cotton Mather, *Compassion Called For: A Faithful Relation of some late but Strange Occurrences that call for an awful and useful Consideration. Especially the Surprising Distress and Deliverances of a Company lately shipwrecked on a Desolate Rock on the Coast of New England* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1711) found in Charles Evans, *Early American Imprint Series*, No. 1507. Note that Warner, in "Captain John Deane and the Wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*" (*New England Quarterly* 48:1 [March 1995]) and republished in his and Bales's edition of Roberts's *Boon Island*, misrepresents the publication chronology of Deane's narratives. The *Relation* edited by Mather preceded the *Narrative* edited by Jasper Deane by three months and therefore is in fact the first of John Deane's published narratives. The material quoted here is from Deane, *Narrative*, 1726 ed., pp. 84–85.

The tale of the ill-fated *Nottingham Galley* and its captain, John Deane, is one of the classic tragedies of maritime history. Given its printing history, it was certainly one of the most well-known shipwreck disasters in the first half of the eighteenth century. Deane was responsible for three different versions of his narrative, two of which were published multiple times. During the summer immediately following the wreck, first mate Christopher Langman, boatswain Nicholas Mellen,⁶ and seaman George White penned another version highly critical of their captain. *Boon Island*, the last novel of twentieth-century author Kenneth Roberts, familiarized his many readers with the story. More recently, maritime histories involving cannibalism, such as Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship "Essex"* and Neil Hanson's *Custom of the Sea*, refer back to the cannibalism incident on Boon Island.⁷

Even though a great deal of ink has been spilled on the *Nottingham Galley* wreck and its commander, depictions remain shaded, fragmented, and incomplete. The episode on Boon Island is only the most horrific aspect of a larger, much more complicated chronicle involving mutiny, politics, class conflict, reputation, and the power of the written and printed word. That "story of the story" is the heretofore unexamined key to understanding the causes—now, as the event's three-hundredth anniversary approaches—of the *Nottingham Galley* shipwreck and its long, intriguing aftermath.



Finally safe and warm, the crew of the *Nottingham Galley* convalesced in a Portsmouth tavern, where a local doctor looked after them, all at the expense of some of New Hampshire's leading gentlemen, including John Wentworth, founder of the colony's great political dynasty. Captain Deane, by far

⁶Spelled variously "Mellen," "Mellin," and "Mellon."

⁷For contemporary accounts relating to cannibalism, see Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship "Essex"* (New York: Viking, 2000), and Neil Hanson, *The Custom of the Sea* (New York: Wiley, 1999).

the healthiest of the survivors, recovered at the home of an acquaintance, Captain Jethro Furber. Furber also hosted Deane's close friend merchant Miles Whitworth, a particularly sick gentleman who had been a passenger on the *Nottingham Galley*. Also very ill but housed elsewhere was John Deane's brother, Jasper, principal owner of the ship. Captain Deane's relative vigor seems more a testament to his particular physiology than to any advantage he may have acquired through unscrupulous means or social rank.

While the ship's company, some barely conscious, struggled to regain strength, Deane busied himself putting words to paper. Within a few days he produced a legal document, a "protest," required in any proceeding to determine liability. Deane set about absolving himself and his crew of all responsibility for the ship's loss, the result, he insisted, of circumstances beyond their control. He then carried his protest over to the tavern, where he secured the signature of first mate Christopher Langman, described as "very ill with a Flux and Fever." The "boatswain" also signed the protest, but other documentation suggests that the actual boatswain, Nicholas Mellen, may have refused his endorsement and that seaman George White signed in his stead.⁸

Meanwhile, word of the shipwreck and suffering on Boon Island reached Boston. Weaving the news into one of his Thursday sermons, Cotton Mather portrayed men "over-run with Ulcers," "Starving to Death," and "Breaking on the Rock." He hoped to exploit public interest in the terrifying event by impressing upon people, particularly sailors, the power of God's wrath and the potential for His mercy.⁹ Mather intended to publish his sermon, but he wanted an accurate account of the story to accompany it, so he sent a letter to his old friend Samuel Penhallow, a prominent Portsmouth magistrate. Mather asked for an "Expressive and Punctual Relation of the horrid Matter, and such as one, as being well attested, may

⁸Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 57. Only within the context of the protest signing is White identified as "boatswain." In every other place where their ranks are identified, Mellen is the boatswain and White is a sailor.

⁹Mather, *Compassion Called For*.

be Relied upon.” “The Least material Mistake,” he cautioned, “may be a great Inconvenience.”¹⁰

Before long, Deane was healthy enough to journey over the notoriously bad winter roads between Portsmouth and Boston to deliver the first draft of his narrative to Mather. With Mather’s editorial assistance, Deane polished up this first full account of the *Nottingham Galley* disaster and dated it “Boston, N.E. [New England] Jan 26, 1710,”¹¹ only twenty-two days after he and his fellow survivors had been evacuated from Boon Island. However, the captain and the Puritan minister may not have been entirely candid about the date of the manuscript, because it was not until 4 March that Mather recorded in his diary that the narrative that he planned to publish was “put into my hands.”¹² An earlier date would, the men knew, suggest fresher and therefore more accurate recollections.

Most of the essential elements of the shipwreck story and the grueling survival experience are not in dispute and are vividly described in the various versions of Deane’s report of them. The *Nottingham Galley*, a 120-ton, armed merchant vessel, sailed from London with a load of cordage. Its announced destination was Boston, at Massachusetts Bay. Along the way, the *Nottingham Galley* called at Killybegs, in Ireland, where an additional cargo, a load of butter and cheese, was put aboard before it embarked again on 24 September 1710. After an unusually long passage, the unfortunate vessel was tossed in a nor’easter in the Gulf of Maine on 11 December. Between the hours of eight and nine o’clock P.M., the *Nottingham Galley* collided with Boon Island.

In each of the two revised versions of Deane’s *Narrative*, he tends to add information, sometimes changing emphasis, but only on the matter of the ship’s heading on the night of the wreck does he directly contradict himself. In the first version he

¹⁰Cotton Mather to Samuel Penhallow, 1 January 1710/11, in *Diary of Cotton Mather*, vol. 2, 1709–24 (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 37–38. Mather must have written the wrong date on the letter. It clearly refers to the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*, but news of the survivors did not reach the mainland until 2 January.

¹¹Deane, in Mather, *Compassion Called For*.

¹²*Diary of Cotton Mather*, 4 March 1711, pp. 47–48.

reports the ship heading “something southerly”; in the second he has it “haling Southerly for the Massachusetts-Bay, under a hard gale of Wind at North-East.” By the time Deane got around to revising his *Narrative* in 1726, sixteen years after the fact, he changed his story, saying since “the Wind being N.E. and the Land lying N.E and S.W, they concluded it both Safe and Advisable to *steer S.W.* ’till 10 a Clock at Night and then lie by ’till Morning, with the Head of their Vessel off from Land.”¹³ This last statement regarding compass direction at the time of the wreck is probably the most accurate. Any course that steered the *Nottingham Galley* westward, toward the rocky shore, was inherently more risky than steering in a southerly direction, which would have brought the vessel gradually further out to sea. Perhaps sixteen years after the disaster, Deane was more comfortable disclosing the ship’s actual heading when it ran aground, whereas in 1710 and 1711 circumstances pressured him to claim a course direction that any mariner would judge to be prudent. Deane’s opponents also say that the ship was veering westward when it hit Boon Island. Maybe by 1726 Deane felt compelled to concede the point.

All fourteen of the ship’s company escaped the stricken *Nottingham Galley* by means of one of its masts, which had fortuitously fell upon the rock after being partially cut away by members of the crew. When the weather cleared, the castaways saw how tantalizingly close they were to the mainland. During their time on the rock, ships would pass by, but the hapless survivors had no means to make a signal fire. Without fire and warm clothing, hypothermia and frostbite quickly set in. After just a few days, exposure took the life of its first victim, the ship’s cook, whose body was set adrift. Shortly afterward the castaways built their makeshift tent. Crucially, the body heat of the men, who were packed tightly together, kept the temperature inside above freezing.¹⁴ During the first week, they

¹³See Deane, in Mather, *Compassion Called For; Narrative*, ed. Jasper Deane, 1711, and *Narrative*, 1726, p. 66; italics added.

¹⁴The importance of the tent was stressed by Dr. Evan Lloyd, an expert in cold weather medicine who reviewed the circumstances of the Boon Island castaways. Author’s correspondence with Dr. Lloyd, October 2008–March 2009.

relied for sustenance on the ship's cargo of cheese, some of which they found floating in the surf. Later they gathered and ate the few mussels they could find and rockweed. They drank melted snow or rainwater gathered in pools, made brackish by ocean spray. Out of the ship's wreckage, the men built a boat and a raft. The boat overturned just a few yards from the rock; the raft also failed, washing up on the shore at Wells, where Bane found it near the corpse. By this time the ship's carpenter had died and been cannibalized. All accounts agree that first mate Christopher Langman and two others—esteeming the act “a heinous sin,” according to Captain Deane—were the most reluctant cannibals.¹⁵ In the end, though, the ship's entire surviving company took part in the act of man eating. Portions of that body still remained to be eaten when Stover discovered the castaways on New Year's Day.

In most chronological litanies of man-eating survival stories, Boon Island's stands out as the first. Travel and shipwreck narratives, real and imagined, were the rage around 1710, and many of these included tales of cannibalism committed by “uncivilized,” non-European peoples. The *Nottingham Galley* narratives were published in the London of Daniel Defoe, whose character Robinson Crusoe fervently lectured his man “Friday” on the merits of abandoning man eating. The Boon Island story seems to have helped force the question of whether or not a gentleman, given extreme circumstances, might ever be justified in eating a fellow human being. Cannibalism, however, is only a small and gruesome incident within a tale compelling for a great number of other reasons.

Most important, especially for understanding the reasons for the wreck and the broad sweep of events that followed it, is that the *Nottingham Galley*, like the infamous *Bounty*, had suffered a mutiny. The first hint of dissent appeared about three weeks after Portsmouth magistrate Penhallow dispatched Deane to Boston to meet with Mather. Near the beginning of February, Penhallow received word that the *Nottingham Galley*'s former first mate, boatswain, and one of the common sailors wished

¹⁵Deane, *Narrative*, 1726 ed., pp. 80–82.

to disavow any endorsements they had made of Captain John Deane's protest. They had signed under duress while still ill, they claimed; now, sufficiently recovered, they wished to tell their side of the story. On 9 February, Deane faced his accusers. At a hearing Penhallow convened in Portsmouth, Christopher Langman, Nicholas Mellen, and George White made their first legal deposition against their former captain. The controversy seems to have delayed the publication of Cotton Mather's account, which did not appear until May, after all of the principal characters had left New England.¹⁶

When they returned to London, the Deane brothers, concerned about their reputations, tried to develop a story line acceptable to their opponents. According to Langman, Mellen, and White, a meeting was arranged that summer between Jasper or John Deane and two of their opponents. The sailors, when handed the Deanes' latest written *Narrative*, say that they "did positively refuse it in Publick Company, and told him to his Face *that it was not true*."¹⁷

Certainly the vast majority of sailors during the period would have let the matter drop at that, accepting whatever satisfaction may have been offered. Sailors did on occasion band together to press cases against ship's captains or merchant employers in the Admiralty Courts, but in the case of the lost *Nottingham Galley*, there was likely nothing to be gained through the expensive process of litigation.¹⁸ But Langman, Mellen, and White, bitter from their experience, refused to back down. They decided to take preemptive action before the Deane brothers could publish their version of events in London. The three sailors, who had modest means at best, paid for and obtained a new set of individual depositions, which they then placed in prominent locations around town, most likely on the tables of the most trafficked coffeehouses of the London Exchange, the center of the English mercantile world. It was not unheard of for sailors

¹⁶Mather, *Diary*, 6 May 1711.

¹⁷Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 43.

¹⁸For more on the role of Admiralty Courts, see Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 2007), pp. 37–38.

to make use of coffeehouses to air grievances against their superiors. In 1673, following an indecisive battle at sea, common seamen embarrassed the government by placing letters critical of their officers on the city's prominent coffeehouse tables.¹⁹

Now, as the London merchant community sipped coffee while feasting on the charges against the Deanes, Jasper seems to have panicked. He rushed into print the version of his brother's *Narrative* he had in hand, or that was already set and could not be altered at a reasonable expense. No other scenario explains why this second version of Deane's *Narrative* portrays Langman as a hero who, on the night of the wreck, risked his life by diving off the ship to reconnoiter a safe place for the company to come ashore.²⁰ To address the charges found in Langman, Mellen, and White's depositions, the Deane brothers add a postscript.

The Jasper Deane–edited version of his brother's *Narrative* was printed by R. Tooke and sold by Sarah Popping. Tooke and Popping were associated with the well-known John Dunton, at times a “publisher, whole sale, retail and 2nd hand bookseller, auctioneer, journalist and hack.”²¹ This group also had connections with Cotton Mather and Daniel Defoe.²² Dunton would soon publish his own abridged version of Deane's *Narrative* in an attempt to capitalize on a story that, as he wrote on the cover, was “very well known by most merchants on the *Royal Exchange*.”²³

Surely Langman, Mellen, and White, given their low social standing, were expected to end their public rebellion at this

¹⁹Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), p. 89.

²⁰In Langman, Mellen, and White's *Account*, p. 50. Langman denies the story, pointing out that he did not know how to swim.

²¹Stephen Parks, *John Dunton and the English Book Trade: A Study of His Career with a Checklist of his Publications* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), p. 5.

²²Dunton, like Defoe, seems to have participated in Monmouth's unsuccessful rebellion in 1685, after which he fled England to reside temporarily in Boston where he became acquainted with Cotton Mather. Between 1710 and 1715, Sarah Popping published four tracts authored by Daniel Defoe.

²³*A Sad and Deplorable, but True Account of the Terrible Hardships and Suffering of Capt. John Deane & Company on Board the Nottingham Galley* (London: J. Dunton, 1711).

point. With their publicly placed depositions, they had boldly and imaginatively struck back at their former captain and his allies. And still, they were not done. John Deane's *Narrative*, which included the postscript rebutting their charges, was causing a stir, and so the self-described "only sailors" decided to refute the Deanes point by point—and to do so *in print*, a domain that, in the early eighteenth century, was reserved for gentlemen. Their extraordinary action was a first in maritime history—a mutiny not only conducted within the rough and narrow confines of the ship but also in the larger, polite sphere of print culture.

It will never be known precisely how Langman, Mellen, and White set out on such an unusual course, but they may well have had help. Like John Dunton, Sarah Popping was eager to exploit the sensational affair of the *Nottingham Galley*. Her participation is evident in the difference between the print attribution for Deane's *Narrative* and the *Account* of Langman, Mellen, and White. Deane's *Narrative* was "printed by R. Tooke" and "sold by S. Popping," whereas Langman, Mellen, and White's *Account* was "Printed for S. Popping."²⁴ Popping, in other words, was the publisher, perhaps the instigator, of the sailors' foray into publication.

To compensate for their lack of genteel social status, Langman, Mellen, and White would rely on the power of their words alone. Indeed, they would argue first and foremost that Captain John Deane was no gentleman at all. Deane would spend the rest of his life trying to prove otherwise.



What was it, then, that the former first mate, boatswain, and sailor of the *Nottingham Galley* had to say that was so potentially devastating to Captain John Deane and his allies? While Deane's story opens on the night of the wreck, Langman, Mellen, and White's *Account* begins aboard the *Nottingham Galley* as it sails off the coast of England in time of war. By the

²⁴Deane, *Narrative*, ed. Jasper Deane, 1711, p. 22; Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 42, italics added.

autumn of 1710, war weariness weighed heavily on the nations of Europe, most of which had been fighting for eight long years in the conflict known as the War of Spanish Succession or, in the colonies, as Queen Anne's War. At the time, England was successfully safeguarding much of its trade by relying on convoys, but merchant ships that left their protection were at significant risk from French privateers.

From "the Nore," an area near the sandbank at the mouth of the Thames, the *Nottingham Galley* traveled in convoy with several other merchant ships escorted by two men-of-war. Off Whitby, a storm slowed the convoy's progress, but Captain Deane decided to break away, in what was described as a "fine gale," and make the run up over Scotland, past the Shetland Islands, to northern Ireland and the port of Killybegs, on the northwest coast, in Donegal County. Five days after leaving the convoy, Langman, Mellen, and White report, the *Nottingham Galley* approached "the bay," presumably a stretch of ocean just north of the island of Arranmore, which the English called "Aran." With Killybegs less than a day's journey to the south in Donegal Bay, two strange sails were spotted lying in the *Nottingham Galley's* path. Langman, Mellen, and White believed the vessels ahead were French privateers, a characterization of the alien vessels later endorsed by the Deanes.²⁵

At the time of the encounter, claim Langman, Mellen, and White, Captain Deane "would have bore down" on the vessels; that is, Deane seemed ready to allow the *Nottingham Galley* to be captured or, at least, refused to admit that the Englishmen faced a likely enemy. Then, in half a sentence, Langman, Mellen, and White make for their place and time what is an extraordinary declaration. They continue, "but the Men would not consent to it, because they perceiv'd them [the two vessels lying ahead] to be French men-of-war."²⁶ It was not uncommon for a merchant captain to consult with his crew when faced with

²⁵Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 45. The Deanes acknowledge the privateers for the first time in the postscript to the 1711 version of Deane's *Narrative*, ed. Jasper Deane, p. 39.

²⁶Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 45.

the choice of standing and fighting, running, or surrendering.²⁷ Do Langman, Mellen, and White mean that Deane ordered the sails set to direct the *Nottingham Galley* toward the alien ships and that his crew refused, or did the captain merely state an opinion in consultation with his crew and the crew disagreed? In their brief and almost casual terms, the *Account's* authors suggest that the crew was in a state of mutiny, but they soften and pass quickly over their confession.²⁸ The disagreement persisted as the alien vessels chased the *Nottingham Galley* “for about the Space of three Leagues,” during which time Deane “often would have bore down upon them” if it were not for the objections, or resistance, of “the men.”²⁹

As if nothing had happened, the *Account* goes on, “upon this we stood off to Sea until 12 at Night, when the Captain, coming upon Deck, we Sail'd easily in toward the shore, by the Mate's Advice, 'till Daylight, and came so near land that we were forced to stand off.” Here Deane accepts Langman's “advice.”³⁰ Generally it was not so easy to escape from privateers, which were built for speed and had large crews that could quickly change sail, board, take, and sail prizes. But the *Nottingham Galley* was also built for speed, and her shoal-shaped hull provided an advantage in the shallow waters into which she sailed.³¹

The *Nottingham Galley* was not yet home free. Langman, Mellen, and White report that the “next Day we saw the two Privateers again, and the Captain propos'd to stand down toward them, or to come to.” Again it seemed that Deane was

²⁷Earle, in *Sailors*, writes, “usually the men in a threatened ship would realize their situation sooner or later and then the Captain had to decide, often in consultation with his crew, whether to run, stand and fight, or most common, stand and surrender at once since the odds were usually hopelessly against the merchant ship” (pp. 120–21).

²⁸See Earle, *Sailors*, on definitions of mutiny, p. 175. For more on mutiny, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seaman, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 205–53.

²⁹Langman, Mellen, and White, joint deposition, in their *Account*, pp. 58–61.

³⁰Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 45.

³¹For more on the galley type of vessel, see Howard I. Chapelle, *The Search for Speed under Sail* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967), pp. 33–38.

deliberately trying to place the *Nottingham Galley* in harm's way, allowing it to be captured by French warships even as his brother Jasper and Miles Whitworth—owners of the vessel and much of its cargo—looked on. For members of the ship's crew, the plot was apparently beginning to unravel. Boatswain Mellen reports in his deposition that, as he stood nearby, he overheard a conversation in which Whitworth told the captain "that he would rather the said Ship would be lost than obtain her design'd Port in Safety, having made £200 Insurance." Deane responded that "his brother Jasper had made £300 insurance and immediately after said, if he thought he could secure the Insurance he would run the Ship on Shore," a common practice against privateers in an otherwise hopeless situation.³² Likewise, on the previous day, when they had first encountered the two suspicious ships, seaman George White said he heard Whitworth say "that he had rather be taken than not." White also corroborated Mellen's account. To the crew of the *Nottingham Galley*, it certainly appeared that the captain and his allies were attempting to perpetrate insurance fraud. The first mate, who may have suspected shenanigans more serious than insurance fraud, was having no part of any illegal scheme hatched by the Deane brothers and Whitworth. During the second encounter with the French privateers, Langman seized control of the *Nottingham Galley* and brought the vessel safely into Killybegs that day. Langman, surprisingly, in deposition, confessed to an act of mutiny.³³

As is clear from their individual depositions, boatswain Mellen and sailor White were convinced that Deane was trying to lose the *Nottingham Galley* and collect on the insurance. If insurance fraud was the objective, though, then the Deane brothers and Whitworth weren't very quiet about their intentions. Multiple times, crew members overheard Whitworth admitting that the ship was overinsured, almost as if he wanted the fact widely known, perhaps as a cover for a far more serious crime. In their individual depositions, Mellen and White take

³²Earle, *Sailors*, p. 121.

³³Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 59.

the Deane brothers' and Whitworth's statements at face value. They testify unequivocally that on the second-day encounter with the French privateers, Deane planned to run the *Nottingham Galley* aground on the Irish shore. But Langman has a slightly different point of view. As he describes it, "the Day following they saw the Privateers again, when the said John Deane (contrary to the Will of this Deponent) would have brought the Ship *Nottingham* to an Anchor, which if done, she would in all probability have been taken." Langman makes no mention of the aim, real or otherwise, to run the ship on shore. By the time Langman, Mellen, and White got to writing their *Account*, their individual opinions had been discussed at length, shared with others, and clarified, so that they could finally conclude that Captain Deane "endeavour'd to betray her (the *Nottingham Galley*) to the French, or run her ashore." For maximum impact, they deployed this new language in the very title of their *Account*. The use of the word "betray" suggests treason.³⁴

When the Deane brothers finally mention the encounter with the French privateers in the postscript of John Deane's *Narrative*, as edited by Jasper Dean, they claim that as a last resort, if there were no means of escape, they would, as they discussed aboard the *Nottingham Galley*, "run the Ship on Shore and burn her."³⁵ Did the Deane brothers add the comment about burning the vessel to convince their readers that they were bent on keeping the *Nottingham Galley*'s cargo out of the hands of the French, even if they had to destroy it? And might the vehemence of their protest reveal yet a more scurrilous plot?—one Mellen and White had not considered but Langham may have suspected.



In 1704 Queen Anne's Lord Treasurer had dispatched a special customs official, Captain Thomas Knox, to Ireland to investigate widespread reports of smuggling and to take measures to suppress it. Knox and many other witnesses testified before

³⁴Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 18.

³⁵Jasper Deane's postscript to Deane, *Narrative* (1711), italics added, p. 39.

a committee of the House of Lords that an extensive illicit wartime trade was being conducted between the British Isles and France. Most of the trade went through Ireland, which lacked a strong customs service, had many islands and inlets convenient for smuggling, and whose population was mainly Roman Catholic and therefore not particularly loyal to the English Crown. Numerous English sea captains who had been captured by French privateers and subsequently exchanged and sent back to England gave evidence before the committee of the many Irish and English ships they observed doing business in French ports.³⁶

Another pamphleteer, who identified himself by the initials R. F. and claimed to know his business very well, protested the lack of a sensible policy to thwart the extensive smuggling trade. Though trade with France is “prohibited by an Act of parliament,” writes R. F., “we find a surreptitious Trade continually carrying on thither, in contempt of the same. . . . Rarely have anyone been exchequer’d though taken in the very Fact of Smuggling, unless it happens to be some senseless Rogue, with a Purse (or “Parle” or “Purie”) as empty as his Pate, and no Friend or faithful Confident at his Back.”³⁷

Although R. F. tends to attribute smuggling purely to a desire for profit, ideological motivations easily coexisted alongside material ones in the illicit wartime trade with France. A significant number of English, not to mention Irish and Scots, refused to recognize King William III, the Protestant Prince of Orange who had ascended to the English monarchy along with his wife Mary during the Glorious Revolution, or their successor Queen Anne. Instead, those so-called Jacobites remained loyal to the dethroned James II, a Catholic who was

³⁶Journal of the English House of Lords, vol. 17, 1 March 1705, available online at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/source.aspx?pubid=119>; and T. K. (Thomas Knox), *A Brief Account of the Woolen Manufacturing of England with Relation to the Prejudices it Receives By the Clandestine Exportation of Wool from Ireland into France* (London: Printed and Sold by A. Baldwin, 1708).

³⁷R. F., *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Prohibition of Commerce with France . . . With an Account of the fraudulent Methods usually taken to cheat her Majesty of her Customs* (London: B. Braggs, 1708).

recognized as the rightful heir to the English Crown by Louis XIV and lived under the French king's protection.

But whereas the smugglers' motivations are not hard to comprehend, their methods are by their nature much less clear. Thomas Knox and R. F. offer only hints and generalities of the numerous means by which goods were exchanged between the British Isles and France during the War of Spanish Succession. According to Knox, Irish products, especially wool, were disguised as barrels of beef and "conveyed into Creeks or Islands." There, "*French* privateers, upon certain signals, call for them, and take them off from those Islands, near the Shoar, where they are left for them, there being a secret correspondence, as well as *French Passes* procured for the support of the Practice." R. F. writes tellingly, "By sham Captures, what gross Cheats and Abuses are the Work of every Day, are numberless; *viz* by taking ships freighted with Wine and Brandy, by private Contract and Assignation: By Seizures being made by the Importers own Information, after private Agreement and Bonds enter'd into between him and the Seizor."³⁸

French wine and brandy and English wool were the goods most commonly traded, but Knox noted before Parliament that "*French* Fleets, Privateers and Plantations (were) furnished with provisions by this Traffick." In fact, the successful delivery of the *Nottingham Galley's* cordage to France would undoubtedly have brought a bonanza to the merchant who accomplished that feat. Though France's financial system had been utterly ruined by the war, shipbuilding thrived. Privateering was the engine that drove the economies of France's western ports, such as St. Malo, which enjoyed a remarkable flow of imports given the dismal state of the country's overall health. In St. Malo there was a "persistent demand for the building of ships and houses and for the feeding of an inflated war-time population," writes historian J. S. Bromley. The money to buy these goods and services came almost exclusively from privateering, but between 1709 and 1711 one-third to one-half of St. Malo's

³⁸Knox, *A Brief Account of Clandestine Exportation*; R. F., *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Prohibition of Commerce with France*.

privateers were captured or sunk each year. The demand for all types of naval stores must have been enormous.³⁹

And if naval stores were highly coveted, then a ship like the *Nottingham Galley*, a fast, shallow-draft vessel perfect for both privateering and smuggling, would have brought a very handsome price indeed. Moreover, on top of the proceeds from the sale of the vessel and its cargo, the Deanes and Whitworth would also have collected the much-discussed insurance money, the frosting on the cake.



Folklore, fiction, and the limited scholarship written about Captain John Deane and the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley* have tended to accept the captain's version of events, but in fact the pieces of the puzzle fit together far more neatly if it is assumed that Deane and his allies were smugglers. Killybegs was a rather peculiar destination, especially if the Deane brothers were intent on purchasing butter and cheese. The region tends to be rough and rocky, fine for raising sheep but not great cow country. For dairy products, a ship normally would have called on one of Ireland's southwestern ports, especially Cork. Convoys were quite regular to the south coast of Ireland, and in that area English merchant shipping had the added protection of five to eight English warships permanently on station to deter an invasion of Ireland and to prosecute smuggling.⁴⁰ Captain Deane, however, had ordered the *Nottingham Galley* to northern Ireland, where there was virtually no chance of encountering an English warship and where buying butter and cheese to sell in Boston, or anywhere else, would have been difficult.⁴¹

³⁹J. S. Bromley, *Corsairs and Navies, 1660–1760* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), pp. 283, 291.

⁴⁰John Hattendorf, *England in the War of Spanish Succession: A Study of the English View and Conduct of Grand Strategy, 1701–1713* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp. 168–71.

⁴¹John O'Donovan, *The Economic History of Live Stock in Ireland* (Cork: University of Cork Press, 1940).

The theory that the *Nottingham Galley* sailed for northern Ireland to avoid English warships and to rendezvous with French privateers, not to buy cheese, is supported by its long, forty-two-day stay in Killybegs. Perhaps the Deanes had difficulty locating a suitable cargo.⁴² But if the Deanes and Whitworth had missed a rendezvous with French privateers, their extended sojourn in the remote corner of Ireland would have given them time to plan another meeting or, possibly, to acquire a French pass that would work in Canadian waters.

After leaving Killybegs, Langman, Mellen, and White report, Deane engaged in a brutal round of corporal punishment. "By his barbarous Treatment of our Men," they claim, the captain "had disabled several of 'em, and particularly two of our best Sailors were so unmercifully beat by him, because they oppos'd his Design above mentioned, that they were not able to work in a Month."⁴³ Harsh discipline on merchant ships, unlike navy ships, was rare, but if the first part of Langman, Mellen, and White's account is true—that Deane tried to lose the ship and the men mutinied—then the beatings of the rebellious crew would be expected. . . . Insolence alone justified corporal punishment.⁴⁴

The many unpleasant weeks at sea are compressed in Langman, Mellen, and White's *Account*. When the *Nottingham Galley* arrives off Newfoundland, the crew sight a ship in the distance making for them "with all the Sail she could." Langman, Mellen, and White report that the captain and his allies hoped the oncoming vessel was French, which was quite possible since they were now in Canadian waters. Once again, the *Nottingham Galley's* best strategy was to run, but this time flight is never mentioned as an option. Instead, the captain chose this moment to end the short allowances he had imposed as one of his disciplinary measures. Deane ordered casks of brandy and beer

⁴²Killybegs is known for fish, but so is Boston and, thus, such a convenient delivery would have represented an early version of coals to Newcastle.

⁴³Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 46.

⁴⁴For more on discipline at sea, see Earle, *Sailors*, pp. 143–63, and Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep*, pp. 207–27.

tapped and invited the crew to drink as much as they wanted while he, his brother, and Whitworth went below to don their best clothes. The scene Langman, Mellen, and White describe certainly looks like one of gentlemen preparing to socialize with friends, allies, or business partners. But it turns out that there was no French captain, nor a French privateer. The ship they encountered was, according to Langman, Mellen, and White, the "*Pompey Galley* of London, Captain Den Commander, at which we rejoic'd, tho our Captain was melancholy." The *Nottingham Galley* would have struck Den as a strange sight, with the gentlemen aboard dressed as if they were going to a ball and the crew staggering around drunk. If the Deane brothers and Whitworth had scheduled a rendezvous with a French privateer near where they sighted the *Pompey Galley*, then the meeting was likely disrupted by the recent English conquest of the French privateering base at Port Royal, an event of which Captain Deane was unaware at the time. For their part, by naming the British ship encountered and its captain in their *Account*, Langman, Mellen, and White in effect call Den as their witness in London's court of public opinion.⁴⁵

Continuing on toward New England, the crew spotted land at Cape Sables. The welcome view was brief because bad weather quickly moved in. With the wind blowing hard, Deane is said to have hauled in sail. It was by now early December. According to Langman, Mellen, and White, the next day the weather moderated, but instead of remaining on course, the Captain ordered the ship to stand away to the north. Langman, Mellen, and White do not identify a reason for the dilly dallying off Nova Scotia, but they imply that Captain Deane was hoping to be found by French privateers operating out of Canada. It was a likely location because French corsairs were known to prey on New England fishermen working the Grand Banks.

After some days of semicircuitous sailing, the *Nottingham Galley* turned south again and in doing so hit foul weather. As the storm grew worse on the evening of 10 December, the crew were forced to "hand all our Sails and, lie under our

⁴⁵Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, pp. 46–47.

Mizzen-Ballast till Daylight.” In the morning, boatswain Mellen had the watch when he sighted land, which turned out to be Cape Porpoise, about a dozen miles north of Cape Neddick and Boon Island. Mellen sent word below to Captain Deane, and both he and Langman came up on deck. According to Langman and Mellen, the captain then baldly stated that it was the first land they had yet seen, “wherein he was justly contradicted by the Mate, which caus’d some Words between ’em: For in Truth we had made Cape Sables a week before.” Had they stayed on their original course, “according to the Opinion of the Mate and the Ship’s Company, we had, in all probability, arriv’d safe the next Day at Boston.” If Deane admitted that they had sighted Cape Sables a week earlier, there would have been no good excuse for a detour in Canadian Maritime waters. The captain’s opponents here accuse him of creating a false narrative in which he portrayed the week intervening between Cape Sables and Cape Porpoise as part of a long journey across the Atlantic characterized by, as he said, “contrary Winds and bad Weather.”⁴⁶

Given the confrontation with Langman at Cape Porpoise, Deane understood that his first mate was still ready to resist if his own point of view contradicted his captain’s. Making an example of a number of the sailors had not sufficed. A short while after their argument, Captain Deane announced the end of water rationing, as is often customary upon the first sight of land, and went below “to serve” his men. Evidently Langman already had a bottle in hand. The captain’s brother took the bottle from Langman (whether he grabbed it or was passed it after asking for it is not clear) and “struck him.” Jasper Deane’s blow coincided with the captain’s return to the deck. He appeared from behind Langman with a “Periwig Block” in hand, a stand “such as Barbers make Wigs on.” Captain Deane struck Langman “three blows on the Head, upon which he fell down and lay dead for several Minutes, all in Blood.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 47; Deane, *Narrative*, ed. Jasper Deane, 1711, p. 24.

⁴⁷Langmen, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 47.

By nightfall, boatswain Mellen, who says he had the watch, claims he had become alarmed about the ferocity of the storm in combination with the proximity of the mainland. He sent someone below to get both Captain Deane and first mate Langman. Langman had not yet been cleaned up from the morning's beating; "scarce recovered," he was still "all in Gore." Langman says he told Deane that "he had no Business so near Land, except he had a Mind to lose the Ship, and therefore desir'd him to hawl further off, or else he would be ashore that Night." At this, Deane seems to have flown into a rage. He informed Langman "that he wou'd not take his Advice though the Ship should go to the Bottom." It is a telling remark. The issue foremost in Deane's mind was not the safety of the ship but his authority as commander of it and, for him personally, the disloyalty of his first mate and crew. For all anyone knows, Deane could have been about to change course when Langman came up onto the deck to challenge his captain once again. In his 1726 account Deane relates that he planned to take in sail at 10:00 P.M. If they had had a good working relationship, the captain might well have heeded his first mate's advice and taken in sail earlier or directed the vessel farther out to sea. Paradoxically, Langman's forceful advocacy for a change in course made that possibility much less likely. Under the circumstances, the captain could not be seen to yield before the demands of his rebellious crew. To drive home the point of exactly who was in command, Captain Deane is alleged to have produced a pistol and "threatened to shoot the Mate." Pointing it at Langman, Deane told his insubordinate first mate that he could do as he pleased so long as it was under the confinement of his cabin.⁴⁸

At this point, the versions of events as related by Deane and by his rebellious crew begin to intersect in some detail. All agree that the first mate was unable to perform his duty during the hours preceding the wreck. They also all agree that Langman performed heroically after the ship ran aground. As the fateful moment of the *Nottingham Galley's* collision with

⁴⁸Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 48; Deane, *Narrative*, 1726 ed., pp. 66–67.

Boon Island drew near, Deane was not on deck either, say Langman, Mellen, and White, “for he was then undressing himself to go to Bed, according to his usual Custom.” If so, cold and tired boatswain Nicholas Mellen must have still been in charge on deck, having overseen consecutive watches since that morning. According to Mellen, without warning “between 8 and 9 a Clock” came the violent impact, which surely tossed the boatswain and set the ship heeling to one side and the waves washing over her deck.⁴⁹

The first thing Mellen seems to have done after the vessel struck Boon Island was to head below to berate his captain, charging that “he had made his Words good, and lost the Ship on purpose.” The boatswain wanted it known that he believed that Deane had willfully destroyed the *Nottingham Galley* on the rocks of Maine. Like boatswain Mellen, sailor White swore that had Boon Island not been in the way, “they must have run ashore in a few Hours which makes this Deponent believe in his Conscience the said Ship was designed to be lost.”⁵⁰

The improbability that Deane would deliberately wreck his ship on the night of the storm has long cast doubt on the case made by Langman, Mellen, and White,⁵¹ but the evident debate among the captain’s opponents about the nature and degree of his culpability, and the evolution of their opinions, has not been appreciated. It is true that nowhere in the surviving record does Deane seem to be a man reckless enough to intentionally run his ship aground in a winter storm; nor is it at all apparent that the *Nottingham Galley* would have run upon the coast had Boon Island not been in the way. What the testimonies of Langman, Mellen, and White do undeniably suggest is that the history of the voyage up through the night of the wreck prevented the captain and crew from working together in time of peril.

⁴⁹Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 48.

⁵⁰Mellen, deposition, London, 1711, pp. 62–63, Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 48; White, deposition, London, 1711, pp. 64–65.

⁵¹Jasper and John Deane seized on this point in their rebuttal in the 1711, Jasper Deane–edited *Narrative*. The argument was picked up by Kenneth Roberts in the twentieth century.

Of all the first-person commentators on the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*, Langman is the most circumspect. He also has a more sophisticated perspective than that of his fellow sailors. Admittedly, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Langman jointly signed a deposition with Mellen and White accusing Deane of purposefully destroying the vessel on the Maine shore. In Portsmouth the fiery boatswain's simplistic argument regarding Deane's culpability prevails over Langman's more cautious approach, revealed later; Langman, at the time in Portsmouth, was perhaps not fully recovered from his illness. In his individual deposition taken in London, however, Langman's distinctive point of view begins to emerge as he chooses his words very precisely. On the one hand, Langman does not want to contradict the testimonies of his shipmates, but on the other, he probably never believed with Mellen and White that insurance fraud was the primary motive of Captain Deane and his allies. Unlike Mellen and White, Langman in his individual deposition does not accept at face value Deane's assertion that he was going to run the *Nottingham Galley* on shore in Ireland; Langman seems to have suspected smuggling all along. In addition Langman, also unlike Mellen and White, never individually and specifically states that Deane intentionally wrecked the ship on the rocks of Maine. While being careful not to refute his shipmates' statements, Langman affirms generally that "This Deponent believeth, that the said John Dean, according to his Working of the Ship in the said Voyage, design'd to lose her."⁵² Such ambiguous phrasing could refer to the ship being deliberately wrecked in the storm or to a treasonous attempt to sell the vessel to the French. By the time Langman, Mellen, and White wrote their *Account*, Langman, with perhaps others joining the discussion, had persuaded his fellow sailors to use language more in keeping with his own understanding of events. They conclude that the ship was lost by "the Captain's Obstinacy, who endeavour'd to betray her to the French, or run her ashore." In the end, Langman convinced Mellen and White to abandon the single-minded, highly contestable charge that

⁵²Langman deposition in Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, p. 62.

Deane had deliberately wrecked the *Nottingham Galley* in the nor'easter of 11 December 1710 in favor of a more complex, broad-based observation of his suspicious actions.⁵³

The supposition that Deane was unfamiliar with the local coast, and therefore might have been ignorant of what dangers lay ahead, is indirectly supported by a charge his opponents make on Boon Island after the weather clears. They allege that Deane “published another falsehood” in this case, saying he “knew where he was; for he declared to us he knew not.”⁵⁴ A combination of the captain’s ignorance of the Gulf of Maine and his unwillingness to listen to subordinates who possibly knew it better than he is the most reasonable explanation for the loss of the *Nottingham Galley*. The voyage’s delays in Ireland and off Nova Scotia were also important factors leading to the disaster.

Immediately after the impact, Mellen, Deane, and several others gathered in the main cabin. In response to Mellen’s tirade, “the Captain bid him to hold his Peace. *He was sorry for what had happen’d, but we must now all prepare for Death, there being no Probability to escape it.*” Two men went up on deck but could not stay there because “the Sea broke all over the Ship” as it increasingly heeled over to one side. Mellen and another sailor went down into the hold and discovered they were taking on water. The cabin, severely tilting with the ship, was but a small pocket of protection that at any moment could burst open or begin flooding from below. The captain, “who had been Cursing and Swearing before,” report Langman, Mellen, and White, “began to cry and howl for fear of losing his Life.” Deane, his opponents charge, was in a state of panic.⁵⁵

Asserting that their captain was a coward was yet another aspect of Langman, Mellen, and White’s broader assault on John Deane’s character. The three men continually barraged Captain Deane and his brother not only with allegations of criminality, negligence, and even treason but also with accusations

⁵³This language is found in the long title of the Langman, Mellen, and White *Account*.

⁵⁴Langman, Mellen and White, *Account*, p. 51.

⁵⁵Langman, Mellen, and White, *Account*, pp. 48–49; italics in the original.

of brutality, impiety, dishonesty, profanity, weakness, greed, ingratitude, and a failure to lead, either by example or as a proper “commander.” In hammering away at John Deane’s reputation as a gentleman, Langman, Mellen, and White demonstrated that they fully understood the definitions, rules, and values of the social order under which they lived. They garnered credibility by honoring that social order, by identifying themselves as “only sailors” and thus acknowledging their inferior rank in the social hierarchy. Writing at a time when a gentleman’s reputation was of supreme importance, Jasper and John Deane were spot on when they declared that their opponent’s words were “level’d at our ruine.”⁵⁶

A first mate, boatswain, and common seaman, who seemed to have had nothing to gain for themselves, had gone to the trouble of paying for legal depositions and, most extraordinary, of writing and publishing their *Account* of the voyage in which they questioned their captain’s gentlemanly status and his loyalty to Queen Anne. Common sailors may have lacked a full understanding of the burgeoning illicit trade with France or of the sophisticated ways of corrupt merchants, but the gentlemen traders of London knew full well what a range of complicated games were being played by opportunistic smugglers and collaborators. Captain John Deane looked to all the world like a liar, a criminal, a coward, and/or a traitor. Christopher Langman, Nicholas Mellen, and George White, “only sailors,” had challenged gentlemen on their own turf, in the field of print, and won. The Deane brothers were driven out of London.



John and Jasper Deane retreated in opposite directions. Jasper returned to the brothers’ native village of Wilford, apparently never again to risk his decreasing wealth or personal safety on the ocean’s waves. Fleeing England entirely, John signed on as an officer mercenary in the Russian navy of Peter

⁵⁶Postscript to Deane’s *Narrative*, ed. Jasper Deane, 1711, p. 39.

the Great.⁵⁷ He seems to have proved himself a competent sailor in the Russian service, but his own history had an uncomfortable way of repeating itself. In 1714 Deane was ordered to relocate the fifty-two-gun man-of-war *Egudel* from Archangel to the Baltic as, again, winter was coming on. He later records that the ship, “after careening and repairing, sailed from Archangel, and passing the North Cape (of Norway) the last of November, with much ado got in and wintered about 25 leagues from Trondhjem, losing near half her men through the asperity of this cold season.”⁵⁸ The following year, Deane was promoted to the rank of captain and given command of the thirty-two-gun frigate *Sampson*. During his service in Russia, he seems to have mastered the workings of the Russian navy while teaching himself to speak and read Russian. Demonstrating his skill as a privateer, he captured twenty prizes and in so doing won the patronage of Count Fyodor Matveyevich Apraxin, head of the Russian Admiralty, but once more, Deane was undone by a controversial encounter at sea.

In 1717, while in the Gulf of Danzig, Deane’s *Sampson* took as prizes two Swedish merchant ships. Just as the *Sampson*’s crew were boarding the captured vessels to seize them, hostile English and Dutch men-of-war appeared. The *Sampson* was hopelessly outgunned. No one will ever know for sure precisely what options were available to Deane, but as when he encountered the French privateers off Ireland, he chose neither to fight nor to flee. The English vessel drew alongside the *Sampson*, and Deane was called aboard. According to Deane, he was forced to yield his two prizes, and that interpretation prevailed for two years while he was promoted and given increasing responsibility. In due course, however, Russian junior officers accused Deane of taking a bribe from the English captain in exchange for the two Swedish prizes.

⁵⁷There is apparently a significant number of records pertaining to John Deane in the Russian Naval Archives in St. Petersburg. What is known of this material, and most of the information described here regarding Deane’s career in Russia, comes from historian Richard H. Warner. See Warner’s essay in Roberts, *Boon Island*, pp. 3–17.

⁵⁸John Deane, *A History of the Russian Fleet During the Reign of Peter the Great*, ed. Cyprian G. Bridges (London: Navy Records Society, 1899), pp. 44–45.

Deane was court-martialed and found guilty. The czar reduced Deane's rank to lieutenant and exiled him to the remote region of Kazan to command a barge on the Volga River. A year later, Deane received a reprieve.⁵⁹

Back in London after eleven years abroad, Deane returned to writing as a means of furthering his interests. He sought to capitalize on his sojourn in Russia by producing "A History of the Russian Fleet during the Reign of Peter the Great," an impressive document he hoped the English Crown would find useful.⁶⁰ As a second element in his self-promotion plan, Deane republished his shipwreck *Narrative*, the one edited by his brother but minus its introduction and postscript. In this way, Deane reintroduced himself to the public as a man of character, brave and resourceful under circumstances of unimaginable hardship. When his confidential manuscript about the Russian navy was delivered into the hands of those officials who could help him, they would already be favorably disposed toward John Deane, a hero, worthy of consideration for some appropriate government position.

Deane's strategy was successful beyond any reasonable expectation. He attracted the attention of Lord Townsend, the queen's Secretary of State for the Northern Department and as a result began an important and close relationship with George Tilson, Townsend's deputy. Deane found himself appointed commercial consul at St. Petersburg. The post was only a "colour," wrote Tilson; Deane's "true business is to transmit hither what intelligence he may be able to get for His Majesty's service."⁶¹ Townsend and Tilson were obsessed with the threat that a Jacobite conspiracy might topple the Hanoverian succession and restore the Catholic and absolutist Stuart monarchy to England's throne. Townsend's choice to employ Deane as

⁵⁹See Warner, "Captain Dean and the Wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*," in Roberts, *Boon Island*, ed. Bales and Warner, pp. 7–10.

⁶⁰Deane, *A History of the Russian Fleet*. Deane's original manuscript is lost, and for many years only an unattributed copy survived. Deane was finally identified as the author of the report in 1934. See *Mariners Mirror* 20 (July 1934): 373.

⁶¹George Tilson to Lord Townsend, quoted in Warner's essay in Roberts, *Boon Island*, p. 9.

a spy was an intriguing one. Deane's background in Russian affairs was certainly a plus, but if one gave credence to the stories that he had traded with the French, then he fell under suspicion of being a Jacobite himself. Circumstances suggest that John Deane may well have been a Jacobite turncoat hired specifically to infiltrate an enemy spy ring.

Deane's conviction for bribery while in service to the Russian navy threw a kink into his St. Petersburg appointment. Sir Nathaniel Gould, on behalf of the English Russian Company, had urged against dispatching Deane because he was "very prejudicial to our mercantile affairs" and "very obnoxious" to the Russian government.⁶² But Townsend and Tilson ignored the warning. Deane arrived at St. Petersburg in the spring of 1725, only to have his credentials denied.

On his way home, Deane wrote Tilson a letter that is vintage John Deane. In case Tilson has little recollection, Deane reminds him that he had only accepted the mission to Russia "with great reluctance, having formerly experienced the malice of that sett of men"—the Russians, or the English merchants in Russia, or both?⁶³—"but it was impossible for any person not present to believe with what bitterness they had persecuted me in Russia." Deane could have refused the post, he wrote, but he did not want his superiors to think he was "afraid to go." His detractors in Russia, the "Jacobites" who had united with "Hollsteeners" (a reference to German rivals of King George's Hanover who were allied with Russia), were "two [*sic*] powerful for a person so much suspected as I was." Most worrisome of all to Deane were his "Implacable Enemies" at home, who "could by no means ommit [*sic*] so favorable an opportunity as my absence gave them, to seek my ruin" and "be rendered odious to the government whose cause I serve and by such persons as are no more friends to the government than they are to me."⁶³ By referencing adversaries personally known to the

⁶²Lord Townsend to Stephen Poyntz, quoted in James Frederick Chance, *The Alliance of Hanover: A Study of British Foreign Policy in the Last Years of George I* (London: John Murray, 1923), p. 107.

⁶³John Deane to George Tilson, 25 August 1725, National Archive of the United Kingdom, Public Records Office (PRO), State Papers (SP) 84/574.

Lord Secretary's deputy, Deane indicates that he now has opponents far more formidable than the common sailors who had sought to sabotage his reputation in the wake of the *Nottingham Galley* disaster. But the ship and the Boon Island ordeal still loom large. The new, politically influential foes who question Deane's loyalty were almost certainly familiar with Langman, Mellen, and White's published disclosures. In a revealing trace of Deane the brute, barbarian, and cannibal, an image relentlessly hammered out by the disaffected sailors, Deane wrote "I make no doubt but my adversary has found means . . . of Representing me a Monster in Nature."⁶⁴

In an attempt to curry favor, Deane produced two intelligence reports on Russia after being forced to leave St. Petersburg, but he had failed to flush out any Jacobite conspiracy. Or so it seemed. Before returning home from his brief stay in Russia, he had apparently secured a meeting with a Jacobite courier, a young Irish military officer named Edmund O'Connor. This meeting, or relationship, later bore fruit. With the offer of a bribe and a king's pardon, Deane eventually convinced O'Connor to betray the Jacobite cause. Deane was then able to penetrate the Jacobite ring led by the notorious agent John Archdeacon, where he discovered that an enormous conspiracy was being hatched against Britain. It seemed that Spain, Russia, and Austria all planned to attack in six months' time, with one army landing in Scotland and another somewhere in the west of England. Feeble on Boon Island and heretofore powerless in St. Petersburg, John Deane now moved a nation. The British ministry ordered ten thousand seamen provisioned for the following spring (1726) and kept thirty to forty ships-of-the-line at the ready to defend the Hanoverian monarchy against the nefarious plot.⁶⁵ The conspiracy was pure fantasy, but it was exactly what Lord Townsend and his underling George Tilson had been looking for. Deane was soon assigned to a British naval squadron as a sort of intelligence officer, a

⁶⁴Deane to Tilson, 5 July 1725, PRO SP 91/9.

⁶⁵Paul S. Fritz, *The English Ministers and Jacobism between the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 131–34.

post he held until he returned to England from the Baltic by the fall of 1726. At that time, he apparently visited his home in Wilford, where his brother Jasper was tending sheep.



Local tradition has it that John and Jasper Deane had parted on bad terms when John left for St. Petersburg in 1711.⁶⁶ Now together again in the place of their boyhoods, the two brothers are said to have attempted a reconciliation. A buoyant John Deane may have prattled on about his adventures in Russia, his role in breaking the Jacobite spy ring, saving England, etc. etc. Jasper, who evidently had sunk everything he could spare into the *Nottingham Galley* venture, was having none of it. The Boon Island experience had left him a broken man. According to legend, the two brothers were walking home together after a party when they got to fighting, which grew heated and perhaps physical. No one knows if blows were struck, but at some point, so the story goes, Jasper burst a seam and dropped dead. Indeed, Jasper did die in 1726, the year John returned home. He left an estate of £73, including twenty-two sheep, two pigs, one calf, and £35 in real estate.⁶⁷ During the course of his life, he had kept his head above water as his resources slowly seeped away. In addition to his livestock, land, and buildings, Jasper Deane left a widow, Elizabeth, and a daughter, Mary.

As Jasper Deane's family was being reduced to poverty, John Deane's alliance with a wealthy Warwickshire woman secured his future. His marriage to Sarah was the solid foundation on which he continued to build his career, which invariably involved self-promotion and a revival of his *Nottingham Galley*

⁶⁶Some of this information is, however, unsupported by the surviving documentation. It is said that Jasper Deane was a doctor, but his will, when he took it out, lists him as a mariner. When he died and the will was executed, he is described as a farmer. At no time on Boon Island, when medical knowledge was in demand, is Jasper mentioned as making a contribution. The earliest published source for this folklore is Mathew Henry Barker, *Walks around Nottingham by a Wanderer* (London, 1835), pp. 49–51.

⁶⁷Inventory of Jasper Deane (microform), Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham, England.

Narrative. In this, his final revision of his shipwreck story, now narrated in the third person, he represented himself as more heroic and his ship's crew as more barbaric than he had previously. As time went by, there were fewer and fewer people who might challenge Deane's version of events. He writes, "At the first Publication of this Narrative, the Master, the Mate and Mr. Whitworth were all in England; but in a Course of fifteen Years since, the Master alone survives of all that he particularly knew." Deane had apparently kept track of Langman and freely mentions him, by rank though not by name. Deane amuses himself by describing the first mate as "slightly indisposed" on the night of the wreck, which implies that he was seasick, not suffering a concussion from being clobbered on the head by his captain. John Deane could laugh at Langman, but he could not bring himself even to acknowledge his own brother, who had very recently died, perhaps at John Deane's feet after a heated confrontation.

On New Year's Day, 1727, minister William Shurtleff, a cog in the communications machine John Deane had set in motion in England, ascended the pulpit of the village church on the island of New Castle, just yards off the New Hampshire mainland near Portsmouth. Deane had written to Lieutenant Governor John Wentworth and urged him to commemorate the deliverance of the Boon Island castaways. Wentworth agreed that a memorial sermon paired with a local republication of Deane's *Narrative* was appropriate, and he tapped Shurtleff for the task. Shurtleff's sermon, much like Mather's sixteen years earlier, centered on certain psalms in which afflicted sinners call out to God in times of distress, just as the Boon Island castaways reportedly had done in the throes of their anguish. Although Shurtleff had never met Captain Deane, Deane's controversial reputation would have been familiar to the clergyman. And so, assigning neither credit nor blame, Shurtleff universalized his message and refused to recognize one account of the episode as more accurate than another. "And whoever of us have had a true Relation of the Persons whose Sufferings, Preservation and Deliverance gave Rise to the present Discourse," he declared, "or have seen the Account that has been published of

GOD's Dealings with them, may find something under each Head, one way or other, applicable to their case."⁶⁸

Despite Shurtleff's uncertain endorsement of the captain's character, the memorial sermon and New England republication of his *Narrative* would seem to have spelled victory for Deane. However, something else had gone wrong. The version of the *Narrative* published along with Shurtleff's sermon was not Deane's newest production but, as a bibliographic note on the cover made clear, replicated the text "As it was printed in 1711 & 1722. And now reprinted in 1727."⁶⁹ The third version of Deane's *Narrative*, apparently an edition to which Wentworth or other New Englanders took exception and refused to publish, not only portrayed the captain in a more favorable light than earlier narratives but further impugned the characters of Deane's former crew. In the preface of a special New England edition published in 1727 and 1730, Deane acknowledged offending someone of importance. "I had indeed Thoughts of perpetuating the Memory of our Deliverance in a different Manner; but my innocent Intentions met with an unexpected Opposition, that induc'd me to have recourse to this present Method: and I hasten'd the Execution, in 1727, whilst there were living Witnesses in New England, to attest the Truth of our signal Escape from Boone-Island." In order to distribute this latest edition of his *Narrative* in New England, Deane was reduced to making periodic trips down to the wharves of London laden with pamphlets. In his obsessive, lifelong drive to repair and shape his own image, he doled out "annually, a Certain Number of these Narratives on board Ships, trading in and out of New England, hoping (with divine Blessing) it may prove service to reclaim some of the unthinking Part of

⁶⁸William Shurtleff, *Distressing dangers and signal deliverances improv'd. A Sermon preach'd at Newcastle in New Hampshire, January 1, 1726-7*, Evans, Early American Imprints, no. 290. In 1735 a third minister, this one in England, would publish a version of Deane's *Narrative* (in abstract form), along with a sermon. See "An Abstract of Consul Dean's Narrative," in Samuel Wilson, *Sermons* (London: Aaron Ward and Joseph Fisher, 1735).

⁶⁹There had actually been two versions published in 1711, but the one edited by Cotton Mather was never republished. The one referred to here had been edited by Jasper Deane.

our own Fraternity,” namely the common seafaring man whose testimony was obviously unreliable.⁷⁰

John Deane's self-promotion continued to pay off. In 1728 the Foreign Office appointed him Consul for the Ports of Flanders and Ostend, the crowning achievement of his career. A high point of his tenure at Ostend was a visit by the Duke of Lorraine, the future king of Austria, during the summer of 1731. In a letter to Tilson, Deane enthusiastically reports having had a substantial conversation with the duke, who, Deane says, “was preacquainted [*sic*] with me. . . . he knew of my having served the late Czar & of my having been shipwrecked before that time, and after a variety of Questions he desired me to give him one of my printed narratives, which accordingly I did the next morning.”⁷¹

After ten years of service to the Foreign Office, Deane departed from Ostend in 1738 and returned to England to retire comfortably in the company of his wife, Sarah. To celebrate the conclusion of his career, he again published his shipwreck *Narrative*. Twenty-three years passed in relative peace, but at long last the erstwhile ship's captain suffered a blow from which he did not recover: on 17 August 1761, Sarah Deane passed away. The next day, 18 August, John Deane died at the age of eighty-one.

But even in death, John Deane found the means to carry on his lifelong battle to defeat his enemies and burnish his reputation. His last will and testament turns at length to his niece, Mary Loring, wife of Edward Loring and daughter of his brother, Jasper. John Deane bestowed on her the annual interest on £100, not an insignificant sum, but the language and terms of his bequest were humiliating. Mary Loring and her family were not to give John Deane's wife or the estate's trustees “any Insult or trouble on their account and . . . the said Edward Loring and said wife Mary or their children shall not reside or roam within forty miles of my said wife”; if they did, then Sarah Deane and the other trustees had the authority to

⁷⁰Deane, *Narrative*, 1726 ed., preface to the 1727 and 1730 New England editions.

⁷¹Deane to Tilson, 30 July 1731 and 26 August 1731, PRO SP 77/78.

cut off the Lorrings' inheritance. John Deane repeated this sort of demeaning language throughout his ten-page will. The Lorrings must have been clamorous critics of John Deane whom, even from the grave, he sought to silence.⁷²

The antagonistic relationship between Deane and his blood relatives is balanced by an especially warm relationship with, surprisingly, Charles Miles Whitworth, the son of Deane's friend of the same name. The elder Whitworth had died in England during the summer of 1711, probably as a result of an infection he had developed on Boon Island. Upon the senior Whitworth's death, John Deane became a sort of foster father to the boy or young man, and Charles in turn played the son John Deane never had. The most striking element in this piece of the story, however, is where Charles ended up: he emigrated to Boston and there became a doctor. Having an adopted son in Boston as a character witness to bolster his reputation could not have pleased John Deane more.

The role that Miles Whitworth and his family played in the *Nottingham Galley* affair remains its most inscrutable aspect. When the elder Whitworth died, he left eight children; therefore, he was undoubtedly older than John Deane. Yet in the 1726 version of his *Narrative*, Deane refers to Whitworth as a "young gentleman, his mother's darling son."⁷³ Here Deane tells an awfully big lie merely to dress Boon Island's first willing cannibal in the garb of innocent gentility. Perhaps there was some other reason for John Deane, fifteen years after the fact, to suggest that it was the younger Charles Whitworth, not his father, who had sailed on the *Nottingham Galley*. If the senior Whitworth had been, for example, a known Jacobite, better to

⁷²*Last Will and Testament*, John Deane of Wilford, executed 23 July 1762, Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PRO PROB 11/882.

⁷³Miles Whitworth's *Last Will and Testament*, executed 1 March 1712, Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PRO PROB 11/526. Miles Whitworth filed this will in 1708 with the names of seven of his children listed as heirs. The will was amended on the eve of the voyage in 1710, when a son, Charles (also called Miles), was added. Charles's inheritance specifically included his father's one-eighth stake in the *Nottingham Galley*. Deane, *Narrative*, 1726 ed., p. 80. Kenneth Roberts ran with the youthful characterization of Miles Whitworth, turning him into a sympathetic teenaged storyteller who might appeal to young readers.

place the young innocent son aboard the hapless vessel. Three generations of Whitworth men went by the name of Miles, the last two Boston surgeons. It would not have been hard to muddy the matter—a favorite John Deane tactic—of precisely which Whitworth had been aboard. Although he left his niece only the interest on £100, John Deane left surgeon Miles Whitworth of Boston £100 without restrictions. In recognition of that bequest, Miles Whitworth, who identified himself as the son of the man who was marooned on Boon Island, memorialized John Deane's death with yet another publication of his *Narrative*, this one published in Boston.⁷⁴ The Whitworth family's devotion to John Deane went still further: the younger Boston surgeon Miles Whitworth named his third son John Deane Whitworth.



Captain John Deane's *Narrative* was published three more times following his death: in 1917, 1968, and most recently, in 1996, in Jack Bales and Richard Warner's edition of Kenneth Roberts's *Boon Island*.⁷⁵ The story of the *Nottingham Galley* also appears in several shipwreck anthologies and is referenced in other shipwreck tales, particularly those involving cannibalism.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Dr. Miles Whitworth of Boston published Deane's revised 1726 version of his *Narrative*, not the 1711 Jasper Deane–edited version, as is asserted in Warner, "Captain John Deane," p. 11.

⁷⁵William Abbatt republished the Jasper Deane–edited version in the *Magazine of History and Biography with Notes and Queries* 59 (1917): 199–217. Mason Phillip Smith republished the same version in *A Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Nottingham Galley, in her Voyage from England to Boston, with an Account of the Miraculous Escape of the Captain and his Crew, etc.* (Portland: Provincial Press, 1968). The Warner and Bales–edited version of Roberts's *Boon Island*, with the various primary documents, was published in 1996.

⁷⁶See R. Thomas, *Remarkable Shipwrecks, Fires, Famines and Calamities, Providential Deliverances, and Lamentable Disasters at Sea* (Hartford: Andrus, 1835); George Barrington, *Remarkable Voyages and Shipwrecks etc.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton & Kent, 1881); *Great Storms and Famous Shipwrecks off the New England Coast*, ed. Edward Rowe Snow (Boston: Yankee Publishing Company, 1943); *Lost Ships and Lonely Seas*, ed. Ralph D. Paine (New York: Century, 1921); and Keith Huntress, *Narratives of Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974). Huntress mistakenly names the ship's boy "Moses Butler," which was the fictional name given to him by Kenneth Roberts.

More significant, the story and its protagonists have captured the imagination of fiction writers. In 1869 William Henry G. Kingston featured in his *John Deane of Nottingham* a young “Jack,” who, during the course of his adventures from Sherwood Forest to the high seas, journeys from naïve adolescence into manhood. Kingston draws on the folklore associated with Deane, but in his treatment, the Boon Island shipwreck is unrecognizable, a minor warm-weather adventure taking place in or near Delaware Bay. Kingston’s book would appear to be of little value to anyone in search of the real John Deane, except for one striking theme, which in fact drives the entire narrative. In the first half of his story, Jack Deane is ensnared by Jacobites. Guilty by association, Kingston’s Jack spends the rest of his life concealing his Jacobite past and committing himself to loyal service to his Protestant monarch, much as the real John Deane appears to have actually done.⁷⁷ The image of John Deane as redeemed Jacobite may have persisted in the collective memory of the people of Nottinghamshire when Kingston was writing in the mid-nineteenth century.

A fictionalized John Deane appeared again in the twentieth century, when the beloved writer of American historical novels, Kenneth Roberts, wrote *Boon Island*, the final work of his immensely successful career. Unlike Kingston’s nineteenth-century fiction, which was only loosely based on John Deane’s life, Roberts closely follows the story line of the *Nottingham Galley* wreck as represented by Deane. For Roberts, Langman was simply a “liar and a coward” who “hated Deane with an abysmal hatred.” That apparently unprovoked loathing was, for Roberts, sufficient motivation for Langman and his allies to concoct lies about Deane.⁷⁸ Roberts’s Langman is “malice personified,” a “whoreson, beetle-headed, flap-eared knave,” guilty of “unreasoning hoggishness,” and “always wrong,” “with a “twisted mind” that “derided the truth, and defiled it.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷William Henry Giles Kingston, *John Deane of Nottingham* (London: Griffith and Farran, 1870).

⁷⁸Lewis Nichols, “A Visit with Mr. Roberts,” *New York Times*, 1 January 1956, quoted in Jack Bales, *Kenneth Roberts* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 13.

⁷⁹Roberts, *Boon Island*, pp. 115, 234, 250, 254, 256, 295, 304, 311.

Neither Roberts, nor anyone else for that matter, has felt the need to take seriously the charges leveled by Deane's opponents. First mate Christopher Langman, boatswain Nicholas Mellen, and sailor George White made their final stand against Captain Deane and his allies in London during the summer of 1711, and then they all but disappeared from the historical record except as foils for their supposedly virtuous captain. For John Deane, a long lifetime of writing and publishing allowed him to turn disaster, humiliation, and suspicion of treason into a calling card of courage, morality, and triumph that has endured to this day, three hundred years after the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley* on Boon Island.

Stephen Erickson, *author of the unpublished, book-length manuscript "Cold Rock: The Horrific Story of the Wreck of the 'Nottingham Galley' on Boon Island, Maine, and the Story of the Story," has done graduate work in American History at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and at the College of William and Mary. He is Founder and Executive Director of CenterMovement.org, an online journal dedicated to centrist politics.*