



A Brave Vessel: The True Tale of the Castaways Who Rescued Jamestown and Inspired Shakespeare's The Tempest

Hobson Woodward

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A gripping tale of shipwreck and survival that changed the fate of the colonies and enriched our literary legacy

In 1609, aspiring writer William Strachey set sail aboard the *Sea Venture*, bound for the New World. Caught in a hurricane, the ship separated from its fleet and wrecked on uninhabited Bermuda, a bountiful island paradise its passengers would inhabit for nearly a year before reaching their intended destination, the famine-stricken colony of Jamestown. Strachey's meticulous account of the wreck, the castaways' time on Bermuda, and their arrival in a devastated Jamestown was read by his contemporaries and remains among the most vivid writings of the early colonial period. Following the life of this ordinary man, Hobson Woodward tells one of the neglected but defining stories of America's founding.

Strachey had literary aspirations and sought to capitalize on his epic experience, but his writings did not bring him the acclaim he sought. Only in the hands of *another* William would his tale of the wreck and its aftermath make history as *The Tempest*. *A Brave Vessel* is the fascinating account of a near-miss in the settling of Virginia, the true story behind one of Shakespeare's great plays, and the tragedy of the man who failed as an author but who contributed to the creation of a masterpiece.

A Brave Vessel: The True Tale of the Castaways Who Rescued Jamestown and Inspired Shakespeare's The Tempest Details

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From Reader Review A Brave Vessel: The True Tale of the Castaways Who Rescued Jamestown and Inspired Shakespeare's The Tempest for online ebook

Elizabeth says

The fourth star is for dedicated research!

This was a fascinating and well-researched book that chronicles the adventures of a British ship heading for the new colony of Jamestown that got separated from its sister ships in a terrible hurricane. After days of thinking they were going to perish in the storm, they ran aground on a deserted island of Bermuda with no casualties from the storm. Over the next year, as told in the detailed journaling of one of its passengers, William Strachey, the castaways used the lumber from the damaged ship to build their escape vessels and made a life for themselves on the island. Eventually they made it to Jamestown and Strachey's written account made its way back to his family and to England. It apparently was read by William Shakespeare, and there is compelling evidence that it inspired much of the content for his last solo-written play "The Tempest." I wonder if "Swiss Family Robinson" wasn't also inspired by it.

I learned a lot, too, about the issues surrounding early Jamestown, the woes that beset it, and the conflicting interests of the owners of the Virginia Company that financed it, the pioneers who were willing to go first to settle there, and the unfortunate interaction with native American tribes whose lands and culture were so clearly disrupted and invaded.

Robert says

A nice bit of pop-history, but unfortunately, the Shakespearean analysis lags a bit. When Woodward is just talking about Jamestown, the book is at its best.

Tom Darrow says

The portion of this book that tells the story about Jamestown, the voyage of the Sea Venture and the shipwreck on Bermuda are the best parts of the story. Once the narrative goes back to England and the connections between the Bermuda trip and Shakespeare's Tempest are shown... the author's narrative style drops off in quality. Instead of weaving together a narrative, he simply cherry picks quotes from the play and compares them to other works. That part of the book is rather dull.

Todd Stockslager says

It is now widely accepted that Shakespeare based his late play "The Tempest" on accounts of the settlement of Virginia, and specifically the wreck of a Virginia-bound ship on the islands of Bermuda. Woodward tells the story of that shipwreck, its survivors, and how they eventually made it to Virginia and into Shakespeare. Unfortunately, along the way he buries the best part of his story.

The story of the settling of Jamestown has been told many other places, most recently in Benjamin Wooley's *Savage Kingdom: The True Story of Jamestown, 1607, and the Settlement of America*. Woodward's account follows the tale of the boat that never made it to Jamestown, blown eastward in a mid-summer hurricane so common to that part of the Atlantic. The *Sea Venture* carried the Virginia colony's intended governor, the admiral of the nine-vessel fleet headed for Virginia, and William Strachey, an erstwhile gentleman with literary aspirations who was apparently busy writing down all the fantastic events that transpired. Carried by the gale to the uninhabited Bermuda Islands, then feared by sailors as populated by devils, the *Sea Venture* grounded within a mile of the coast and miraculously all 150 sailors and colonists (including several women) survived both the storm, the wreck, and the lifeboat trip to the island . . .

. . . Which turned out to be a veritable tropical paradise where people would come to wear knee length shorts with dark socks and dress shoes and putter around in golf carts, although that was much later. Seriously though, the *Sea Venture* survivors created a microcosm of English empire on the islands, based on the natural plenty of edible wildlife on land, air, and sea.

After nearly a year, the team built a pair of smaller boats from the trees on the island and the remnants of the still-stuck *Sea Venture*, and continued their journey to Virginia--which was just a week's sail west. All the while Strachey was duly recording events; he was eventually appointed colonial secretary and sent letters describing the events before returning to England . . .

. . . To find his account memorialized (or plagiarized) by Shakespeare in "*The Tempest*" which opened just days after Strachey set foot back on his native soil!

Such is Woodward's account, which had great promise of a more interesting tale, but it too was blown off-course and foundered on the rocks of:

--failing to find the story. History is full of fascinating events like this. Fascinating, that is, when the right writer finds the heart of his story with the point of his pen (regards to Jimmy Buffett for that line). The heart of Woodward's story should have been, after a brief thumbnail of what happened in the New World (the journey, the shipwreck, and the aftermath), what happened when the news and the participants like Strachey arrived back in the Old. Instead this story is relegated to the final four of 18 chapters and an epilogue, less than one third of the book by page count. Too much time is spent retelling the story of the Jamestown settlement itself, which is better known and not as interesting today (in a nutshell for those who slept through it: Jamestown struggled but Virginia was settled, America won the Revolution, and the Americans beat the natives to conquer the rest of the continent) in comparison to how the story made it back to England and how it played out there.

--Burying the story in the unreadable footnotes. There is apparently a lot of question about which sources, Strachey's included, that Shakespeare used and how he got them, how much he had read of the New World, and exactly how the play parallels the sources and how audiences reacted to it. But this debate takes place mostly in the poorly formatted footnotes. I've never seen footnotes formatted in sentences and paragraphs, which combined with the parenthetical and numerical syntax common to footnotes makes them very difficult to reference. Which wouldn't be half so bad if Woodward hadn't left too much of the story in his discussions about the sources buried in the footnotes. He should have pulled these discussions about the sources to the body of the book, and relegated much of the Jamestown account to the footnotes.

Not a bad book, just a missed opportunity for a better one.

Laura says

Full disclosure: The author is an esteemed former student of mine so I feel like there is some conflict of interest in my "rating" this book. But *Brave Vessel* is a rare combination of meticulously researched **and** gripping, dramatic tale that I can enthusiastically recommend to all sorts of readers. Whether you love sailing or 17th-century history or just an amazing yarn, look for this vividly written book.

Michelle says

The first part of this--the history of the Sea Venture shipwreck on Bermuda and how they helped save Jamestown colony--was very interesting and well written. I feel the second part, on the connections between the account of the Sea Venture and *The Tempest*, was denser, harder to enjoy, and sometimes "reaching" a little too much.

Caroline says

First off, a caveat. This is speculative history. It has to be. At this remove, it is impossible to know what truly inspired Shakespeare to write any of his plays, let alone 'The Tempest'. I'll grant, it is entirely possible that Shakespeare heard of the wreck of the Sea Venture, heard tales in the taverns, even read William Strachey's letter to his patron. Many of the parallels between the play and the true events are striking, and I can well believe that Shakespeare did use the story as a basis for his play. But it's impossible to know for sure, and many of the parallels could well have applied to any shipwreck of the era.

That said, it's an interesting contrivance to use as a device for telling Strachey's story, and I won't complain too much since it's such an interesting story. The Sea Venture was the flagship of a fleet of nine ships headed to the fledgling colony of Jamestown, separated from the rest of the fleet by a hurricane in the Atlantic and wrecked on the coast of Bermuda. All hands survived and remained on the island for nine months, planting gardens and hunting wild pig and sea fowl whilst they constructed two new pinnaces to take them the rest of the way to Jamestown. Bermuda was an island of plenty, and there was little hardship for the survivors, save internal strife and mutiny from those who wanted to remain on Bermuda and establish a new colony there.

When the passengers of the Sea Venture, long since given up for lost, finally arrived at Jamestown, they saved the colony from starvation with plentiful rations they brought with them from Bermuda. Had they not arrived when they did, it is likely the few remaining colonists who had not perished from starvation would have evacuated back to England, probably crossing on the sea the fleet sent to resupply the colony. Had Jamestown perished as a colony who knows how different American history might have been.

The story of the Sea Venture on its own is enough for a good book; the latter chapters of this book is where it suffers, in attempting to draw too concrete conclusions about Shakespeare's plays. There is no evidence that Strachey ever saw 'The Tempest', although given his own literary interests and the existence of a play involving a shipwreck so soon after his own experiences, it is likely that he did. But it's impossible to know, and it's certainly nothing but speculation and artistic licence to write about what he thought and felt watching the play.

Michael D says

This was a really well done book on a totally interesting topic. It's especially worth the read if you've ever been to Bermuda or have plans to go. The section of the book dealing with the island's accidental finding is really fascinating.

Rick says

According to the author the wreck of a supply ship called the Sea Venture was the inspiration for Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Be that as it may it was certainly an adventure.

John says

Very interesting history but too much detail. It's about the wreck of a ship on the way to Jamestown in 1610 which gave Shakespeare the idea for the *Tempest*. The survivors managed to get to Jamestown and the food they brought saved the colony.

Interesting fact: In 1607 Shakespeare's company built the Blackfriars theater, which was the first enclosed theater. They then had to break plays up into acts so they could change the candles.

Cynda says

First Reading: Entertaining. Swift-moving. Interesting resting view of history. Quite possible. Makes - *Tempest*- more accessible. Thanks.

Second Reading: I re-read because I doing a buddy read of *The Tempest* . Not really worth a complete 2nd read past the point where the English sailors and settlers arrive in Jamestown. The details/words and phrases that match up in memior and and in the play are unmistakable.

Aristae Henricus says

"A Brave Vessel" follows the true story of writer William Strachey as he sails to the New World, is shipwrecked on Bermuda and finally finds his way to the early settlement of Jamestown following "The Starving Time".

Coincidentally, his journals help inspire playwright William Shakespeare, leading him to write his famous play, "The Tempest".

Two men whose initials are W.S., both writers, one recognized by history and the other largely unrecognized but also important, "A Brave Vessel" tells the tale of survival, not only on the island then known as "The Devil's Island", but also in the New World and in Old England.

I was fascinated to read of the Virginia Company's many deceptions that they used to lure settlers to the New World. I had an idea that they were largely lying when they painted America as a place of gold and prosperity, (I mean, who wouldn't suspect them?), but I had no idea that they actively hid the truth and kept

sailors from speaking out against the true nature of the New World.

If you want to get a peek on what was really going on in the early days of the New World, or if you're like me and just love survival stories that include tall ships and tales akin to Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", you'll not want to miss reading this book.

Happy Reading!

Peter Bridgford says

I bought this book during a visit to Bermuda, and I was intrigued by the description on the back cover - a British supply ship wrecks on Bermuda, two homemade vessels are built there that saved Jamestown, and the tale of it all becomes a source of Shakespeare's The Tempest. In the end, the book was an awesome look at several deep subjects, including colonization and the awful relationship with the Natives, sailing in the 17th Century, survival on an undiscovered island, and the art of William Shakespeare. If any of these things interest you, this book is a great read!

Catherine says

A fascinating story, with lots of interesting detail.

Jessica says

The first half of this book was very interesting. There was a lot I didn't know about the voyage from England to Jamestown and the Virginia Company. Although this book is clearly well researched and detailed, I did struggle toward the end where Woodward goes through each act of The Tempest - I was glad to see that the last 63 pages of the book we're just notes and that I was finished!
