

THE MYSTERIOUS CAPTAIN AMM, MASTER MARINER OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

by Trevor W. Hearl

“Captain Amm’s several voyages in his vessel Duke of Gloucester must be ranked high amongst calling ships that wrought changes on Tristan”. So states Rozell C. Smith in *Lifeline of a Lonely Island*, and few would dispute his opinion. Indeed, it could be argued that, apart from Corporal Glass, Captain Amm did as much as anyone to shape Tristan’s early history. But who was he?

In contemporary accounts the Captain was indeed a shadowy figure. Even Augustus Earle, who took ship with him at Rio for the Cape in 1824 and found himself marooned on Tristan instead, tells us nothing beyond his name - Captain Simon Amm - and that of his ship, the sloop *Duke of Gloucester*. Thomas Swain, voluble enough about catching Nelson as he fell on HMS *Victory*, said nothing about the Captain he had long known at the Cape before accompanying him to Tristan in 1826. Amm’s best publicised venture, taking five prospective St Helenian brides and their children to Tristan in 1827, is documented well enough, but behind his bizarre transaction - undertaken for a fee of 20 bushels of potatoes per head - the man himself remains quite elusive.

So elusive indeed that even his name arouses doubts among writers and researchers. Augustus Earle had called him “Amm”, but in 1940 Jan Brander emphasized in a footnote that “The correct spelling is Ham”. (p. 129). More recently Rozell Smith has suggested that the doubts had been caused by Tristan speakers dropping the letter “H” although in 1980 George Crabb confidently called him “Captain Ham”. (p.220).

My own doubts, about his name at least, were resolved after stumbling across a South African biography of Saul Solomon, “the Member for Cape Town”. Born in St Helena in 1817, a nephew of Saul Solomon “merchant-king of St Helena”, he went to school in 1829 at the Cape. There he became a leading businessman and politician, his sister, Bella, keeping house for him with the help of a school friend. That friend was Jane Amm, “whose father, Captain Amm, had perished at sea”, it stated. Saul later proposed marriage to her, but was not accepted, though she remained a household companion until her death in 1870.

But Captain Amm remained in enigmatic obscurity. His home, presumably, was at the Cape, though he is not in Philip’s records of *British Residents*, 1795-1819. The fate of the *Duke of Gloucester*, however, is mentioned in Dr Arkin’s scholarly study of the Cape-St Helena trade, 1794-1836. He quotes Captain Amm’s contract in Jamestown in 1827 to supply St Helena with urgently needed whale oil, and the Company’s complaint in 1828 that only seven of the required 12 tons had been delivered owing to “the unfortunate loss” of the *Duke of Gloucester* (described as a

whaling schooner), a disaster that must have occurred between April 1827 (when Amm took the brides to Tristan) and August 1828.

Augustus Earle's sketch of the *Duke of Gloucester* off Tristan is reproduced in Allan Crawford's recent study (1982, p. 32). Is there no further information about its Master? Surely the mysterious life and death of Captain Amm merits greater prominence in Tristan historiography than it has so far received.

SOURCES:

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