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A NAVAL VISITOR IN BRITISH WEST FLORIDA

by ROBERT R. REA

THE WORLD-WIDE EXPANSION of the British Empire in the eighteenth century was dependent upon a navy whose officers were, of necessity, the most widely travelled men of their times. No less than frontiersmen, the holders of His Majesty's commission were empire-builders. Seldom, however, were they fully conscious of the broader significance of their work or capable of literary exploitation of their experiences. John Blankett was an exception to this generalization. His career extended from the inland waters of North America to the Indian Ocean, from Russia to South Africa, from the English Channel to the Red Sea where he last flew his broad pennant.¹ Blankett possessed a keen eye for the unique and delighted in sharing his observations with any who might find them useful or interesting. He was the author of a brief book on Portugal and several lengthy descriptive and strategic memoranda addressed to such influential British statesmen as the Earl of Shelburne.

One of John Blankett's endeavors in the field of letters resulted from his experience as a young lieutenant stationed on the newly-acquired British Gulf Coast in the years 1764-1765. Extending his activity beyond the confines of ship-board duty, Blankett familiarized himself with the infant colony of West Florida, was briefly a property-holder therein, and visited the city of New Orleans whose strategic importance, though lost upon a British government, was clear enough to a future British admiral. The manuscript records of British West Florida and the unpublished correspondence of the Royal Society, to whom Blankett offered his observations on the Mississippi region, present a unique view of British naval participation in the creation of the American empire.

The introduction of British troops and the establishment of civil government in West Florida was accompanied by the appearance of naval vessels at Pensacola, the provincial capital. Naval interest in the Gulf Coast reflected the essentially Carib-

1. Biographical information may be found in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXII (1802), 35-36; J. K. Laughton's sketch in the *DNB*; and Robert R. Rea, "John Blankett and the Russian Navy in 1774," *The Mariner's Mirror*, XLI (1955), 245-249.

bean nature of the area and its contacts in the early years of British occupation. The sea offered the easiest and most obvious route to West Florida from either Britain or the northern colonies, and it was generally recognized that the colony's future was tied economically to Caribbean trade and commerce. Naval vessels bringing troops and supplies frequently contributed significantly to the affairs of the young colony, lent a helping hand to hard-pressed soldiers, and allowed enterprising officers an opportunity to dabble in colonial real-estate.

Assistance in establishing British authority and impressing the surrounding hordes of Indians with British might was greatly appreciated by the successive commanders and civil officials at Pensacola. Major William Forbes, for instance, showed his gratitude for such aid by securing horses for the use of naval officers ashore. Four horses cost Forbes four gallons of rum, but he was a good horse-trader; his rum was half water.² Governor George Johnstone, himself a former naval person, sought the support of Admiral Sir William Burnaby in his quarrels with the army,³ and the Navy made itself generally useful in all but the mercantile sphere of activity: the presence of men-of-war at Pensacola frightened off Spanish trading vessels from Havana whose commerce was most necessary to colonial prosperity.⁴

Naval officers and seamen were not likely to become permanent settlers in West Florida, but they were prompt to engage in land speculation. Admiral Burnaby held considerable property interests, as did Sir John Lindsay, the commanding naval officer at Pensacola, and several other members of the company of H.M.S. *Alarm* to which Lieutenant John Blankett was attached.⁵ Blankett probably reached West Florida with Sir John's squadron in September 1764.⁶ Following established procedure, he petitioned the provincial council for a grant of land, and on February 7, 1765, he was awarded Town Lot No. 88 in Pensacola.⁷

2. Forbes to Gage, July 15, 1764, Gage Manuscripts, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Hereafter cited as Gage Mss.

3. See the Gage Mss, *passim*.

4. Forbes to Gage, May 28, 1764, Gage Mss.

5. Clinton N. Howard, *The British Development of West Florida, 1763-1769* (Berkeley, 1947), 53, 57-58, 63.

6. Mackinen to Gage, Sept. 20, 1764, Gage Mss.

7. Howard, *op. cit.*, 57; Alabama State Department of Archives and History, British West Florida Transcripts, 158. Hereafter cited as A&H Trans.

His tenure of the property was brief, as was his stay on the Gulf Coast. Before the end of the year his lot was transferred to James Robinson on the grounds that Blankett had given no indication of intention to improve the property nor build a house, nor had he transferred his interest to any other party.⁸

Blankett's visit to the neighboring province of Louisiana and the Isle of Orleans was the result of British interest in opening a passage from the Mississippi River into West Florida and thereby circumventing Spanish control of virtually all of the commerce of the interior. The government of West Florida invested considerable energy toward this end and hoped that the Iberville River would provide a means of communication with the Mississippi which would lie wholly in British hands.

As early as the spring of 1764, Major Robert Farmar proposed the establishment of a British post at the juncture of the two rivers in order to better "preserve a communication with the post of Natches" and to put "a check upon that constant intercourse and correspondence which the French enjoy at present without interruption with the savages."⁹ James Campbell surveyed the Iberville during the summer, and his reports to Mobile sustained Major Farmar's enthusiasm for the project.¹⁰ The surveyor reported to General Thomas Gage in December that a fort on the Iberville would be "the key to the Mississippi," and he urged the building of "a stockaded blockhouse with four four-pounders."¹¹

So encouraging did the prospects appear that the Iberville project won the enthusiastic support of the newly-arrived Governor George Johnstone, who wrote that "The advantages which will attend the occupying of this post, besides the keeping so material a passage open, & protecting the navigation of this passage will be, the securing our possessions on the north side of that channel, & rendering New Orleans dependant on us for all things instead of our being dependant on New Orleans."¹² Characteristically, however, Johnstone favored his own authority on the Iberville River, that "very ingenious young Gentleman"

8. Howard, *op. cit.*, 66; A&H Trans., 220. Transfer occurred between August 13 and November 2, 1765.

9. Farmar to Gage, April 17, 1764, Gage Mss.

10. Farmar to Gage, September 24, 1764, Gage Mss.

11. Campbell to Gage, December 10, 1764, Gage Mss.

12. Johnstone to Lindsay, December 10, 1764, Gage Papers, American Series.

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Phillip Pittman, and saddled Campbell with the impossible task of opening a route whereby vessels of six feet draft might move from Lake Pontchartrain into the Mississippi no later than June, 1765.

Toward this end Johnstone, on December 10, 1764, requested that Sir John Lindsay place a naval vessel at the colony's disposal. Lindsay was requested to make any structural or equipment changes deemed necessary for river service and was assured that "every species of fresh provisions" would be readily available to the ship assigned the duty.¹³ The Governor's plea was supported by Major Farmar, in behalf of the military establishment, thereby displaying a unique case of cooperation between the civil and military authorities in West Florida.¹⁴ Early in January, 1765, both Campbell and Pittman headed west to begin work on the Iberville channel and the proposed fort.¹⁵

On January 2, 1765, Admiral Lindsay assured the Governor of his support and advised that "The *Nautilus* being the smallest Frigate in the Squadron, I have therefore given Capt. Locker orders to get her ready for that service. But as she draws 13 feet of water, I am in some doubt if she will be able to go over the Bar at the Balize [at the mouth of the Mississippi]." ¹⁶ Inquiry at Mobile apparently assured the Governor that *Nautilus* could navigate the entry into the Mississippi, and on January 7, the Council decided to accept the Navy's offer and to send equipment for the new post by that conveyance.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the Governor and his advisers were overly optimistic concerning the quantity of materiel which might be sent aboard one twenty-gun ship. Lindsay was forced to warn Johnstone that "the smallness of the *Nautilus* renders her incapable of receiving such a quantity of stores as is mentioned . . . especially as I have directed Captain Locker to take in a greater quantity of provisions than usual in order that the service she is going upon may not be frustrated by depending on a precarious supply." Lindsay further advised the Governor that *Nautilus* would be ready to sail from Pensacola on January 29. She would stop at Dauphin Island, outside Mobile Bay, and there receive troops

13. *Ibid.*; A&H Trans., 38-41.

14. Farmar to Gage, December 21, 1764, Gage Mss.

15. Farmar to Gage, January 17, 1765, Gage Mss.

16. Lindsay to Johnstone, January 2, 1765, A&H Trans., 41-43.

17. Council Minutes, January 7, 1765, A&H Trans., 45-46.

destined for the new post, six cannon, and various other military stores.¹⁸ Major Farmar was promptly informed of these arrangements and promised that troops at Mobile would be in readiness for *Nautilus'* arrival.¹⁹

Lieutenant John Blankett was quick to seize the chance presented by this project. As he later wrote:

Such an opportunity offering of acquainting myself with the river Mississippi was too favorable to be neglected. I therefore applied to Sir John Lindsay, the commanding Sea Officer at Pensacola, for leave to pass in the *Nautilus* to New Orleans; which he very readily granted, as the *Alarm*, to which ship I belonged, was not immediately wanted.²⁰

The sailing of *Nautilus* was delayed for several days, at least, and while Campbell waited anxiously at New Orleans, a more pleasant spot than the crocodile-infested swamps of the Iberville, Governor Johnstone attached Archibald Robertson, another engineer, to the expedition. In his instructions to Robertson, the Governor gave a name to the new post, desiring "that the Fort may be called *Bute* in remembrance of that virtuous minister who was the instrument employed by His Majesty under the blessing of God, for extending our dominions to that western limit."²¹

With due deliberation *Nautilus* went about her appointed task, and Lieutenant Blankett, who sailed with her, had ample time to compile that account of his passage and observations of the lower Mississippi which he forwarded in 1774 to the Royal Society in London. His report was received but not printed. It did not possess great scientific value, but it graphically portrayed the river scene and described those matters of particular interest to sea-farers both naval and mercantile. As a contemporary view of the area it holds greater value and interest for the twentieth-century historian than it did for the eighteenth-century academician. Blankett's report follows:

18. Lindsay to Johnstone, January 21, 1765, Gage Mss.

19. Johnstone to Farmar, January 22, 1765, and Farmar to Johnstone, January 27, 1765, Gage Mss.

20. The Royal Society Mss, Letters and Papers, Decade VI, No. 37, Burlington House London, England (photostatic copy in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.). Blankett's communication is here printed with the gracious permission of the Royal Society.

21. Campbell to Gage, February 8 and February 20, 1765; Johnstone to Robertson, February 9, 1765, Gage Mss. The Earl of Bute was also the instrument whereby Johnstone secured his gubernatorial appointment.

* There being no tide of any consequence from the gulph of Mexico.

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The Balize, which is a small fort at the entrance of the Missipi, is situated in the latitude 29°08', forty three leagues SW of the harbour of Pensacola, & as the land here is very low they make a signal from the Fort to Ships in the Offing who would otherwise find it difficult to ascertain the entrance of the river. The different entrances of the river are formed by mud banks, on which the trees which are continually floating down the river are stopped, & in a short time form small Islands which are raised above the surface of the water & become covered with wild canes & rushes.

There are three principal passes, The East, The South East, & The South West, all these passes are very liable to shift & fill up for it is not more than four or five years ago that Ships were used to pass close to the little fort at the Balize, which is now more than a mile from the passage at present made use of.

The East pass is the one most commonly used, as supposed to contain the most water, when the Nautilus first arrived there I found thirteen feet on the bar, but the next day it blowing hard out of the river, the water had fallen to something less than twelve feet. The Ground is soft mud, tho there are some parts hard gravel. The Current is very rapid, more especially when the river is full. The tides at the entrance are irregular & depend on the winds: They sometimes rise about 1 foot & half tho without lessening the strength of the current. There are two King's Pilots & proper boats at the Balize who are in readiness to go out to Ships in the offing, these people are obliged to sound the bar after every gale from the S.E.

After passing the bar which is about a Mile long you meet with 4, 5, & 6 fathom water, where ships generally anchor in a small bay & take in whatever might have been put out to lighten for coming over the bar.

After this the only difficulty is the strength of the Current which runs between 3 and 4 knotts. The river is about half a mile broad, the banks low & steep. It is not good to anchor for the heavy trees which are swept down by the current catch the anchor & very soon bury it, so as to make it almost impossible to weigh it again. This we found by experience, and we learned afterwards that the best method of stopping the ship, was by a bow & quarter fast to the trees, as you may lay your side to the banks.

For upwards of twenty leagues the banks are very low, the ground swampy marshes covered with wild Canes, Cedar, & rushes. As you proceed farther the banks rise something higher, in some places three & four feet, but this must be observed to alter according to the fullness of the river. The Plantations are well banked up. They begin a reach called *Detours aux Anglois*. The soil is abundantly rich & fertile producing Sugar, Indigo, Indian Corn Cotton & almost every thing of American growth, & with very little pains, they seldom dig their grounds, but only turn it up with a hoe & put in their plants or Grain. They raise great quantity of Cattle & Stock of all sorts.

Five leagues from the *Detours aux Anglois* is the town of New Orleans the right hand side of the river, it is stockaded round in a regular manner, but at the time I was there had not a gun mounted. [It] is by no means capable of defence, its only strength lies in its difficulty of access. The town is of an oblong form, the houses . . . & built of wood with balconies in the manner of the West Indies. Their trade consists chiefly in Skins, Squared timber, Lumber Indigo, & some cotton, & is carried on chiefly to the Illinois & to Cape Francois in Hispaniola. To the Illinois they send Cloths, Flannels, Wines, Cutlery & other European manufactures, & receive in return Skins, Flour & Corn, which with Squared Timber, Shingles & Lumber are carried to Cape Francois in return for the Manufactures of Europe.

The trade to the Illinois has been greatly Monopolised by the Governors, Intendants & Comptrollers, who under pretence of sending detachments, recruits, & stores to the Illinois, carried on their trade in large *Batteaux*, at the King's expence, by which means they could undersell the Merchants & were always sure of the first of the market at the Illinois.

The Mississippi may be called the Nile of America, it rises in the same manner & overflows its banks, the Ouse fattening the soil, it has a continual current downwards* & abounds in the same animals, such as Crocodiles & water serpents. The Mississippi begins to rise in April when the Frosts break up in the high mountains with which its source is surrounded & rises from ten to twelve feet which is evident from the marks on the Trees, it falls again the beginning of September. It must be observed that this overflowing only extends very wide near the mouth of the

Missisipi, for as you go up the river the land at some distance is above the height of the flood at its greatest fullness.

It will likewise be necessary to observe that tho the water in the river is raised ten & twelve feet, yet the water on the bar is not proportionably increased; For the Sea breezes blowing fresh the whole summer wash up the loose sand thrown down by the current of the river & make the sand banks higher than in the winter, so that in fact there is less water in Summer than in Winter, thro the different entrances of the River. It is principally owing to this reaction of the Sea breezes against the Current that those small Islands in the mouth of the River are continually increasing, & it will be evident upon examination to determine that the lower parts of the Missisipi are only the work of a few Centuries.

The Plantations by the side of the river are banked up to any height the proprietor pleases, according to what quantity of water he wishes to have; from the great fertility of the soil every kind of herbage is very luxuriant & the Orange trees in particular seem to delight in the nature of their situation. Myrtle trees, from which the wax is made, are in great abundance, & with the Orange trees generally compose the hedge rows. The sailing up this river is very agreeable, for in order to keep out of the strength of the current, you frequently pass under fine spreading trees, & open at once, upon a well cultivated Plantation.

The rapid motion of so large a body of water as the Missisipi, must naturally occasion a great current of Air which fans the borders of the river, in the great heats of Summer, & renders it pleasant in the most Calm seasons.

The water of the river, when left to settle, is extremely soft & fine, & if we may believe the Inhabitants is good against almost all the disorders of the country. It is certain that they drink it, after any violent exercise to prevent fevers, & even give it in fevers by way of diet drink.

During my stay at New Orleans, the Batteauxs arrived from the Illinois & brought accounts that the Indians had discovered a colony of Japanese. They described houses of red earth & several other particulars which made the French conclude that they had met with a settlement of Colonists whom they supposed to have come from Japan. These were the Merchants accounts, but as I afterwards wrote to Mr. Aubrey the Commandant at

New Orleans on this subject, I shall transcribe his letter only adding that Mr. Aubrey is a man of great knowledge, much conversant with the history of America, & ever accounted of strict honor & veracity.

Monsieur

Je vous prie de m'excuser du long silence que j'ai garde a votre egard, la multitude d'affaires dont j'ai ete accable jusqu' ici m'a empeche d'entretenir correspondance avec un des hommes avec lequel je desirerois le plus d'en avoir, je compli sur votre indulgence et je me flatte de la meriter, attendu que ma faute est involontaire.

Nous me demandes une relation au sujet de ces figures Asiati-ques que l'on a vue dans les Nord Ouest de L'Amerique, la con-noissance que j'ai de de cette Nouveaute est que le Sieur des Voltez, Officier reformi, etabli depuis longtems aux Illinois, m'a rapporte que des sauvages de Missouri lui avoient dit, que des na-tions tres eloignes de leur village, assuroient que du cote, ou le soleil se couche il avoit passe des hommes toute differons des hom-mes rouges & blancs, qu'ils portoient des longues robes, et avoient des fusils et des armes qui quoique differens des notres, feroient pourtant les meme effet, Voila Monsieur, tout ce que je sai.

Ce qu'il y a de certain, cest que la position du pais des Illinois on j'ai ete longtems, est singulierement remarquables. A Son Nord Est, est Canada et La belle riviere, celebre a jamais par les actions heroiques que s'y sont faites, et les actions barbares, que s'y sont commises Le Nord et le Nord Ouest des Illinois a pro-prement parler n'est pas encore decouvert ce post en quelque facon, dans cette partie, sert des bonnes a l'Universe connue. Au dela est un Continent immense, ou L'Avarice, et la Cupidite des Europeans n'a pu encore par venir, selon les apparences ce sera la generation suivante qui fera cette decouverte.

Selon va au nord des Illinois en remontant le fleuve en ren-contra, apres trois une luing de Chemin le saute St. Antoine passe ce saut, le Missisipi n'est plus rien, il se divise en plusieurs fourches & vent lines plus loin, est un lac, et un terre marecajeuse et tremblante, dont il prend sa source. Les Sioux et autres Na-tions firores habitent ces Terres fertiles et riches en varis pel-

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liserie, la mauvais foy & la cruaute de ces Sauvages imputent les Voyageurs d'y aller Commerces.

A l'égard de Nord Ouest des Illinois, il est traverse par un des plus grands et rapides fleuves de l'Univers, appelle le Missouri. Il entraine avec lui des Isles & des forets qui vont se promener dans les Golphes de Mexique, on ne connoit que quatre cent lieues de son Cours, les Francois n'ont jamais passes le village de Ricarao, des nations innombrables habitent cet continent si la Navigation de ce fleuve n'étoit pas aussi terrible et dangereuse qu'elle est, on y auroit fait des decouvertes interessantes et un commerce considerable. Plusiers Voyageurs en ont raporte des dents D'Elephants, mais on n'y en a jamais vue d'en Vie, . . . seule chose me fait penser que le nord ouest de L'Amerique [et] le Nord Est de L'Asie se touchent, ou que si il y a une separation [qu'e]lle n'est pas considerable.

Si cette Nouvelle des Sauvages est vraie il ne seroit pas impossible de voir arriver en quelques jours, une detachmens Japanois ou Moscovite, mais avant cet evenment je crois que les Espagnole seront ici, est que je serai partis pour La France.

Je sois bien de la joie que la guerre Sauvage est sur sa fin & que vous seres bientot tranquilles possesseurs des terres que nous vous avent cede. Depuis la mort de Monsr. D'Abbadie j'ai travaille sans relache a tranquiliser les sauvages, je vois avec satisfaction que mes peines ne sont pas perdus, et que depuis que je suis a la tete de ces Pais, on n'a point entendu parler [de] ces catastrophes que fort horreur a l'humanite et J'espere que Messieurs le Anglis me rendrent toute la justice que je merite. Je vous prie Monsieur de me donner de vos nouvelles de me . . . un peu de part dans votre souvenir, & d'etre persuadei de tous les sentimens les plus parfaits d'estime et de consideration la plus grande avec, lequel J'ai l'honneur d'Etre

Monsieur

A la Nouvelle Orleans
18 Juin 1765

Votres tres humble
et tres obeissant serviteur
Aubrey

P.S. Having read an account in the Philosophical Transactions of supposed Elephants teeth found in the NW parts of America, which were conjectured to belong to some other animals I mentioned it to Mr. Aubry who assured me that by every account.

he had receiv'd, & by every trial he had made, he had no doubt of their being real Elephants teeth.

The joys of sailing on the Mississippi appear to have ended with *Nautilus'* northward progress. The frigate reached the site of Fort Bute no later than April and remained until mid-June at which time it was forced to return to New Orleans for want of bread and other supplies. Engineer Campbell reported that *Nautilus'* presence had great effect upon the French and Indians of the area who respected this display of British strength. The ship's crew were of little assistance in the work at hand, however, for like most sailors, they insisted that their duty did not require service ashore.²² Similar complaint was made by Robertson, who had accompanied Locker and Blankett aboard the vessel, and had been led to believe that the ship would provide him with a working party of forty men.²³

One can well imagine the British seamen growing restive as the summer heat weighed upon them and their rations diminished. Equally concerned was Admiral Burnaby, who hired a sloop to convey supplies to his river outpost,²⁴ but Captain Locker, unable to wait, dropped downstream long before relief could reach him. The supply ship met *Nautilus* crossing the bar at Balize.²⁵ Governor Johnstone protested vehemently against the abandonment of his construction detachment at Fort Bute, but he received only a curt rebuff from the new naval commander at Pensacola, Captain William Cornwallis, who denied either knowledge of or responsibility for the joint operation in which *Nautilus* had been engaged.²⁶

By the summer's end the project had been dropped from naval consideration altogether, and the small working party headed by Robertson had been dispersed by desertion, fever, and a raiding band of Alabama and Houma Indians who destroyed the place and chased Robertson back to New Orleans.²⁷

Nautilus' role in the history of the Mississippi was far from glorious; Blankett's description of the rich river country failed to

22. Campbell to Gage, June 20, 1765, Gage Mss.

23. Robertson to Gage, September 20, 1765, Gage Mss.

24. Wedderburn to Gage, June 7, 1765, Gage Papers, American Series 34.

25. Johnstone to Cornwallis, July 8, 1765, Gage Mss.

26. Cornwallis to Johnstone, July 8, 1765, and Johnstone to Robertson, October 1, 1765, Gage Mss.

27. Robertson to Gage, September 20, 1765, Gage Mss.

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stir Britons to effective action, yet in no part of the Southern colonies might the combined efforts of the British army, navy, and colonial government have paid greater dividends. Similar failure to achieve cooperation was in part the cause of the eventual loss of British West Florida, which slipped into Spanish hands during the American Revolutionary struggle with almost the same ease with which the first Fort Bute was swallowed up by the ravenous Mississippi.