

Short, sharp bursts of history

Shipwrecks of the Southern Seas

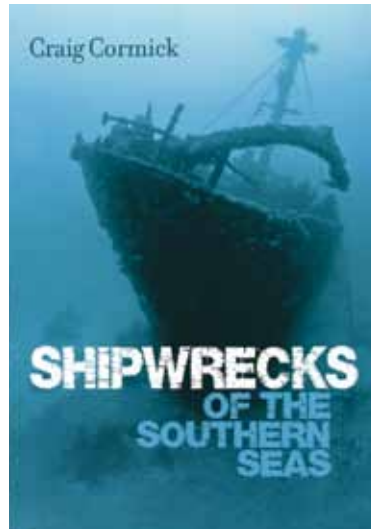
by Craig Cormick. Published 2011 by Pier 9, an imprint of Murdoch Books Pty Limited, Millers Point, Australia. Paperback with flap, 304 pp. ISBN 978 1 74196 787 6. RRP \$34.99

AUSTRALIAN WATERS are the final resting place of more than 6,500 shipwrecks and this book by Dr Craig Cormick offers us a tantalising glimpse of a mere handful of them – just enough to whet the appetite for more. The author is billed as a science communicator with a PhD in ‘creative communication of history’. I like Cormick’s writing style – it’s so very easy to read, it’s engaging and the book is well researched. As he says, ‘there can be as many points of view on history as there are historians’. His book is one offering that really engages the reader via its consciously non-academic storytelling style.

There are 22 chapters leading us through the age of sail and steam from 1622 to 1890; from the first known European wreck in our waters, the British East India Company ship *Trial*, to the three-masted steamship *Quetta* – the latter referred to by Cormick as ‘the *Titanic* of Torres Strait’. The chapters are succinctly but engagingly written and ideal to read on the bus, train or ferry to work; or to catch a couple of chapters before bedtime. This is not an in-depth study of our shipwreck heritage, nor does it try to be. And this is why it is successful – it will draw you in and you will want to find out more!

This book covers not just shipwrecks but mutiny, piracy and castaways and their attendant stories of survival, courage, greed, cowardice, treachery, mystery and the absurd. There are some great engravings and illustrations to support the reader’s journey through these fascinating stories.

There are the ships and stories that are relatively well-known, such as the 17th-century United Dutch East India Company’s *Batavia* (remember when the replica stayed with us in 1999–2000?); the *Bounty* of mutiny fame in the



18th-century, and the 19th-century story of the ‘notorious celebrity’ Eliza Fraser who survived the wrecking of the *Stirling Castle* and being held captive by Aborigines. Rescued by a convict, Eliza told her story many times but in different ways each time – prompting the author’s query: ‘Was she a poor victim of savage treatment’ or a ‘compulsive lying psychochick’? And there’s the tragic loss of the *Loch Ard* in 1878 in Victoria where 52 lost their lives and only two survived.

Little-known maritime disasters also appear. There’s the story of the 14-year-old French cabin boy Narcisse Pelletier from the *Saint-Paul*, wrecked on the Louisiade Archipelago in 1857. He ended up stranded on Cape York, where he lived with the Pama Malngkana people for 17 years until forcibly removed through the good intentions of a European captain.

Have you ever heard of Barbara Thompson, the sole survivor from the cutter *America*, which was wrecked while salvaging goods from other shipwrecks in the Torres Strait? Barbara was rescued by men from Muralug (Prince of Wales Island) where she was recognised by the chief of the Kaurareg as ‘the ghost of his recently dead daughter, Giom’. So Barbara lived with them for six years until she was rescued by the survey ship *Rattlesnake*. On board were explorer Owen Stanley

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and marine artist Oswald Brierly, names we may be more familiar with.

Cormick’s style of writing may not suit all. Each chapter is written slightly differently. For example, the *Trial* story is likened to a soccer match – ‘over the centuries there has been fierce rivalry, and occasionally wars, between the English and the Dutch – still being played out in World Cup soccer matches’. He scores the 17th-century wrecks off the Western Australian coastline as ‘Holland 4, England 1’. For Barbara Thompson’s story he says ‘read her story and then decide whether an opera would be the most appropriate way to present her experiences to a contemporary audience’. He then gives us the story in four acts.

Shipwrecks of the Southern Seas offers its readers short, sharp bursts of history in a light-hearted but factual way, mixing well-known, lesser-known and some virtually unknown events that have happened around our coastline or in our region. Well-suited to this day of instant information, Cormick’s latest book will engage you in our seafaring past, and immerse you in some of the tales of tragedies and survivals that deserve being told or retold. ■

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