

An account of the loss of the Country Ship *Forbes* and Frazer Sinclair, her late Commander

HORST H. LIEBNER AND DAVID VAN DYKE

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the life of the English Country trader Captain Frazer Sinclair leading up to and following the loss of the *Forbes* in the Karimata Strait in 1806. It examines the adventure and tenuous times of trading around the Indonesian archipelago after the fall of the VOC and subsequent transfer to the British. Included are the details of Captain Sinclair's trading history, multiple prizes as a privateer, and shipwrecks.

KEYWORDS

English Country trade; Captain Frazer Sinclair; opium; privateer; *Forbes*; Karimata Strait; Letter of Marque.

Running before a favourable easterly wind well into the third hour of 11 September 1806, the British country ship¹ *Forbes*, out of Calcutta under Captain Frazer Sinclair, most unexpectedly “struck and stuck on a reef of rocks at the South entrance of the Straits of Billiton” (Figure 1).²

¹ A ship which was employed in the local trade in Asia and the Far East was known as a Country Ship. These ships were owned by local shipowners in the east, many of which had long standing connections with the Company. As well as collecting cargo from outlying places to particular ports, ready for loading on the Regular ships for transshipment to England, the Country ships traded freely all year round [<http://www.eicships.info/help/shiprole.html>].

² This and the following unmarked details on the *Forbes*' last voyage are compiled from two reports of the wreckage, found in the *Prince of Wales Island Government Gazette* (in the following, *PWIG*) 11-10-1806, shown in Figure 1, and in a supplement to the *Bombay Courier* 03-01-1807, here not presented. For supplying scans of all surviving editions of the *PWIG* until

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Her crew, so spitefully thrown out of their routine and sleep, presently lowered the ship's tenders, and tried their utmost to get the vessel off the cliff; yet, the hull apparently being breached, "about two hours after, the stern went down in 5 fathoms", and, as witnessed by the wreck's present site, the *Forbes* slipped off the reef into the 30-odd meter she now rests. With dawn breaking, the ship's company of 78 European officers and tars, Indian seacunnies and Laskar sailors now found themselves, some 600 nautical miles from the nearest English settlement, in but their boats – and that, as will become apparent presently, in a sea claimed by Britain's current enemies, the Batavian Republic and her confederate, Napoleonic France, thus frustrating a landfall on nearer shores. Not only having lost the "property and treasure" the crew had gathered during the six preceding months, they now faced the hardships and dangers of a lengthy voyage in open boats through hostile quarters, an ordeal that could easily imperil their freedom, if not their lives.

The *Forbes* was almost brand-new: It was only a short 20 months since she, on 18 January of the previous year, and just as we had expected by the accounts of other launchings, had "glided into her destined element, amidst the admiration and applauses of a numerous assemblage of spectators".³ Built by a certain Matthew Smith at his yards at Howrah on the River Hooghly's banks opposite to Calcutta, this "very handsome vessel of 300 tons burthen" was registered as what then used to be called a "ship", "full-rigged" – meaning, carrying square sails on all of her three masts (Figure 2). To the day two months later, she made her maiden voyage to Bombay, then the most important British settlement on India's west coast, under the mutual protection against the French privateers known to haunt the Bay of Bengal in convoy with a dozen other ships, where she dropped anchor on 25 May of that year. We don't know when the *Forbes* returned to Bengal; yet, by 30 November the ship was back in Bombay, having

left the [Calcutta] Pilot on the 19th of September, and experienced light North East winds in her passage down the Bay of Bengal; off Ceylon they met with hard gales from West to S. W. Spoke H. M. ship *Victor*, in Lat. 17° 15' N. — On their passage up the coast they touched at Cannanore. Passengers, Colonel Forbes, to Point de Galle, L. Mackintosh, Esq. from Mangalore, and Mr. M'Leod who died at Sea (*Bombay Courier* 07-12-1806).

1816 we are indebted to Geoff Wade, then of the National University of Singapore.

³ *Asiatic Annual Register* [...] for the year 1808 (in the following, AAR NNNN) (1811: 96) describing the launch of *Emma*, for which see the following note.

PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND
GOVERNMENT GAZETTE,
Saturday, October 11, 1806.

On Wednesday last, the 1st Subscription Assembly was held at the Navy House, which was numerously attended—the dancing began about half past eight o'clock, and was kept up with great spirit until 11, when an elegant supper was served up, after which, the dances re-commenced and continued till an early hour.

LOSS OF THE FORBES.

The *Forbes*, Captain Frazer Sinclair, sailed from Calcutta on the 5th April, bound to the Eastward on a trading voyage, with a cargo of opium, piece goods, and iron; on the 11th ultimo, (returning home laden with the profits to a considerable amount) about 2 A. M. then going at the rate of 5 knots, she struck and stuck on a reef of rocks at the South entrance of the Straits of Billiton, lat. 3 40 together with a Dutch brig which had been taken as prize during the voyage; the boats were immediately hoisted out, and every endeavour made to get the ship off, but unfortunately without effect, as in about 2 hours after, the *stera* went down in 5 fathoms; finding every attempt to save either vessel or cargo fruitless, the crew with 5 Javanese taken from the prize brig, were divided into three boats: Capt. Sinclair, Mr. Robert Sharp, 4th mate, and 11 of the crew in the pinnace, after undergoing the greatest distresses from want of water and provisions under a scorching sun, without an awning or any thing to cover them, fell in with the *General Baird*, Captain John Harford, eight days after leaving the wreck, who with his wonted liberality-supplied them with every thing requisite for their further progress to Malacca.

On the morning of the 22d ultimo, the pinnace arrived at Malacca, and on the 25th, the long boat with Mr. Hammond and Mr. Domain, 1st and 3d officers and 27 of the crew also reached that Settlement, the other boat has not yet made her appearance.

Previous to the loss of the *Forbes*, Mr. Hitchings, 2d officer, with 16 men, were dispatched in another brig, (which had also been captured) no intelligence has yet been received of her.

We understand, that the *Penang Packet*, Capt. Mathews, has been chartered and dispatched by Mr. Douglas, to the reef of rocks, where the *Forbes* and her Prize were unfortunately lost, for the purpose of endeavouring to recover some part of the property and treasure on account of the underwriters.

Figure 1. "Loss of the *Forbes*" (*Prince of Wales Island Gazette* 11-10-1806).



Figure 2. A British country trader, a "full-rigged ship", off Bombay, circa 1850 [<http://www.britannica.com/technology/ship/History-of-ships>].

Colonel Forbes must have thought the ship's name a rather gratifying concurrence – and one wonders if the Bombay trading house of Forbes and Company (Figure 3), established in 1767 by the Scottish peer John Forbes and destined to become "one of the oldest businesses in the world"⁴ that still today runs a number of successful enterprises in India, would not have found a vessel bearing their company's tag a carrier suitably appointed for their far-stretched commerce. However, in the ships' registers we could address, we noticed but two mentions of the *Forbes*: Her only appearance in the annual "List of Vessels belonging to the Port of Calcutta" in the first edition of the *East India Register and Directory for 1806* omits the usual entry for a "managing owner" and, speciously by a printing mistake, notes the name of her captain in the line directly above as commander of a *Fairlie*; registered under "General No. 95" in Phipps 1840's *Collection of Papers Relative to Ship Building in India*, the vessel is correctly stated to have been "lost in the Java seas, 11th Sept. 1806", but neither her skipper nor proprietors are revealed (Figure 4).

⁴ For example, *British Library Blog*, "Untold Lives", 18-11-2013 (<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/untoldlives/2013/01/forbes-and-company-one-of-the-oldest-businesses-in-the-world.html>); compare for example, http://www.forbes.co.in/history_flash.htm, both last accessed 24-08-2015).



Figure 3. Forbes & Company's office, Bombay. 1810; British Library, BL/WD 315 no.10 [http:// britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/ untoldlives/ 2013/ 01/ forbes-and-company-one-of-the-oldest-businesses-in-the-world.html].

General No.	When Launched.	Names.	Tons.	When Built.	Builders' Names.	Remarks.
64	1802	Thomas Henchman,	500	Howrah,	M. Smith,	Burnt at Malacca, 1811, on the expedition to Java.
65	"	Sir William Pulteney,	509	Calcutta,	Gillett & Blackmore	Sold in England.
66	"	Vigilant,	276	. . . . .	. . . . .	Sold to the Arabs, and lost.
90	"	Emma, (Hoy) . . .	130	. . . . .	M. Smith.	Lost.
91	"	Lovely Hannah, . . .	317	. . . . .	M. Smith.	Lost on the Bases (off Ceylon.)
92	"	Clyde,	340	. . . . .	. . . . .	Cut off at the Feejee Islands.
93	"	Grappler,	150	Kidderpore,	A. Waddell.	H. C. Gun brig; lost on the coast of France.
94	1805	Sir Edward Pellew, .	480	Calcutta,	Harvey and Co. . .	Lost on the Eastern Reef, (Bengal) July 1810.
15th Jan.						
95	"	Forbes,	340	Ditto,	M. Smith.	Lost in the Java seas, 11th Sept. 1806.
96	"	Caroline,	456	. . . . .	. . . . .	Lost in the Straits of Malacca, 1816.
97	"	Princess Charlotte, B.	140	. . . . .	. . . . .	Afterwards called Gessina; sold at Java, 1829

Figure 4. The Forbes' entry in Phipps' *Collection of Papers Relative to Ship Building in India* (Phipps 1840: 100-101).

If the *Forbes'* owners and captain had speculated to capitalize on chartering the vessel to her Bombay namesakes, their efforts apparently didn't bear fruit: Back in Calcutta in February 1806, she was fitted out for an "Eastward trading voyage", and, with a "cargo of opium, piece goods, and iron", left the Hooghly

on 5 April 1806. Her voyage took her to Sulu, then destined for a brisk trade in British-Indian "war stores, opium, and textiles",⁵ the locally produced sea cucumber, mother of pearl, and birds' nests so coveted on the Chinese market, and the Spanish Dollars of South American mints that came to the Philippines with the yearly Manila Galleons. The *Forbes'* hoard of species is a true telltale of an English merchant-sailor's interest; for the *datu* of Sulu, on the other hand, the "arms, powder, and lead" supplied by British country traders were "essential to maintain their hegemony in the region"⁶ by, above all, providing the Sultanate's slaving and privateering fleets with their indispensable tools. Opium, then, was a major consumer article redistributed by Sulu rulers to their cohorts – and didn't it, as so aptly expressed in a Buginese hero's elegy of the early years of the twentieth century, have "a long tradition / as opener of the heart / to constant thoughts / concerning the goods of the villagers"⁷ the Sulu raiders so regularly sought? The *Forbes*, anyway, stayed for only the five days between 22 and 27 May, ostensibly so to avoid raising too much of the Sulunese partiality for Western goods and vessels that, as was well-known in those days, could easily lay a lingering sailor's life and ship on the line.⁸

From Sulu the ship set a course to the southeast, and passing between Sulawesi and Halmahera made the Molucca Sea. Just as prudent seamanship commands – "from June to September, the E and S coasts of the [Obi] islands are inaccessible because of high seas"⁹ – she then, most probably, rounded Halmahera through the strait between Bacan and Obira: A short note apparently taken out of the *Forbes'* log states that the vessel "on 20 June fell in with the American ship *Eliza*, off Pitt's Strait",¹⁰ a position she could not have touched at had she passed through the open waters north of Ceram (Seram). Her next recorded sojourn, between 30 June and 10 July, was "Warrow Bay", today's Waru Roads on the north-eastern end of the Island of Ceram that "afford safe anchorage at all seasons, in 29m, mud";¹¹ we suppose that here her crew not only stocked on the "water and other refreshments [that] may be procured"¹² in the hamlets lining the bay's southern shores, but also obtained the small cargo of nutmegs that was part of her homebound freight.

Our sources are silent about the *Forbes'* pursuits at the "several places on the Islands of Lombock and Bally" where she put in on her voyage back West. It took the ship nearly two months to reach Madura – and it seems that only here she was made aware of her unwarranted position of being an English vessel in an enemy's water:

⁵ James F. Warren (2007: 41).

⁶ Warren (2007: 41).

⁷ Roger Tol (1990: 189).

⁸ Compare for example, J.R. Logan (ed.) (1849-1851) and Warren (2007).

⁹ National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2004: 22).

¹⁰ This, and any unmarked quote following, is taken from an "Extract of a letter from Captain Sinclair, containing an account of the unfortunate loss of the *Forbes* of Calcutta", *Supplement to the Bombay Courier*, 03-01-1807.

¹¹ National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2004: 50-51).

¹² Horsburgh, James (1852: 744).

On the 6th September about 20 miles to the Westward of the East end of the Island of Madura, fell in with the Dutch Frigate *Phoenix* from Batavia bound to Sourabaya, hoisted American Colours and passed within point blank shot of her; fired several shot at us in passing without doing any damage.

Finally, having reached seas frequented by Britain's opponents' shipping, the ship's company now commenced to hound the second goal of their voyage, privateering. Aptly prepared they were: Besides the vessel's guns were found stacks of grapeshot, an unmistakable preparation for close-quarter combat, intimating that looming in close on prey was the call of the hour. Not a day after the tryst with *Phoenix*, the *Forbes* thus "captured a Dutch brig from Batavia bound to Sourabaya with a cargo of Wine, Gin, Arrack, &c.", well possibly the source of many of the bottles found on the wreck; a day later it was a further two Dutch vessels, sailing "in ballast from Batavia bound to some port in the East end of Java for Rice". We have not been left with a detailed account of the following affairs; though, would seem that the *Forbes'* second mate, a certain "Mr. Hitchings, with 16 men",¹³ was given command of one of the latter prizes and permission to cruise on his own account.

Throughout the Java Sea, the ship's voyage westwards was remarkably fast: Since the encounter with the *Phoenix* on the sixth, the *Forbes* –including the taking of the brig with her spirituous cargo!– had made some 220 nautical miles in about 40 hours, so run at an average of at least six knots. It would now be roughly another 40 hours and a further 200 miles to Mampango reef – where she eventually foundered, "together with the Dutch brig taken on the seventh", thus loosing not only the ship, but also "the profits to a considerable amount" which the crew had amassed during the last six months.

Amazing as the *Forbes'* 1806 exploits might seem to a reader living in more settled times, they were but the bread and butter of a Country Trader. The extant newspapers and register volumes of those years recall many an adventurous scene: ample, apparently, were encounters with unwelcoming "natives"; spirited chase and capture of enemy's vessels (and, not rarely, a ship's successive recapture by her erstwhile owner); or foundering and loss of ships and fortunes. Just take, for our story, the "hostile treatment and subsequent melancholy death of Capt. Pavin of the *Ruby*, at Sooloo" in March 1800 ("poor Pavin, and the whole of the boat's crew, were cut to pieces – they [the Sulunese] made a present of Pavin's hat, and the boat, to Captain Porter"¹⁴ of the *Apollo*, calling at Jolo in June that year); or the *Jonathan Duncan's* passage through Pitt's Strait in December 1801, where she was

attacked by eight very large canoes in a most daring manner, who discharged a heavy flight of arrows at the ship, by which four men were dangerously wounded, two of whom died a few days later in a delirious state, owing to the arrows being poisoned (AAR 1802 1803: 10-1).

¹³ This and the following, PWIG 11-10-1806.

¹⁴ AAR 1801 (1802: 21f), partly quoting the *Bombay Courier*.

A hearty "discharge of a heavy fire of musquetry" could dispel those more than 300 "men of a very savage appearance"; yet, the darings of a, say, French privateer, were a much different affair:

At half-past three p.m. we saw a ship on our lee quarter, in chase of us; at six o'clock the chase gained fast on us [...]; by eleven o'clock she was nearly alongside. We got the *Armenia* under a reduced sail, and all ready for engaging, hailed the stranger, but received no answer; she then hoisted French colours, and fired a shot into us, which was returned by a broadside of the *Armenia*. Every exertion was used to prevent the enemy boarding, which, from his manoeuvres, appeared to be his intention; we continued the action for about 40 minutes, when, finding that all resistance was fruitless, we were obliged to strike to the *Clarisse*, Captain Le Meme.

Our killed and wounded were, Mr. Baddeley, first officer, slightly wounded; Mr. Falconar, third officer, killed; the captain's steward and an European seacunny, dangerously wounded; two Portugeze seacunnies wounded (one since dead); [...] our sails and shrouds were very much cut up from their line of fire, which was about six feet above the deck. The *Clarisse* lost three men, which they say were in a boat which filled alongside; but, from the quantity of blood on her deck, we have reason to distrust their account (*AAR 1801 1802*: 23).

Most dreaded, however, was loss of ship and life in uncharted seas (and such were many of the waters negotiated by country traders), vividly portrayed with the foundering of *Cato* and *Porpoise* in Torres Straits, December 1803:

The *Porpoise* was scarcely a the ship's length from us to leeward, setting with her head towards us, and her broadside upon the reef; her fore-mast gone, and the sea braking over her [...] and when the day was broke, we had the mortification to perceive that the *Cato* had shared the fate of the *Porpoise*; the bow and bowsprit of the latter only, at intervals, appeared through the surf; the former lay with the bottom exposed to the sea, which broke with tremendous fury over her; not a mast standing. [...] The one surviving ship's crew now] perceived that we had cleared the reef, but our congratulations were mixed with the utmost painful reflections on the sufferings of the crew[s] wrecked[, whom they] could not approach without certain destruction (*AAR 1804 1806*: 80ff).

Such dangers were, nonetheless, well outshone by the fortunes a successful voyage could make for the owner and captain of a country ship. Tapping into the fabulous riches of the European East India Companies, "country trade" meant commerce in all but the companies' monopoly goods, on all but the sea-lanes leading to Europe which, just as said commodities, had exclusively been chartered to the state-backed cartels. However, the mercantile dictates instituted by the various companies active in Asian waters were not necessarily of a uniform nature, thus furnishing interlopers under discrete flags with sufficient leeway to pursue their "ever a profitable business";¹⁵ in addition, the private traders' deference for even their very own nation's monopolies

¹⁵ William H. Coates (1911: 106).

left, more often than not, much to be deserved. Add to this the persistent venality of the East India companies' personnel, and the "sink of corruption and iniquity"¹⁶ that were the fifteen or so particular trading houses in Calcutta of the early 1800s becomes but a paragon for any of the ports and stations the various European powers had established throughout Asia since the sixteenth century.

The later seventeenth century had seen the heydays of the two main players of such commerce, the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) and her counterpart, the English East India Company (EIC); the next hundred years, however, witnessed the protracted yet persistent decline of their fortunes. By the 1770s, both the Dutch and the English companies were technically bankrupt – but while the EIC was bailed out by parliament and the Regulating Act of 1773, the VOC tried her luck with short-term loans. The soaring defeat of the Netherlands in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780–1784, the ensuing loss of the VOC's last footholds on the Indian subcontinent and the first concessions for a free British trade in the Malay Archipelago stipulated in the Treaty of Paris 1784, turned the pending amortization of the company's temporary credits into a hopeless affair; now, conversion into state-backed obligations appeared the only resort. Yet worse was still to come: By 1795 allied to Albion's enemy of choice, post-revolutionary France, the Lowlanders' trade came under constant harassment by the British Navy, virtually severing communications and commerce between the Dutch East Indies and Patria; in the East, vastly superior English fleets in 1796 took the VOC's late crowns, Ceylon and the Moluccas, still the major marts for cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, the "fine spices" that firstly had lured the Western Powers into Asian waters. The Moluccas would be returned to the Dutch only with the short-lived peace of Amiens in 1802; Ceylon, though, was positively lost, while the ailing VOC, nationalized in 1796, already in 1798 had been declared bankrupt. Not that the EIC made better: By the early years of the nineteenth century her deficits "were running around £2 million a year"; under the 1797–1805 governorship of Richard Wellesley alone the company's debts rose from £17 million to a staggering £31 million, "around £1.8 billion"¹⁷ in today's money.

The ebbing fortunes of the two great companies opened a plethora of new opportunities for private merchant-sailors based in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century the intra-Asian country trade hence advanced from a mere feeder network to an economic factor in its own right: in the 1780s alone, the number of clearances of independent vessels at the port of Calcutta rose from around 120 sail, carrying roughly 45,000 tons, to nearly 600, representing a burthen of around 175,000 tons, "by which it appears that the country trade [...] had multiplied near four fold" (Phipps 1840: iv). The French Revolutionary Wars, raging since 1792, yet took an increasing toll of both privately owned and EIC ships,

¹⁶ Warren (2007: 38).

¹⁷ William Dalrymple (2004: 289).

causing "a declension of nearly one half of the country trade"¹⁸ – and finally compelled the Honourable Company, in urgent need to replace the shipping space fallen to Britain's enemies, by the early 1800s to charter non-company vessels to carry Indian cargoes to China and even back to England.

Given the dearth in bullion that since its very beginnings had plagued Europe's eastern commerce,¹⁹ it for the western companies proved much more expedient to barter various Asian products obtainable in areas they controlled for the spices, tea, silk, and Chinese porcelain that formed the backbone of their business. In the China run, Indian cotton and, as we shall see in a moment, opium were the commodities of choice; particularly Bombay merchants greatly profited from such trade.²⁰ For many a country trader based in Calcutta it though was the "Eastern Archipelago [that ...] furnished the means of an extensive commerce":

The demand for the produce of those Islands is unfailing, and that produce is only limited by the extent of the population. By means of the variety of its tribes, their intermixture and connexion with each other, and the accessible nature of the coasts, washed by the smoothest seas in the world; while large and navigable rivers open communication with the interior, the stimulus of this commerce is propagated in successive waves through the whole; and the inexhaustible resources of the country are drawn forth in a manner, and to an extent, that could not otherwise have been obtained (Phipps 1836: 318).

Here, raw cotton was not a promising medium of exchange: In great demand all over the islands were the gaily coloured "piece goods" of Gujarati and Bengal cloth the *Forbes* had carried on her outbound voyage. Of much better usance still were arms and drugs; today the ambit of crime syndicates, such merchandise was then, at worst, a semi-legal addition to an otherwise perfectly lawful trade. Many a country trader did not refrain from supplying even potential foes with an ordinance that might well be turned back onto its vendor – thus would much of the guns and powder that featured so prominently in the British trade with the Sultanate of Sulu eventually equip the Iranun's vessels of war and plunder, the most feared of all "Malay" raiders. Nonetheless, as an eyewitness of such a transaction observed, there were worthier goals than considerations of a moralist or strategic nature:

I saw the Sultan [of Mamuju in Sulawesi] purchase ten barrels of gunpowder [...], at 45 reals per barrel of half a picul; this was American powder. The usual price

¹⁸ Phipps (1840: iv).

¹⁹ To finance her Indian trade of the first centuries CE already "Rome, indeed, had to export so much gold in payment for Asian wares that Tiberius (14-37 CE) tried to restrain his subjects from wearing silk, and Vespasian (69-79 CE) tried to halt outflow of bullion" (Simkin, C.G.F. 1968. *The traditional trade of Asia*. London: Oxford Uni. Press, p. 23). Compare Miller, Innes J. (1998 [1969] *The spice trade of the Roman Empire: 29 B.C. to A.D. 641*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Chapter 13).

²⁰ Compare Anne Bulley (2000. *The Bombay Country Ships 1790-1833*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, Chapter 7).

is from 80 to 90 reals per picul; muskets 15 reals each; [... while] the Americans sell their gunpowder at the rate of 22 and 24 dollars per picul, and their muskets, 7 dollars each. [W]hen such prices are considered, it need not be wondered at that such an extensive trade should be carried on. [...] Indeed, most of these rajahs consider their gold as of no other service than inasmuch as it enables them to purchase opium for their own use, and arms, ammunition &c. for the assistance of their Bugis friends, and the annoyance of their great enemies the Europeans (Dalton 1837: 77).

It would appear that the arms' habitual companion, Indian opium, may well have equalized the former's truculent potential. The ruler of Mamuju we just met

and his brothers smoke opium in great quantities; [...] they are continually stupid, and will not see a stranger until time be given them to recover a little. When a prow arrived from Macassar with a letter to the rajah which the anakoda insisted upon personally delivering, he had to wait two days, before he could obtain an answer, during which time the rajah and his brothers were recovering sufficiently, to be sensible of the contents of the letter, and make some reply (Dalton 1837: 77).

Indeed, loss of motivation and impetus, one of the deplorable effects of the drug, could well have impeded belligerent impulses – yet again, it was not tactical deliberations, but lucrative acumen that drove its commerce. Since the EIC's 1757 annexation of Bengal, the Hon'ble Company virtually controlled India's main centres of the production of opium, a monopoly she artfully employed as, first-of-all, substitute for the bullion otherwise needed to purchase the Chinese tea that back home was in insatiable demand: Company officials in Guangzhou would buy tea on credit, covenanted by bills drawn on the next Calcutta opium auction; the drugs, the import of which, not without hindsight, was strictly prohibited by the Celestial Government, would then be conveyed aboard country vessels to some offshore station and smuggled into the China by their local business partners.²¹ In the East Indies, though, private sale of opium meant "only" trespassing the monopoly of the *Amfioendirectie*; the Dutch, anyway, had to buy the drug from the EIC, a trade that since the Hollanders' coalition with France had come to a virtual standstill – a perfectly opened turf, thus, for any an adventurous commander of a country ship.

Frazer Sinclair, the *Forbes'* captain, by 1806 was an old hand in such a commerce. Reportedly born in Stromness, Orkney Islands, in 1774,²² he makes his, as we assume, first appearance in the British registers for her Indian possessions as the "Sinclair, unemployed mariner" found in the "Madras list of seafaring Europeans" in *The East India Kalendar ... for the Year 1797*; at about the same time we find his, presumably, brother Patrick as seaman in Calcutta's

²¹ A fair number of contemporary detail concerning this trade may be found in Phipps (1836: 208ff).

²² This and the following data on the Sinclair family is found in *The Whitton and Ritch Genealogy from Scotland* (<http://www.robertwhitton.eu/person.php?id=14451&pat=Sinclair&fam=1>, last accessed 04-09-2015).

pilot service. We could not locate these two Sinclairs in the lists of passengers or officers of outbound company vessels for the years in question, and neither are they registered in the list of "Free Mariners [...] who have proceeded to India, under the License of the Court of Directors"²³ of the Hon'ble Company between 1793 and 1811 – one thus would imagine that they, as many a later officer in the country trade, had arrived in Asia as humble sailors on board an EIC Indiaman, and jumped ship at a convenient and promising British-Indian port.

The sources available to us reveal only glimpses of how young Frazer began his career on –to use Marlow's epithet for the Asiatic waters to be traversed by the barque *Judea* of Joseph Conrad's *Youth*– the Eastern Seas. The first official mention of an F. Sinclair employed in a naval occupation is the "chief officer of the ship *Anna Maria*",²⁴ sailing from Madras to Calcutta under the command of a John Cumming in October 1800, and we imagine that some years afore he had commenced his career, on any given country trader, as seacunny or petty officer, many of whom, it seems, weren't named in the lists of captains and officers active in India we could address. One would fancy that his later leanings as captain of a country ship were wrought by the accounts and encounters of those years, amongst which could well have been the fate of the pepper-trader *Montgomery*, out of Calcutta under command of a certain Alexander Sinclair, a possible fellow native of Orkney if not Stromness.²⁵ In 1799 escaping a French corsair off Sumatra only due to the "spirited and judicious conduct"²⁶ of Captain Cumming, then in command of the *Active*, early next year the vessel, rumoured to carry "gold dust to the amount of 3000 Dollars" (Figure 5), fell prey to the privateer *Buonaparte*,²⁷ commanded by François Ripaud de Montaudevert, the Jacobin gentleman of panache who in 1799 had offered French help to the unlucky Tipu Sultan of Mysore. Ripaud, with his wont civility, landed captain and crew at Tapanuli, whence they made their way back to India on board a Madras-bound ship;²⁸ the *Montgomery*, though, by her captors despatched to France, was off South Africa retaken by a vessel of the British Cape Squadron, and eventually offered for public sale.²⁹

²³ *Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons and Command (East India Company)* (1813: 151, 395ff).

²⁴ *New Oriental Register and East India Directory for 1802* (1802: 168).

²⁵ <http://www.cursiter.com/txt-exe-files/Sinclair.txt>, last accessed 01-10-2015, mentions at least three possible Al(l)exander Sinclairs born in Stormness between ca. 1750 and 1780, and a good dozen others from other Orkney settlements.

²⁶ *Madras Gazette* 20-03-1799, taken from "a letter dated from on board the *Active*, the 26th of February, 1799 [... T]o the commander of the *Active* the owners of [... the *Montgomery*] would appear to be indebted for their safety"; compare documents P.P. 083-5 O. C. 15 Apr. No. 7, P.P. 1086 O. C. 15 Apr. No. 10 or P.P. 1122-3 O. C. 15 Apr. D at the National Archives of India.

²⁷ *India Gazette* 09-06-1800, 14-07-1800.

²⁸ *India Gazette* 27-05-1800.

²⁹ While the loss of the *Montgomery* in due time found its reverberations in the British Isles' papers (see, for example, the *Aberdeen Journal*, 02-03-1801, *E. Johnson's British Gazette* and

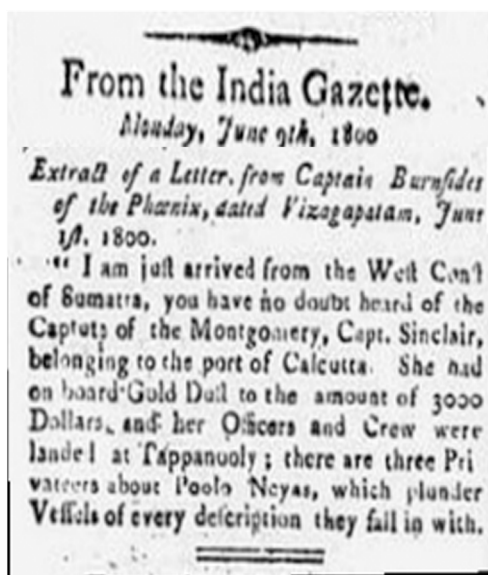


Figure 5. News of the loss of the *Montgomery* (*Bombay Courier* 11-07-1800).

In 1801 still captained by Cumming, 1802 found the *Anna Maria* under a new commander, William Garden or Gorden, trading to the Red Sea;³⁰ Frazer Sinclair, however, by then was in charge of the *Ruby*, a Calcutta-built vessel of 250 tons owned by a certain George Jackson (Mathison and Mason 1802: 72). It appears that the ship from March 1801 to August 1802 was “taken up as transport”³¹ for Wellesley’s and Baird’s expedition to Egypt³² – except, though, for a note on having “received [her] provisions and sailed this morning [31-03-1801]”³³ from Bombay to the Red Sea and a *Ruby* calling at Al-Qusayr in August 1801,³⁴ we could not discover any further news regarding the vessel’s exploits in the sources available to us.

At some time after his return from Egypt, Frazer Sinclair was given a new command: Both the second edition of the *East India Register and Directory* for 1803 and the first for 1804³⁵ note an F. Sinclair as captain to *Alert*, “a fine ship of 500 tons, [...] highly admired for [her] construction and the materials

Sunday Monitor 24-05-1801, or the *Portsmouth Telegraph* or *Mottley's Naval and Military Journal* 25-05-1801), first reports of the recapture of the ship off the Cape of Good Hope had arrived several months earlier in both India and England: see the *Bombay Courier* 11-10-1800, or the *London Packet* or *New Lloyd's Evening Post* 10/12-11-1800.

³⁰ *Bombay Courier* 27-11-1802, quoting reports from Calcutta re her voyage from Corings, Mocha, and Aden; she eventually was lost in February 1803 off Ceylon (*Bombay Courier* 19-03-1803 and 25-03-1803).

³¹ AAR 1805 (1807: 145, 148, 152).

³² For that campaign and its sanitary repercussions of see Nair, Arpana (2009) “An Egyptian infection”: War, Plague, and the quarantines of the English East India Company at Madras and Bombay, 1802”, *Hygeia Internationalis* 8(1): 7-29.

³³ Gurwood, John (1834: 87).

³⁴ *Bombay Courier* 12-09-1801.

³⁵ *East India Register and Directory* (1803, 1804: 96).

of which [she] was built", ³⁶ and launched off the Calcutta yards of Messrs. Archer and Smith (who also were her "managing owners") in January of 1802. Under way "from Calcutta to China", she arrived "at Malacca, on the 28th November, [1802,] all well, and would take her departure thence on the 30th of the same month"; ³⁷ of her return the *Bombay Courier* (30-05-1803) tells us that

[B]y private letters from Calcutta, we learn that the ship *Alert* had arrived in the River from Canton, whence she sailed on the 28th February. The intelligence brought by this vessel of the market for Cotton, is very unfavourable – the price was not only low, but daily falling.

In the meantime, the *Ruby* had on 1 February left Calcutta for England, chartered to the EIC as an "extra ship" for a voyage to Europe under the command of a certain John Hitchings. The voyage was not a happy one: Already at St. Helena the crew is quarrelsome; just ten days later, Hitchings at last "struck" his first officer, John Johnstone, for repeated drunkenness; a little on running into headwinds, the ship's seams started opening, and the pumps had to be kept running throughout the remainder of the trip, aggravating the decay of discipline aboard. While still under way off the English coast, the *Ruby* was boarded by the press-gang of a British man-of-war, giving Hitchings a convenient opportunity to get rid of the worst troublemakers – his reduced crew, though, now had to double their efforts on the pumps. The logbook of the passage ³⁸ leaves us, largely, with the impression that Hitchings failed to display the firmness expected from a superior officer on a long blue-water cruise; and this inaptitude perhaps was the reason that, seven months after her arrival in England, the *Ruby* set her course back to India under a Captain Blake (*Supplement to the Bombay Courier* 03-11-1804).

One wonders, whether the John Hitchings taking *Ruby* to Britain could not have been the same self as that J. Hitchings, the second officer of the *Forbes* who was to be given charge of one of her Dutch prizes, thus intimating an acquaintance of some standing with Frazer Sinclair. We, then, would certainly have to query the motives behind Sinclair's resolution to leave a secure berth as commander of a chartered vessel to his supposed companion (and, perhaps, erstwhile officer), at the very moment she was bound to sail to their fatherland. In any case, Sinclair apparently was not the man to hang his affairs into much of a limelight: as the reader will have noted, we know of most of his exploits only by second- or third-hand reports. Thus we also lose his trail after the *Alert's* return from China in the late spring of 1803 – on the ship's next recorded voyage, again to China and commencing in August that year (where she in September finds herself "becalmed in sight of Prince of Wales Island for six days, after leaving the port"), ³⁹ the vessel is in charge

³⁶ *Bombay Courier* 20-02-1802, quoting the *Calcutta Gazette* of 28-01-1802.

³⁷ *Bombay Courier* 29-01-1803.

³⁸ See, *Ruby: Journal*, anon, 7 Jan 1803–17 Aug 1803, call-no. IOR/L/MAR/B/379 at the British Library.

³⁹ *Bombay Courier* 10-12-1803, "based on a report from Prince of Wales Island".

of a Captain Plum. Frazer Sinclair –with, at least in 1806, John Hitchings as his second officer– makes the next appearance we know of as captain of the *Forbes* on her way to Bombay in 1805, a calling that, as related above, ended, on September 11 of the following year, on Mampango reef.

A high-sea ship's boats are not the smallish affairs used to scull about on a Sunday afternoon's lake. Country vessels had to charge and discharge much of their cargoes in ports and anchorages without jetties, where their tenders would have to be most instrumental – hence, such boats were roomy enough for dozens of travellers, and, besides their sweeps, regularly carried a strikeable mast and sails. In the hands of capable mariners, these small vessels could perform surprising feats: the accomplishment probably best known is Captain Bligh's open-boat voyage, covering the amazing 3,500 nautical miles between the position of Polynesian Tofua, where the mutineers had left the loyal members of the HMS *Bounty's* crew to their fate, to Kupang in the Dutch East Indies.

The *Forbes* carried three tenders, onto which Sinclair divided the shipwrecked, himself, "Mr. Robert Sharp, 4th mate, and 11 of the crew in the pinnace [...]; the longboat with Mr. Hammond and Mr. Domain, 1st and 3d officers and 27 of the crew";⁴⁰ and the remaining 36 sailors, probably under command of the serang or a seacunny, in the second longboat. The fate of the "5 Javanese taken from the prize brig", irretrievably foundered just the same, remains unresolved: In the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* it is claimed that they were divided into the boats; the "letter from Captain Sinclair" quoted in the *Bombay Courier* states that "the boats [were filled] with the whole of the ships company except 4 or 5 Javanese who refused to leave the wreck". After eight days of "the greatest distress from want of water and provisions under a scorching sun, without an awning or anything to cover them", the shipwrecked somewhere in the southern entrances to the straits of today's Singapore ran into the *General Baird*, last out of Calcutta under Captain Harford, "who with his wonted liberality supplied them with everything requisite for their further progress to Malacca".

The pinnace made Malacca on 22 September, three days after their falling in with the *General Baird*; the longboat under Hammond and Domain arrived on 25 September; by the time the news of the loss of the *Forbes* was to be printed, "the other boat ha[d] not yet made her appearance". The disheartened sailors seemingly contemplated about ways to recover their losses: The *PWIG* reports that:

the *Penang Packet*, Capt. Mathews, has been chartered and despatched by Mr. Douglas [the unlucky partner in a trading house operating in the commerce "between Penang, North Sumatra and Bengal"]⁴¹ to the reef of rocks, where the *Forbes* and her Prize were unfortunately lost, for the purpose of endeavouring to recover some part of the property and treasure on account of the underwriters.

⁴⁰ *PWIG* 11-10-1806. For the sources of further quotations related to the shipwreck and its direct aftermath used in this section compare footnote 2 above.

⁴¹ Nordin Hussin (2007: 79).

We, however, do not know what became of these designs – the *Penang Packet* clears into the port of that name on 7 October, and again on 21 October, but carries no further news. Our next intelligence of the crew's whereabouts is the entry for 15 October in the logbook of HMS *Harrier*, under patrol duty in the Straits of Malacca, noting that, while anchored in the roads of Malacca, the vessel "receiv'd three men formerly belonging to the Country Ship *Forbes* Letter of Marque".⁴² It remains unanswered whether these men had decided that the strict discipline aboard a man-o'-war was preferable to the sufferings just endured, or merely intended to hitch a ride to Penang, where the *Harrier* was headed.

The stranded mariners' desperate circumstances took an unexpected turn on 22 October. "A stout Dutch snow, laden with a cargo to the value of 14 or 15,000 dollars," made the port of Penang, and was taken charge of by "a boat of one of H.M. ships [...] immediately on her anchoring";⁴³ inspection revealed the vessel to be under command of J. Hitchings, who, a short time after having been despatched with one of the Dutch brigs the *Forbes* had taken on 8 September, had fallen in with said snow, and judiciously placed the prisoners of both his first and the second prize on the former, smaller vessel, "allow[ing] them to make the best of their way to Java." We could not locate the respective entry in the surviving logbooks of the navy vessels at that time at Prince of Wales Island, and hence assume that Hitchings was apprehended by HMS's *Greyhound* or *Lion*, "the appointed convoy for the China fleet"⁴⁴ assembling at Penang, or HMS *Blenheim*, there stationed, all of which were, supposedly with their logs on board, lost at sea in the following couple of years. The Dutch prize, in the sources variously named *Sinsore* or *Singsoy*, was after some deliberations "given up on Thursday [23 October] to the Captors by His Excellency the Commander in Chief", Admiral Troubridge, flying his flag on HMS *Blenheim*. The snow and her cargo were promptly and publicly auctioned on Saturday, 1 November (Figure 6). We don't know how much the ship was worth – the above estimate for her cargo nonetheless amounts to roughly US\$180,000.- in today's silver prices.⁴⁵ While this sum may not have been sufficient to compensate for the loss of a not yet two-year old ship of 300 tons, it probably would have helped refunding some of the outlays the underwriters had invested in the *Forbes'* voyage.

⁴² National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, ADM/LH/54.

⁴³ PWIG 25-10-1806.

⁴⁴ PWIG 15-11-1806.

⁴⁵ Calculation based on +/- 25gr silver per Spanish Dollar; for silver exchange rate see http://www.24hgold.com/english/gold_silver_prices_charts.aspx?money=USD, last accessed 05-10-2015.

PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND GOVERNMENT GAZETTE.

VOLUME 1. SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1806. NUMBER 36.

THE HONOURABLE THE GOVERNOR AND COUNCIL have been pleased to direct, that all ADVERTISEMENTS, which appear under the signature of the SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT, or of any other Officers of Government, properly authorized to publish them in the GOVERNMENT GAZETTE, shall be deemed to convey Official Notification of the Board's Orders and Regulations, in the same manner as if they were particularly specified in the Persons, to whom such Orders and Regulations have a reference.
FORT CORNWALLIS, February 27, 1806.

H. S. PEARSON, SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT.

Government Advertisement.

THE price of Pork, having been raised in June last, entirely owing to the then mortality and consequent scarcity of Hogs on this Island, those causes no longer existing, NOTICE is HEREBY GIVEN, that from and after the 1st of November next ensuing, the Renter of the exclusive Privilege of retailing of Pork, will not be permitted to demand more than the former rate of 22 pence per catty.

By Order of the Honourable the Governor and Council,
T. RAFFLES, Adm. Sec. to Govt.
Prince of Wales Island, Oct. 30, 1806.

SALES BY AUCTION.

TO BE SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
BY CAPES AND CARROLL,
AT THEIR ROOMS,
This day, Saturday, the 1st Nov.
AT 10 O'CLOCK PRECISELY,
THE FOLLOWING
ARTICLES:
A Writing Table, with billiard table Cushion,
A pair of Chests of Drawers, on feet to match,
A pair of satin wood Couches,
Eight Chairs,
A Dining Table of Nardoo wood, consisting of a centre Table and two round Ends,
A large Pegue Water Jar, with Cover,
And various other Articles.

CONDITIONS OF SALE, READY MONEY.

SUBSCRIPTION ASSEMBLY

The Assembly which was to have taken place this Evening, is postponed till Wednesday next. Subscribers are requested to apply to the Secretary for their Tickets, on or before Monday morning next.
Prince of Wales Island, Oct. 31, 1806.

By order of the Prize Agents.

TO BE SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
BY COURT AND BONE,
At Messrs. McCulloch and Co's Godowns,
This-day, Saturday, the 1st Nov.
AT 10 O'CLOCK PRECISELY,
THE CARGO OF THE PRIZE BRIG
SINGSOY,
CONSISTING
Japan Copper,
Iron, in large flat bars,
Java Tobacco,
Batavia Sugar Candy, in baskets,
China Paper,
China Shoes,
China Fire-works,
Batavia Arrack,
Common China Ware, in chests.

CONDITIONS OF SALE, READY MONEY.

TO BE SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION, **BY CAPES AND CARROLL,** At the House of Alexander Gray, Esq. *On Wednesday next, the 5th Inst.* AT 10 O'CLOCK PRECISELY, Various Articles of Household Property, Wines, &c. &c.—Particulars of which will be circulated previous to the Day of Sale. CONDITIONS OF SALE, READY MONEY.

ADVERTISEMENT.

MR. DAVID McCULLOCH, the Agent at this place for the GANES INSURANCE OFFICE, Calcutta, has been authorized to insure on account of that Office on the Honourable Company's Ships from hence to China, against all Risks, at a premium of Four per cent, to return One per cent for convey and safe arrival, and the amount payable in Calcutta in case of Loss.
Prince of Wales Island, Oct. 25, 1806.

TO BE SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION, **BY COURT AND BONE,** At Messrs. McCulloch and Co's Godowns, *This-day, Saturday, the 1st Nov.* AT 10 O'CLOCK PRECISELY, THE PRIZE BRIG **SINGSOY,** With her Stores, as from Sea. Conditions will be made known at the time of Sale.

COURT AND BONE, HAVE JUST RECEIVED FOR SALE.

A few pairs of Lacquered Trunks, on Stands,
Lacquered Ware, consisting of Card Boxes, Backgammon Boards, Tea Caddies, Waiters, &c. &c.
A few sets of Camphor-wood Trunks

FOR SALE,

AT MESSRS. D. McCULLOCH AND CO.'S
GODOWNS.
A quantity of excellent old Bengal RUM, London proof, which will be disposed of on very moderate terms, in order to close a Concern,
A few Pipes of London Particular, London Market, and India Market MADEIRA WINE, and London Market MADEIRA, in chests of 6 dozen each.

Figure 6. Advertisement for the sale of the prize Singsoy (PWIG 01-11-1806).

We cannot ascertain, how and when the late *Forbes'* company made their way to Calcutta – at least Sinclair, however, was back right in time to purchase the *Farquhar*, “burthen about 120 Tons, coppered; well known as a prime Sailer, and admirably adapted for a Run to the Eastward, with Opium, from the approaching Sales”, publicly auctioned by Tulloh and Company on 4 December 1806.⁴⁶ The auction thus took place a short fortnight before 18 December arrival in Calcutta of the Bengal convoy, “from Prince of Wales

⁴⁶ *Calcutta Gazette* 27-11-1806.

Island, whence they sailed on the 14th ultimo",⁴⁷ implying that Frazer Sinclair had made his way to the Hooghly by some other, faster conveyance. The *PWIG* mentions only one ship leaving Penang for Calcutta before the departure of the convoy, the *Jessy* under Captain Kemp who cleared the island's roads on 5 November, but does not inform us of the vessel's eventual passengers.

By 1 January 1807, the *Farquhar* was registered to Frazer Sinclair as both managing owner and commander in the current "List of Shipping belonging to the Port of Calcutta";⁴⁸ and already early in February the ship passed Malacca – now though, suspiciously, without (as far as we know) a note of her departure from the Hooghly, and without calling at Prince of Wales Island, then the main British station in the Straits. The local news does not inform us of purpose and destination of her voyage; yet, in an August edition of the Madras papers,

by the *Kelvin Grove*, arrived here from the Eastward, last from Penang the 16th ultimo, we learn, that the *Farquhar*, Captain F. Sinclair, who sailed from hence on a trading voyage to the Eastward, and equipped as a Letter of Marque, has captured several Dutch vessels; one of which arrived at Penang, prior to the departure of Captain Dundas from thence; and two others had reached Malacca. A large Spanish Vessel also struck to the *Farquhar*; but Captain Sinclair thought it most prudent to relinquish this prize, she being crowded with Europeans, and his own vessel but thinly manned with Lascars, many of his crew having been put on board the other vessels captured by him (*Bombay Courier* 12-09-1807).

The *PWIG* this time sports no advertisements for the sale of Sinclair's prizes, and the short reports on the ship's homeward voyage do not contain more than the mere dates of her journey: At Prince of Wales Island we are notified that "on Monday last [20 July] anchored in the harbour, the ship *Farquhar*, Capt. Sinclair, from Malacca, left the 18th instant", and, "on Sunday next will sail for Calcutta, the ship *Farquhar*";⁴⁹ in Calcutta, "on Friday [21 August] accounts were received of the arrival in the river [Hooghly] of the ship *Farquhar*, Captain Sinclair, from Penang the 20th ult. [...] Passengers per *Farquhar*: Capt. Mackay, and Mr. Arratoon".⁵⁰ One is inescapably left with the impression that the exploits of this seven-months cruise were not necessarily intended for public consumption, and certainly wonders how Sinclair could have arranged for a valid Letter of Marque in the short two months between his purchasing the vessel and leaving Calcutta – proper privateering, after all, was subject to the authenticity of such a license, without which a prize court would not legalize condemnation of any given ship and cargo taken, thus encumbering proposals for a public sale.

However, any such inconveniencies were not the tune of the year to come. In May 1808, Captain Scott of the Hon'ble Company's vessel *Tweed* reports

⁴⁷ *Calcutta Gazette* 18-12-1806.

⁴⁸ *Calcutta Annual Register and Kalendar* [...] for the year 1807 (1807: 65).

⁴⁹ *PWIG* 25-07-1807.

⁵⁰ *Calcutta Gazette* 24-08-1807.

of “a vessel of suspicious appearance [...] off Pulo Aur; but which from the information he afterwards obtained at Malacca, he found to be the *Farquhar* privateer, from Calcutta, commanded by Capt. Sinclair”;⁵¹ by October, news arrive in Calcutta that “Captain Sinclair, Commander of the *Farquhar* (Letter of Marque) had captured two Dutch prizes of considerable value, and that one of them had reached Penang”.⁵² This would have been the *Farewell*, “taken by the *Farquhar* [...] on the coast of Java” and conveyed by her prizemaster, a Mr. Robert Sharpe; the 3 September 1808 edition of the *PWIG* adds that Sinclair and crew are “said to have taken, during [their] present cruize, eight prizes: four of which had been sent off, with orders to remain at this island, until the arrival” of the privateers’ vessel. A fortnight later we are informed that “Captain Sinclair, of the Private Ship of War *Farquhar*, had arrived at Malacca, from the Eastward, with two prize brigs [...] and], with her prizes, may be expected here, very shortly”. A third “brig prize [...] got on shore at Tanjung Bolus”, but, afforded immediate assistance by the *Farquhar*, was afloat again in due time; and by 19 September Sinclair, with “the Dutch brigs *Fortune*, *Helder*, and *Fredda*, and an Arab ship, which came from Semarang, laden with sugar and tobacco” anchored in the roads of Penang. The best part of the unfolding story is, perhaps, the lot of the Copenhagen ship *Susannah*,

taken by the *Farquhar*, on the coast of Java, on the 15th of March last, [which] has not been heard of since; [...] there were on board her, the prize-master, Mr. Bethumy Walker, the Danish commander, his clerk, carpenter, and carpenter’s mate, a few slaves who were promised their liberty; and thirty-three people from the *Farquhar*. Capt. Sinclair having since taken, for the second time, the first and second officer of the ship *Susannah*, was informed by them, that she had on board, when taken, two chests of gold, a quantity of quicksilver, and camphor-wood; amounting, altogether, it is supposed, to a very considerable sum; a circumstance of which, at the time of the capture, Capt. Sinclair was entirely ignorant (*PWIG* 24-09-1808).

The sources available to us cannot unravel the *Susannah*’s and her prize crew’s further fate; the *PWIG* though, in quick succession throughout the coming weeks, advertised the *Farquhar*’s prizes and her cargo for auction (Figure 7). Of considerable interest to the seafaring public was “that Capital fast sailing brig the *Fortune*, burthen about 180 Tons; [...] a remarkably fine vessel, built at Java, of Teak; well calculated for an Eastern Trader, and mounts Eight long four-pounders” (*PWIG* 10-10-1808). The *Farquhar* and her crew left Penang by 17 October, before the last of her spoils had been taken to market – nonetheless, the ship, as “we learn with concern” from the *Calcutta Gazette* of 16 November 1808, “in her passage up the river [Hooghly], ha[d] been stranded and wrecked, a little below Culpee”; fortunately, this time “the Treasure and Tin, which formed part of her cargo, will yet be recovered”.

⁵¹ *Calcutta Gazette* 04-05-1808.

⁵² “Nautical Chronicle and Naval Report [from] Calcutta, October 3d 1808”, in *Bombay Courier* 29-10-1808.

With the Farquhar's foundering her affairs were all but over: The owner of the Arab ship filed a case against the detention of his vessel and cargo, forwarded to the Calcutta prize court, from where, by October next year, orders were received at Penang "to restore the Arab Ship named *Shilanoon*, together with her Stores or Cargoes, or the proceeds of the Sales thereof, to Syad Abdulla Semanthaan, the former Naqueda of the ship" (PWIG 14-10-1809).

The image shows two pages from the 'PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND GAZETTE', dated Saturday, October 22, 1808. The left page contains several notices, including one for 'GILBERT & HUTTON, Auctioneers' which is highlighted with a red box. The right page also contains notices, including one for 'GILBERT & HUTTON, Auctioneers' and another for 'GILBERT & HUTTON, Auctioneers'. The notices are written in a formal, legalistic style typical of 19th-century gazettes.

Figure 7. Advertisements for auctions of Farquhar's 1808 prizes (PWIG 8-10-1808 and 22-10-1808) .

Back in Calcutta Frazer Sinclair meanwhile had taken command of the *Emma*, "a very beautiful ship, constructed upon the model of a sloop of war, and said to be peculiarly adapted for offense and defence", launched on 25 November 1808, carrying 440 tons and named after Matthew Smith's, her builder's, daughter. We remain uninformed of *Emma*'s concerns except for her arrival at Bombay on 14 November of the next year;⁵³ by March 1810 we yet find her, together with the country ship *Troubridge*, readied to take the newly appointed "staff and suite of his Excellence the Commander in chief" of Madras Presidency from Calcutta to their station.⁵⁴ It would appear that at some time thence *Emma* was chartered by the Royal Navy as relief and transport for Rowley's hard-pressed squadron off Isle de France, where she

⁵³ *Bombay Courier* 18-11-1809.

⁵⁴ PWIG 14-05-1810, quoting the *Calcutta Telegraph* 13-03-1810.

arrived, “armed on the emergency”⁵⁵ with the guns of the East-Indiaman *Windham* and in convoy with HMS *Boadicea*, in August 1810, only to note that they were “too late to afford the necessary succours”⁵⁶ for the British ships meanwhile lost in the disastrous Battle of Grand Port (Figure 8). *Emma* was given patrol duties “off Rodriguez to warn any passing British vessels of the danger from the French squadron”⁵⁷ that had recently arrived to reinforce the defence of the French Indian Ocean Islands; later that year, she, together with HMS *Hesper*, surveyed the bay where the landing party destined to take Port Napoleon on 2 December 1810, was to be set ashore. “Intelligence from the Mauritius” printed in the *PWIG* of 11 March 1811, informs us that the last labour of “the armed ship *Emma*, Captain Sinclair” in the campaign was to be

fitted up for the reception of General De Caen [the French defender of Isle de France], and his suite [...] to set sail on the 16th Dec.[.] General Abercrombie having positively refused to allow De Caen to remain longer on the island.



Figure 8. *Le Combat du Grand Port, 23 août 1810* ('Battle of Grand Port, 23 August 1810'), Pierre Julien Gilbert, 1842, Musée national de la marine. From (far) left to right: HMS *Iphigenia*, surrendered to Admiral Hamelin on 28 August; HMS *Magicienne* being scuttled by fire; (foreground) HMS *Sirius* being scuttled by fire; (background) HMS *Nereide* surrenders [24 August]; (right) Duperré's squadron, the French frigates *Bellone*, *Minerve*, and *Victor* [https://upload.wikimedia.org/Wikipedia/commons/c/c6/Grand_Port_mg6971.jpg].

⁵⁵ AAR XI-1810 (1812: 54).

⁵⁶ *Bombay Courier* 15-12-1810, quoting "Calcutta Intelligence" from 23-11-1810.

⁵⁷ <http://cannonade.net/mauritius.php>, last accessed 14-09-2015; for this and the above, compare Letters of Captain Rowley copied from an English Paper of the 13 February in *Supplement to the Bombay Courier* 26-06-1811. For a "romanticized" account of the overall campaign see Patrick O'Brian's *The Mauritius Command*, first published 1977 by Collins, UK.

For the *Emma*, the conquest of Mauritius was not an unrewarding episode: Even a *London Gazette Extraordinary* of 13 February 1811,⁵⁸ knows to report that "the Admiral [by then, Albemarle Bertie] warmly praise[d] the conduct" of her crew, and still in 1828 the ship's company was called to claim their shares in the "fourth and final distribution of the prize property" made at Isle de France (*London Gazette* 1828: 1376). De Caen eventually "embarked on board the *Emma* Transport with his family and suite on the 24th December",⁵⁹ to be repatriated via the Cape of Good Hope, where she called in January 1811. Yet, as successful as ever she might have been throughout the campaign, by August of that year (thus we assume, shortly after her return from Europe) the ship was sold to the Calcutta firm Fairlie, Ferguson and Co., and placed under the command of a certain A.G. Noayle (*East India Register and Directory for* 1811: 119).

We don't know whether Sinclair didn't find himself the man to, as was usual on a civilian ship turned man-o'-war, serve as mate under a navy officer (represented by, at least during the survey for the landing stage on Isle de France, a certain Lieutenant Street),⁶⁰ or whether he still felt uneasy at the prospects of a voyage home; he, anyway, after the cessation of the campaign appears to have made his way to Madras on one or other of the India-bound troop transports. There, it would seem, he could not refuse hastened requests to contribute his knowledge of the Eastern Islands to the Madras division of the fleet readied in the early months of 1811 for an invasion of the island of Java – in any case, he under the tempestuous conditions⁶¹ of 18 April left port as one of the pilots of the expedition. The nature of his appointment was, apparently, not overly dependable: Still in January 1812 he "reasons and solicits payment of his allowances as Pilot to the Fleet on the late Expedition" with the "Government of Fort St. George" (National Archives of India 10-01-1812).

Somewhen in early 1812 Sinclair acquired his last command, the *Lady Rollo*. We find the vessel already in 1811 advertised as

built of teak, [...] launched at Calcutta in October last, burthen 120 Tons Carpenter's Measurement; her Rigging & principal Sails are new, and of the best quality, she is well found in Stores, and may be sent to Sea at a very trifling expence, &c is well calculated, for the Gulph, or Malay trade (*Bombay Courier* 22-06-1811).

By now, privateering in the Malay Archipelago is done with: After having taken Java in 1811, Minto and Raffles had spread authority and reforms throughout the islands, guaranteeing free and unmolested trade for any Dutch *burgher*, native *nakhoda* or British country trader alike. Hence, in 1812

⁵⁸ As quoted in Nichols (1811: 171).

⁵⁹ *Bombay Courier* 23-02-1811.

⁶⁰ AAR 1810-1811 (1812, "History" p. 16).

⁶¹ William Thorn (1815: 2f).

Sinclair conveyed cargoes of "Opium and Bee's wax"⁶² or timber along the coasts of Java; there would also be the occasional passenger, just as the "three Women belonging to H.M. 14th Regt."⁶³ stationed at Semarang who aboard the *Lady Rollo* went to Batavia in October of that year. His goal, one assumes, would have been those "Eastward Trading Voyage[s]" between Calcutta and the Archipelago that he had pursued with *Forbes* or *Farquhar*, by now but for the privateering part. His exploits appear to have been rewarding enough: In 1813 Sinclair could semi-retire as supercargo, leaving the daily handling of the vessel to a certain Captain Pringle.

However, returning from the southern Moluccas and Timor, the *Lady Rollo* on 13 September that year

struck a shoal situated in lat. 7° 45'S and about 40 miles S.E. by E. distant of Flores' Head, and after some hours, during which unsuccessful attempts were made to get her off, she bilged, and was totally lost, with the whole of her cargo. [...] the Commander, Supercargo (Mr. Sinclair,) Officers and Crew, in all 38 persons, saved themselves in the boats of the vessel, and made for Bima, where they arrived about the 20th ultimo. It appears that they were not received by the Rajah of that place with all the hospitality which their distress entitled them to claim. He refused to afford them any assistance, and they owed the means of quitting Bima to the friendly aid of a Chinese, who furnished them with a Prow, in which they arrived at the port of Bisuki in the night of the 12th instant (*Java Government Gazette* 30-10-1813).

We wonder if not this, now third, loss of vessel tore a string in Frazer Sinclair's perseverance. As the *Calcutta Gazette* of 24-01-1814 knows to report,

we have already had the mortification to announce the total loss of the ship, *Lady Rollo* of this port, on her return from a trading voyage to the Moluccas. One of the Seacunnies, who escaped from the wreck, and arrived in Calcutta about a fortnight ago on a vessel from Batavia, has at length been found and states on his examination, the following circumstances; viz.

"The *Lady Rollo* remained about a month at Amboyna, and then returned to Timor. At that port she remained about five or six days and then proceeded to Timor Koopayn, where she remained about five or six days and then left it. About the month of September last, about 6 o'clock A.M. and when we were about 2 or 3 days sail from the Island of Narrain Tokar, and out of the sight of land, the brig took the ground, and continued in that stated till about 12 o'clock, when she was got off; and in the course of an hour after she again took the ground, and after every exertion was used by endeavouring to tow her off with her boats and otherwise, Captain Sinclair on the following morning desired all hands on board to leave her; which being done, he set the wreck on fire, and burnt her up, with her cargo and all things on board, including clothes and all the stores, with the exception of the clothes we had on, a bag of rice and a keg of water, and some few common necessities which we took with us."

⁶² *Java Government Gazette* 12-09-1812.

⁶³ *Java Government Gazette* 24-10-1812.

Yes, indeed,

Fortunes no doubt were quickly made in those days, and often equally quickly lost. In the latter misfortune if the skipper haply possessed a mercurial temperament, he would betake himself again to his congenial task; if not, he passed out of the arena and another took his place. Many a quiet village churchyard at home shelters the remains of some doughty mariner, who after a career out here in days of stress and strife, wended his ways to his native place, to enjoy his competence and end his days in peace (Coates 1911: 104).

Now in his early forties, Sinclair must have found the latter prospects promising enough to turn his thoughts back home – and we will see in a moment that his years of adventure and audacity in the East had furnished him with a fortune sufficient to “end his days in peace” in the lands of his birth. However, such longings would certainly have been augmented by his deteriorating health: When eventually boarding the *Maister*, under Captain William Wiseman homebound out of Calcutta on 25 October 1815, “he was at that time so very ill that he complained of living to reach England”.⁶⁴

We cannot ascertain how Frazer Sinclair arranged his way back home. There’s a “Sinclair’ leaving Batavia on a *Ruby*, Captain Hamilton, for the Cape of Good Hope and Calcutta on 14 December 1814,⁶⁵ sufficiently in time to catch the *Maisters*, on which he was eventually berthed, at Bengal. He must have had a clear presentiment of his end a-loom: “Previous to his coming on board the said ship he informed [Captain Wiseman] the he had made his will in Calcutta”, and it is conceivable that he had chosen a lengthy trip on the *Ruby* to alleviate the respiratory ailments he was suffering from with the fresh air of the Indian Ocean. He carried a copy of his testament aboard, as, “when a person in that Country [of Bengal] makes a will it is usual for the Original Will (Figure 9) to be left in the East Indies for his Executors”. Frazer Sinclair perished on the *Maisters*, just two weeks after her leaving the Hooghly, on 8 November 1815, “of a violent Asthma with which he was afflicted”.

⁶⁴ All unmarked quotes in the following are taken out of the official procedures surrounding the execution of Sinclair’s will, found at http://search.findmypast.com/results/world-records?firstname=fraser&lastname=sinclair&yearofdeath=1816&yearofdeath_offset=0, last accessed 01-10-2015.

⁶⁵ *Java Government Gazette* 17-12-1814.

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Exhibit **A** Referred to by the annexed Petition *EHL*
In the Name of God. Amen. I Frazer Sinclair
of Calcutta. Mariner being in bodily Health, and of
sound and disposing Memory, and considering the
Evil, Dangers and other Uncertainties of this Transitory
Life, do (for avoiding Controversies) make, publish
and declare this My last Will and Testament,
in Manner following:— That is to say; First I recom-
mend my Soul to God, who gave it, and my Body
I commit to the Earth, or Sea, as it shall please God
to order; and for and concerning all my Wordly Estate,
I give bequeath and dispose thereof as followeth: That
is to say: First I will, that all my just Debts and
Funeral Charges be paid and discharged by my
Executors herein after named. I leave to my Father
Peter Sinclair and my Mother Christian Sinclair
of Stromness in Orkneys One half of all the property
that I may be possessed of at the time of my Decease,
also I leave One fourth of the whole to my Brothers
John Sinclair and Peter Sinclair of the same place
to be equally divided between them and I also leave
to my Dear Cousin Margaret Smith of or near
Liverpool One Eighth part of the whole, and to my
Niece Elizabeth Sinclair and Nephew Peter Sinclair
the Son and Daughter of my late Brother Benjamin
Sinclair one Twelfth part to be equally divided
between them the remaining Twenty fourth part to
be at the disposal of my Dear Cousin Margaret
Smith to be given by her to either of her Sisters that
may be most in want of it and hereby nominate and
Appoint my Dear Cousin Margaret Smith of
or near Liverpool to be my Executrix in England,
and that all my effects be Turned into Cash and
Remitted

Fig. 9 First page of Frazer Sinclair's Last Will [www.findmypast.co.uk].

He didn't die a poor man. Throughout the next couple of years George Mitchell, his appointed executor in Calcutta, transferred 69,511 Sicca Rupees, roughly £365,000,- (or US\$550,000,-!) in today's money, to England (Figure 10). Frazer Sinclair had pledged to "my father Peter Sinclair and my mother Christian Sinclair of Stromness in Orkneys one half of all the property that I may be possessed of at the time of my decease", bestowed one fourth of the

funds to his brothers John and Peter, “to be equally divided between them [...] and to my niece Elizabeth Sinclair and nephew Peter Sinclair the son and daughter of my late brother Benjamin Sinclair one twelfth part”. He further bequeathed “to the Poor of the Parish of Stromness in Orkney the sum of Six Rupees four hundred to be distributed by my father or in case of his death by the Minister of the parish”. Nonetheless, he chose to

nominate and appoint my Dear Cousin Margaret Smith of or near Liverpool to be my Executor in England and that all my Effects be Turned to Cash and remitted to her with a copy of this will for the purposes above mentioned to be addressed to the home of Mr. Arthur Smith Merchant Liverpool.

[illegible]

Figure 10. Summary of the sums transferred to England in course of the execution of Sinclair's Will [www.findmypast.co.uk].

He also entrusted his “seal and brooch to the above named Margaret Smith”; and she, spinster still, made the journey to London to prove, on 12 June 1816, “before the judge by oath [...] the truth of this Affidavit”. And while the news of Frazer Sinclair’s unfortunate demise made their way back to India (Figure 11), she, nay, might have preferred him to have

Escap'd with life, in tatters,
Behold me safe on shore,
Such trifles little matter,
I'll soon get togs galore:

For Poll swore when we parted
No chance her faith would jar,
And Poll's too tender-hearted,
To slight a shipwreck'd tar.

(Charles Dibdin, *The Shipwreck'd Tar*, 1803)

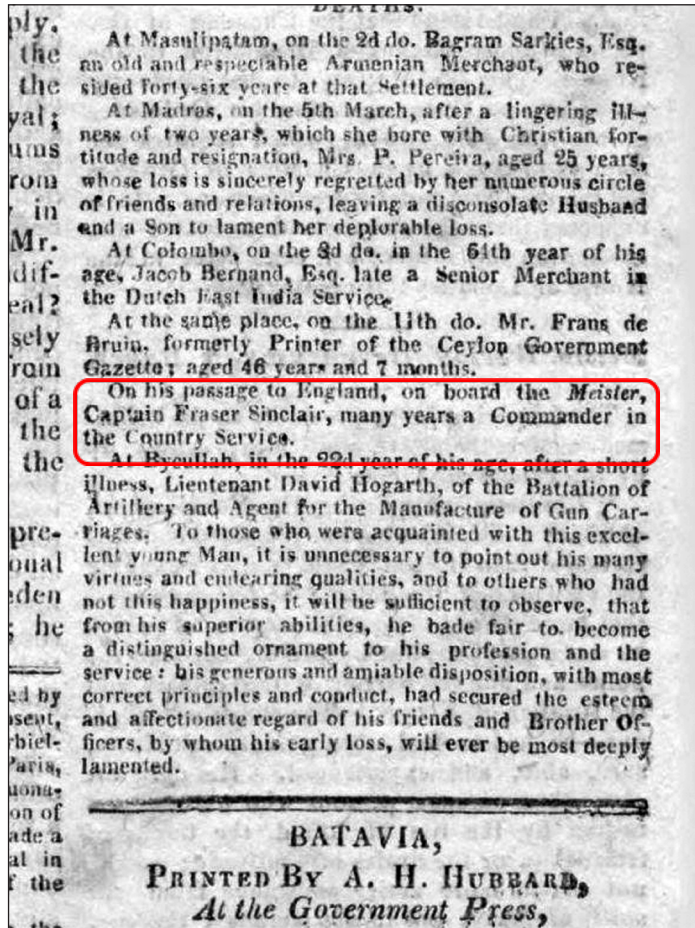


Figure 11. Obituary for Frazer Sinclair, *Java Government Gazette* 08-10-1816.

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