

The Legend of the Flying Dutchman

'...what should I see but the Flying Dutchman coming right down upon us, with everything set — I know 'twas she — I cou'd see all her lower-deck ports up, and the lights fore and aft, as if cleared for action.'

From George Barrington's *Voyage to Botany Bay*, 1795

In 1596 a merchant expedition of three vessels sailed from Amsterdam to Java, a voyage that led to a network of lucrative Dutch trading posts around the world. By the mid-17th century the Netherlands was the foremost commercial and maritime power of Europe, and the Dutch East India Company the world's first multinational corporation.

The Netherlands and Britain were both great maritime nations and, inevitably, conflict arose between them. This took the form of three vicious and bloody Anglo-Dutch Wars between 1652 and 1674. The legend of the Flying Dutchman was probably born during or soon after the Anglo-Dutch wars, which lasted for more than twenty years.

During the second Anglo-Dutch War, the British won New Amsterdam from the Dutch and renamed it New York. But it was also during that war that Britain suffered its most disastrous maritime defeat. In June 1667, Dutch ships attacked the laid-up British fleet in the River Medway near the Thames estuary. Many British ships were either destroyed by the enemy or deliberately sunk by their crews. *The Royal Charles*, the flagship that had brought King Charles II home from exile, was captured and towed back to Holland. The attack caused panic in London, and Dutch fleets harassed the coastal towns of England. Dutchmen seemed to be appearing everywhere out of thin air, as Samuel Pepys noted in his famous diary.

Fire ships were used by the Dutch with devastating effect, looming out of fog and smoke with 'blood red sails and blackened masts' to terrify superstitious sailors. They were usually manned by skeleton crews who steered them onto targets before escaping at the last moment.

Stories of the sudden and mysterious appearances of the Flying Dutchman may have been encouraged by the inexplicably swift journeys by certain Dutch captains between the Netherlands and the East Indies in the 17th century. One such captain, Bernard Fokke, made the journey from Holland to Java in a record three months and four days. He was widely rumoured to be in league with the devil.

The earliest literary mention of the legend is to be found in Chapter VI of George Barrington's *A Voyage to Botany Bay*, published in London in 1795. Barrington was a 'gentleman pickpocket' and charlatan who was transported to New South Wales in 1791 but rose to become chief constable at Parramatta. Barrington's account includes the following:

About two in the morning I was awaked by a violent shake by the shoulder, when starting up in my hammock, I saw the boatswain, with evident signs of terror and dismay in his countenance, standing by me. 'For God's sake, messmate,' said he,

'hand us the key of the case, for by the Lord I'm damnably scarified: for, d'ye see, as I was just looking over the weather bow, what should I see but the Flying Dutchman coming right down upon us, with everything set — I know 'twas she — I cou'd see all her lower-deck ports up, and the lights fore and aft, as if cleared for action. Now as how, d'ye see, I am sure no mortal ship could bear her low-deck ports up and not founder in this here weather: Why, the sea runs mountains high. It must certainly be the ghost of that there Dutchman, that foundered in this latitude, and which, I have heard say, always appears in this here quarter, in hard gales of wind.... when I called to Joe Jackson, who was at the helm, to look over the weather-bow, he saw nothing; tho', as how, I saw it as plain as this here bottle,' taking another swig at the Geneva.

In 1804, Irish poet Thomas Moore (1779-1852) author of *The Minstrel Boy* and *The Last Rose of Summer*, wrote a poem called *Dead Man's Island*. Two of its verses read:

*See you, beneath yon cloud so dark,
Fast gliding along, a gloomy bark?
Her sails are full, though the wind is still,
And there blows not a breath her sails to fill!*

*To Dead-Man's Isle, in the eye of the blast,
To Dead-Man's Isle, she speeds her fast;
By skeleton shapes her sails are furl'd,
And the hand that steers is not of this world!*

Moore added the following postscript to his poem: '...The above lines were suggested by a superstition very common among sailors, who called this ghost ship, I think, The Flying Dutchman.'

A German legend tells of a Captain Falkenberg, sailing forever through the North Sea (not around the Cape) playing at dice for his soul with the devil. In Joseph Conrad's 1903 novel *Falk*, the captain is drawn from the Falkenberg legend, though in most other respects Conrad was influenced by Wagner's opera. Another German version of the story appears in H. Schmidt's *Der ewige Segler* (The Eternal Seafarer) of 1812. Other versions of the story identify the captain variously as Vanderdecken, van Straaten or van Diemen. Amongst the many creative artists who have used the legend was Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) whose novel *The Phantom Ship* (1839) was the chief source for *Le Vaisseau fantôme*, an opera libretto by Paul Foucher and Bénédicte-Henry Révoil, set by Pierre-Louis Dietsch and staged at the Paris Opéra in November 1842, just two months before Wagner's work was performed in Dresden.

A recurring theme in many of these tales is that the captain, desperate to round the Cape of Good Hope (storms and mutinous crew notwithstanding) had vowed to persist though it took him until the Day of Judgment. This display of hubris had been noted by Satan (some versions say God) who held him to his word, and thus he sails for evermore. In some renderings, the Dutchman's arrogance is compounded by the murder of a crew member who had tried to persuade him to turn back. In other versions, the ship's company are stricken with cholera and for this reason are denied landfall.

Sir Walter Scott's poem *Rokeby* (1813) contains the following lines:

*Then, 'mid the war of sea and sky,
Top and top-gallant hoisted high,
Full spread and crowded every sail,
The Demon Frigate braves the gale;
And well the doom'd spectators know
The harbinger of wreck and woe.*

The next mention of the legend in English is to be found in a story *Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, the Tenacity of Natural Affection* that appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine of May 1821. The Scottish connection is significant in view of later locations of the tale. The author is not revealed but is believed to be one John Howison, a British East India officer whose other writings (also published in Edinburgh) included accounts of the Cape of Good Hope where the events in the Blackwood's story take place. The crew of a British vessel sight a mysterious ship in full sail although the weather is foul, and they recognize it as the Flying Dutchman. A party from the ghostly ship brings letters to the other vessel, pleading with the captain to carry them to loved ones in Holland; but those to whom the letters are addressed are long dead. Finally, the letters are left on the deck and a gust of wind blows them into the sea, to the relief of the British sailors. Especially poignant is the way in which the author describes the despairing and unbelieving reactions of Vanderdecken's crew, who weep when told that their loved ones (including Vanderdecken's wife) have been dead for generations. It is a story full of pathos, and in this respect comes close to Wagner's conception of the Dutchman's tragic fate.

The Blackwood's Magazine story was read by a prolific London playwright and impresario, Edward Fitzball ('The Terrible Fitzball') who used it as the basis of a macabre melodrama *The Flying Dutchman; or The Phantom Ship*, first staged at the Adelphi Theatre in London in 1826. Performances were repeated in English theatres for a number of years.

Fitzball's play might (or might not) have been seen by the German poet Heinrich Heine when he visited London in 1827. It was Heine's 1833 story *Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski* (From the Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski) that became Wagner's immediate source, although Heine's work is far removed from Wagner's in tone and purpose. Wagner might also have been familiar with Joseph Christian Freiherr von Zedlitz's *Das Geisterschiff* (The Ghost Ship) of 1832, and later tales by Wilhelm Hauff.

Heine's tale is notable for its cynicism (prompted by his reaction to Fitzball's play?) a quality entirely absent from Wagner's opera. In it, Schnabelewopski attends a theatrical performance in Amsterdam where he sees a play about a Dutch captain who 'had sworn by all the devils in hell that, despite the storm that was raging, he would round a certain cape ... even if he had to keep on sailing until the Day of Judgement.' The Devil takes the captain at his word but gives him the hope of redemption through the fidelity of a woman's love – in search of which he may go ashore every seven years. A 'redemption' theme as part of the legend appears in writing for the first time in Heine's story and no doubt caught Wagner's eye – although its origin lay with Goethe's *Faust*, in which Faust is redeemed through the intercession of Gretchen. Heine also uses the 'letters' theme that had been central to the Blackwood's story.

'Poor Dutchman' says Heine. 'He's often only too happy to be saved from the woman who wants to save him, and soon heads back to his ship.' This 'Wandering Jew of the oceans' eventually meets Katharina, a Scottish merchant's daughter, who has been contemplating a painted portrait of the Dutchman. She promises to be 'true unto death.'

Then Schnabelewopski, his attention flagging, spies an alluring woman in the audience (Eve, he calls her) and they slip out together for a sexual dalliance. They return just in time to see Katharina wringing her hands, about to leap into the sea. She leaps - and the Dutchman is duly redeemed. As far as Heine was concerned, the moral of the tale is that women should be careful *not* to marry a Flying Dutchman, and men should note that, even in the most favourable circumstances, women will be their undoing.

Heine's cynical tone aside, it is clear that this story provided many of the familiar details in Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, as well as some not so familiar, such as the Scottish (not Norwegian) location that Wagner also adopted until shortly before the first performance.

Wagner originally intended not to write his own libretto for *The Flying Dutchman*. In May 1840 he sent his prose scenario to Meyerbeer's librettist, Eugène Scribe, in the hope that Scribe would write the text and the Paris Opéra would then commission Wagner to write the music. To this end, he composed three pieces: the two songs of the ships' crews and a ballad for the as yet unnamed young woman. The commission never materialized, and so Wagner finished the libretto for himself.

There have been occasional 'sightings' of the Flying Dutchman since that by George Barrington's shipmate *en route* to Botany Bay in 1791. One of the more celebrated was recorded by Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, and his younger brother Prince George, later King George V. This sighting took place on 11 July 1880 when the two princes were Cadet Midshipmen on the corvette HMS *Bacchante*. They were travelling with their tutor John Dalton on a three year voyage and had just visited Adelaide and Melbourne. While they were at sea between Melbourne and Sydney the following event occurred, as recorded in their published account:

At 4 a.m. the Flying Dutchman crossed our bows. A strange red light as of a phantom ship all aglow, in the midst of which light the masts, spars, and sails of a brig 200 yards distant stood out in strong relief as she came up on the port bow, where also the officer of the watch from the bridge clearly saw her, as did the quarterdeck midshipman, who was sent forward at once to the forecastle; but on arriving there was no vestige nor any sign whatever of any material ship was to be seen either near or right away to the horizon, the night being clear and the sea calm. Thirteen persons altogether saw her, including others from the other ships in the squadron, the *Cleopatra* and the *Tourmaline*... At 10.45 a.m. the ordinary seaman who had this morning reported the Flying Dutchman fell from the foretopmast crosstrees on to the topgallant forecastle and was smashed to atoms.

The princes' account also quotes eight lines of Senta's Ballad from *Der fliegende Holländer*. Wagner had given concerts in London three years earlier, when he had

been received by Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) the princes' father.

A Dutchman in Spanish costume

Wagner's stage directions describe the Dutchman as being dressed 'in black Spanish costume'. He took this detail from Heine who describes the Dutchman's portrait as being 'of a handsome man in the costume of the Spanish Netherlands'. There are good historical reasons for this. The Netherlands and surrounding areas, known collectively as the Low Countries, passed from the control of the Dukes of Bourgogne during the early 16th century into the hands of the Habsburg emperor Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1555 Charles granted control of Spain and the Netherlands to his son, Philip II, whose oppressive rule led to a war of independence waged by the Dutch from 1568 to 1648.¹ One of the events sparking the popular uprising was the execution of Count Egmont, whose heroic stand was celebrated centuries later by Goethe and Beethoven.

In 1579 the Union of Utrecht, an alliance of all northern and some southern territories, was formed. The seven provinces that joined the union would become the Netherlands; those that did not would become Belgium, Luxemburg and part of northern France, and were known as the Spanish Netherlands. It was not until 1648 that Spain recognized the sovereignty of the Dutch Republic. Spanish fashions in dress were commonplace under the Habsburgs during the 16th century. They survived well into the 17th century, during which time Wagner's Dutchman would have been involved in the lucrative trade with the East Indies, via the Cape of Good Hope.

Norwegians who once were Scots

Following Heine's precedent, Wagner originally set *The Flying Dutchman* in Scotland, not Norway. Senta's father was called Donald, not Daland (almost an anagram) and his ship was manned by Scottish not Norwegian sailors. The latter's famous song and dance that opens Act III does have something *écossaise* about it, albeit in sailors' boots. Senta herself was originally called Anna. The huntsman suitor was Georg, not Erik, and the first scene was set near the Scottish coastal village of Holystrand, not Sandwike. Just two months before the Dresden premiere in January 1843, Wagner suddenly changed the location from Scotland to Norway, a decision that required him to go through the entire score with a red pen, changing names and adapting the stage directions.

Peter Bassett

¹ In Verdi's *Don Carlos*, Philip dismisses an appeal for clemency from a group of deputies from Flanders and Brabant, and rejects Carlos' demand to be given the regency of Flanders, whereupon Carlos draws his sword against his father before being disarmed by Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa.