**‘As pretty a thing as I have ever seen’: Animal Encounters and Atlantic Voyages, 1750–1850**

John McAleer, University of Southampton, UK

Encounters with marine animals can take place in the most unusual locations. Pasted into the opening pages of the journal kept by a junior officer on board the *Elizabeth*, on its long voyage from Bristol to Australia in 1853, are the ‘wings’ of a flying fish.[[1]](#endnote-1) Mr Lovell’s interest in preserving the creature, a representative of the living world that defined his maritime journey to the Antipodes, was not unusual.[[2]](#endnote-2) Gerald Montagu, a volunteer apprentice in the merchant ship *Princess Charlotte*, also preserved a pair of ‘wings’ from a flying fish during his voyage to Bombay in 1835, ‘by spreading them out quite flat when moist and then placing them between the leaves of a book’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Initially encountered as live animals, these flying fish were quickly transformed into natural history specimens, collected and preserved for posterity. Although the extraordinary voyages of scientific exploration undertaken in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought European sailors into contact with an unparalleled range of unusual animals, the more mundane and well-travelled sea routes plied by migrant and trading vessels—the types of long-distance voyage represented by the examples of Lovell and Montagu—also brought travellers into contact with the wonders of the natural world. These human-animal encounters could only happen at sea, where the crew and passengers of these ships were privileged with a unique window on to the natural world. During the course of their long voyages south through the Atlantic Ocean in the last decades of the age of sail, travellers bound for final destinations in Asia, South Africa and Australia experienced a variety of novel natural phenomena: the heat of the tropics, storms off the Cape, the beauty of shipboard sunsets, and unfamiliar constellations in the heavens. But the animals that shared their shipboard space and inhabited the waters of the surrounding ocean also elicited sustained and detailed commentary from sailors and passengers alike.

While environmental historians have long acknowledged the role of animals in shaping human societies, maritime historians have been more reticent to recognise the impact of non-human actors.[[4]](#endnote-4) For travellers in migrant vessels or East Indiamen, however, the wide expanse of the Atlantic represented an unrivalled opportunity to encounter, experience and engage with the ocean and its animal inhabitants on an unprecedented scale. This article focuses on representations of human-animal interactions in these maritime spaces.[[5]](#endnote-5) The discussion focuses on three aspects of these encounters, holding up a mirror to contemporary human-animal relationships. First, it considers the role played by animals on board ships. On one level, of course, they provided crucial provisions. But as pets and travelling companions, they helped to break up the monotony of these voyages. Second, it explores the wonder and awe with which travellers confronted the non-human maritime world that they encountered on the voyage. Finally, the discussion turns to the collecting activities engaged in by travellers in an attempt to bring something of this maritime world to land.

Drawing from a wide range of primary sources, representing different types of voyage and a variety of travellers, this article argues that animal encounters were an integral part of these journeys through the Atlantic Ocean. All of these vessels carried livestock to serve the needs of their passengers and crew. But relegating animals merely to the role of essential commodities for human survival neglects the fact that animals and encounters with them played a much more variegated and important role in these voyages and the history of imperial expansion more generally.[[6]](#endnote-6) Animals on board ship provided food, but also entertainment and companionship as pets, curiosities and even speculative investments. The waters surrounding the ship were a veritable menagerie and unfamiliar marine animals became subjects for scientific and spiritual speculation. From flying fish to hammerhead sharks, booby birds to boneta, animals affected human responses to these long, tedious journeys and reveal contemporary attitudes to the natural world more generally. Travellers marvelled at strange creatures and collected them as specimens. By exploring travellers’ various interactions with, and responses to, a range of animals in the Atlantic Ocean on their way to other continents, we can better understand the ways in which the natural world shaped their experiences of the voyage. The reactions of these human travellers to their animal companions, and the creatures encountered along the way, were characteristic aspects of the voyages that facilitated an expanding empire of commercial and political power. As well as inspiring wonder, and sometimes fear, encounters with animals in the open waters of the Atlantic marked the broader journey undertaken by these travellers: from domestic and familiar to strange and unknown, expanding mental horizons in the process. Travellers were, partially at least, acculturated and acclimatized to their situations through their encounters with animals in this oceanic space. The discussion also illustrates the ways in which attitudes towards animals were beginning to change in the period examined here.[[7]](#endnote-7) Instrumentalist views of animals as sources of food, economic investments, or elements of a divine plan persisted and coloured the views of travellers on ocean-going sailing ships. But they increasingly co-existed with new ideas about and concern for animals and their natural habitat. All of these impulses were manifest in the Atlantic voyages explored here and studying them offers a maritime perspective on the cultural history of human-animal relations at the time.

*Travelling with animals*

The most common animal travelling companions were, of course, those brought on board for the purposes of providing food throughout the voyage. Even with the victualling opportunities offered by the Iberian-controlled islands, ships sailing south through the Atlantic needed a variety of supplies for this leg of the journey. The commander of the East Indiaman *Sir Edward Hughes*, James Brabazon Urmston, took pleasure in showing ‘his farm yard, pigs and poultry’ to Lady Anne Barnard, as she prepared to embark for South Africa at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the ship seemed to operate as a surrogate for the farm: ‘All was clean and wholesome and on the poop a most numerous society, fed on good corn and hay, and excellent mutton was the result’.[[8]](#endnote-8) In March 1825, the *Atlas* left Gravesend for India with ‘an ample live stock consisting of sheep, pigs, geese, ducks, turkeys, fowls, guinea fowl, rabbits and pigeons; we also had a milch cow and her calf’.[[9]](#endnote-9) But animals did not just accompany human passengers as additions to the list of provisions.

Familiar and trusted animals were sought after by British communities living in distant continents, necessitating a long and often uncomfortable sea voyage for the creatures in question. In 1809, on his way to Madras, Richard Gubbins admitted that he and his sailing companions got ‘tossed about famously’ in the Bay of Biscay, but he reassured his sister that his ‘dogs go on very well’. He was aware, however, that the hot weather to come would be ‘most trying for them’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Five years later, Andrew Fleming Hudleston travelled to India with ‘a pack of fox hounds and two horses’ destined for the use of Lord Moira, the governor general.[[11]](#endnote-11) Robert Ramsay—a cadet in the military service of the East India Company—recorded that, before they left port, several persons brought dogs on board the East Indiaman *Lady Campbell* for sale to the travellers, ‘asking £1 a head for them’. Ramsay reported that ‘good dogs bring £10 or £11 in Calcutta; but there is a heavy freight to pay and the chance of their dying’. Nevertheless, the ship sailed with ‘about 16 different kinds on board all huddled together’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Minnie Wood, travelling to the subcontinent in the middle of the century, was less than impressed by having to share her shipboard space with ‘a pack of foxhounds who invariably begin to howl just as one is falling asleep’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Their presence on board was at the behest of the captain: ‘Most of the hounds on board and four splendid horses belong to [the Captain], as he is taking them out on spec., as these animals fetch an immense price in India.’ This speculation carried an inherent risk and an uncertain return, however: ‘Unfortunately, poor man, one very fine horse has died, worth 160 guineas, and three dogs, £30, which makes a great loss to him.’[[14]](#endnote-14) When it came to dogs, Emma Roberts thought that terriers were ‘sufficiently hardy to make the voyage without risk to their health’, but that ‘spaniels, pointers, and hounds’ were a different matter. They ‘will not escape sickness unless they are well brushed every day’. According to Roberts, ‘experience has shewn that brushing the coat of a dog on board ship is a better preventive from illness than washing, and for a trifling remuneration some person will be found to perform the office’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Although many of these examples suggest that the dogs in question were destined to cater for the sporting and hunting activities of Europeans in the subcontinent, this was a period, as Kathleen Kete has shown, in which the keeping of domesticated animals as pets increased in popularity.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that similar motivations inspired those on long sea voyages. And dogs were not the only species transported by humans across the waters of the Atlantic. On board the *Orient*, a clipper on its way to Australia in 1862, Edward Lacey gave an insight into the purposes fulfilled by the birds that accompanied the passengers of the vessel:

Our feathered songsters enliven our dull and monotonous existence; on shutting your eyes you might fancy, minus the rocking of the ship, that you were ashore; in many of the cabins a canary or two is to be found; two in the cuddy seem to vie with each other to sing the loudest, and during meals keep up a continual duet.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Travellers also sometimes shared their shipboard space with more unfamiliar animals. Many of the crew on board the *Lady Penrhyn*, part of the First Fleet bringing convicts to New South Wales in 1787, purchased ‘curious birds’ at Rio de Janeiro. But the perils of carrying live animals was quickly brought home to them: ‘all dyed [*sic*] on going to sea’, recorded the ship’s surgeon.[[18]](#endnote-18) Of course, exotic animals were much more common on voyages returning to the Atlantic from further afield. William Harrison prepared to undertake his journey from South Africa, northwards through the Atlantic, with some extraordinary companions, which required significant oversight in order to get them successfully on board ship. He ensured that ‘the carpenter had made a snug berth for my antelope free from any obstruction to the working of the ship and safe from getting loose on the deck’. Harrison elaborated, explaining that ‘so many [antelope] had come to accidents in breaking their legs … that I had made up my mind this should not have its liberty during the voyage’. With better timing, the antelope might have shared its berth with another example of African fauna: ‘I had been promised a zebra to be sent down from the interior of the country but it did not arrive in time.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Bringing exotic animals to Europe was one of the speculations that sailors engaged in to make extra money.[[20]](#endnote-20) At the very beginning of the eighteenth century, for example, the East Indiaman *Kent* transported ‘five china birds, 3 large antilopes [*sic*] designed for the Queen of England and several cockatoos’ across the expanse of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans from Batavia.[[21]](#endnote-21) James Pyke’s journal is silent on the experience of those animals on the voyage, or that of their human sailing companions. Over a century later, in 1822, Lieutenant Stuart Corbett was sad that he could not send his brother ‘any parrots or monkeys’ from India. It was certainly possible to procure ‘five or six different sorts of parrots some not larger than a bullfinch quite green except a small red speck on the breast’. Corbett’s reticence about sending them on the passage to Europe was based on the worry that he would ‘never be able to find any one who will take sufficient care of them on the voyage home’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Not everyone, it seems, valued animal travelling companions. Working, or rather travelling in confined spaces, with animals presented a risk: Robert Lewys was wounded by a tiger cub—a gift from an East India Company deputy governor to King Charles—on a return voyage in the *Mary*.[[23]](#endnote-23) Perhaps incidents like this explain Lieutenant Corbett’s problem.

Despite Edward Lacey’s positive views, not every encounter with the natural world was welcomed on board ship. Animals shared, and frequently invaded, the ‘personal space’ of travellers. James Morant—going to India on board the *Carnatic* in 1838—recorded sardonically that, as he prepared to brush his teeth one evening by pouring some water into a tumbler, he found two large cockroaches who had ‘contrived to gain admittance with felonious intent (having been attracted by a few drops of wine and water) and could not secure a retreat’. It was only with significant effort that he ‘succeeded in drowning them in salt water’.[[24]](#endnote-24) The experience of Henry Martin Lightoller, sailing to Australia as the surgeon-superintendent of the *Scottish Bard* in 1878, was even more perturbing. On the night of 28 July, Lightoller felt a strange sensation in bed. Something was ‘tickling the end of my nose last night. Made a grab at my nose, and caught what do you think? Why, two cockroaches. Lord, didn’t I jump! The animals were evidently having a day out at my expense.’ And the excitement did not stop there for Lightoller or, indeed, his tiny travelling companions: ‘I nearly swallowed one in my coffee this morning.’[[25]](#endnote-25)

Sadly, travelling with animals could also involve neglect, mistreatment and cruelty. Harriet Tytler and her husband were returning from India with ‘two large cages full of little birds’, destined for a European zoo. During a particularly violent storm, the cages were lashed to the floor ‘for fear that they would be thrown off the walls of the cabin from the terrible rolling of the vessel’. This proved disastrous. The noise of the raging storm and the creaking vessel had drowned out the birds in their futile fight to stave off the ship’s rats. This horrific incident was followed by another, as Mr Tytler ‘was so mad over it that as soon as this terrible weather had abated he got a rat trap and caught four, which jumped out of the stern window into the sea as soon as he opened the door of the trap’. Seeing the rodents swimming for their lives elicited no feelings of remorse from Harriet who was happy to record that the rats ‘met the fate they deserved’.[[26]](#endnote-26) The poor goat which William Harrison took with him on his voyage to South Africa in 1830 did not suffer as drastically. Nevertheless, it refused to give any milk and appeared unwell, which was unsurprising given Harrison’s diagnosis: ‘I think its illness is caused by having eat[en] some paint which has been left on deck all night.’[[27]](#endnote-27) Edward Snell recounted the story of a dog which had been running around on deck since the *Bolton*, the ship in which he was travelling to Australia, left Portsmouth. It was thrown overboard by the ship’s cook ‘on suspicion of being mad’. In this case, Snell was not without sympathy for ‘the poor thing’, which ‘swam very hard after the ship and looked very pitifully up at us’. The dog receded from view which, Snell thought, was ‘rather a hard fate for the poor fellow’.[[28]](#endnote-28) While many Atlantic voyages show little evidence of the ‘valorization of kindness to animals’ that Kathleen Kete suggests became part of human-animals encounters in the nineteenth century, Edward Snell’s response suggests a softening that was replicated by other travellers.[[29]](#endnote-29)

In referring to the speculative transport of animals to India, William Wilson Saunders expressed sentiments of concern for animal welfare. Educated at the East India Company’s military academy at Addiscombe in Surrey, Saunders’s interest in entomology and botany might explain his distress over the mistreatment of living creatures that he saw on his voyage. Badgers were brought on board the *Duke of Bedford*, the vessel taking Saunders to Calcutta in 1830, for the express purpose of being sold in India for baiting: ‘Badger baiting I hear among sporting characters in India is a favourite sport and a good badger will fetch a good sum of money so much so that as in the present case it answers to bring them out from England.’ It is clear, however, that Saunders disapproved, observing that ‘these badgers belonged to the stewart [*sic*] and were his speculation which I was glad to hear for I would scarcely think the captain would have attempted gaining any thing by such petty means’.[[30]](#endnote-30) A similarly sympathetic note was struck when Saunders reflected on the fowl (‘poor things’) kept in confinement on deck. He empathised with the birds ‘penned up in a coop in the burning sun with scarcely room to turn about’. It must be ‘miserable indeed’ and ‘a cry of go back, go back [Saunders’s estimation of their call] from a bird in such a situation can but call attention and lead you to think of its miseries’.[[31]](#endnote-31) And again, as they rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Saunders reflected on the shooting that was a widespread and popular pastime with many seaborne travellers at the time:

A great many sportsmen hard at work today killing all my pretty birds, at least knocking as many of them down into the water as they can, many I am afraid to live there in agony for days. I do not like to see these pretty creatures, as they come flitting by the ship in all the pride of life, in a moment destroyed, and this merely for the pleasure of destruction and for the sake of shewing your dexterity as a sportsman.[[32]](#endnote-32)

While Saunders’s extensive reflections on the natural world and his forthright disapproval of the cruelty that he witnessed towards animals in this maritime space was somewhat unusual—at least in the written sources—it suggests a shift from a purely instrumentalist view of animals as food to a more sympathetic approach. It also highlights the fact that these voyages brought many travellers into contact with the wonders of the natural world in ways unimaginable in Europe.

*Maritime marvels*For travellers sailing south through the Atlantic, animals encounters did not just take place on board ship. Throughout the journey, these voyagers encountered the living world all around them and it became an object of interest and curiosity. The birds in the air and the fish in the sea presented new experiences of the world and new perspectives on its creator.[[33]](#endnote-33) Before the widespread acceptance of Darwin’s theories, as Christiana Payne reminds us, ‘the intricacy, beauty and endless variety of marine life were widely seen as convincing proof of the existence of God’.[[34]](#endnote-34) In the case of the shark, marine animals could also signal the cruelty and unforgiving nature of these oceanic spaces.

In the course of his voyage to Bombay in 1750 in the *Lord Anson*, John Henry Grose filled his account with descriptions of various ‘fishes which form no small part of the entertainment in the course of the passage’.[[35]](#endnote-35) He devoted multiple pages to the flying fish, albacore, dorado, dolphin, shark, sucking fish, and yellow tail that he encountered. On his passage to Asia nearly a century later, Howard Malcom—an American Baptist missionary—remarked on the ‘aquatic novelties, which serve to vary our monotony and create topics for our many journalizers’. In his case, a variety of ‘blackfish, boneta, flying-fish, dolphins, porpoises, gulls … summon our new voyagers to the side and excite no little interest’.[[36]](#endnote-36) William Hickey, the famous Indian diarist, was fascinated by the flying fish, which he had heard of but considered a joke until he saw schools of them landing on deck.[[37]](#endnote-37) Thomas Twining was similarly enthralled: ‘Few natural novelties are more surprising and pleasing.’[[38]](#endnote-38) For John Nott, these creatures were ‘like flights of sparrows rising from the water’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Mary Greene made a similar comparison: ‘Flocks of flying fish to be seen just like the goldfinches on Salisbury Plain they fly in flocks, settle down in the sea and rising again take successive flights over the water.’[[40]](#endnote-40) And even as she sampled a flying fish for her breakfast, Lady Nugent attempted to record its distinctive physical characteristics with an extensive description:

The eye is very large and the side fins, which enable it to go a considerable distance in the air, are webbed, and very large in proportion to the fish itself; when expanded, they generally fly against the wind to avoid their enemies the dolphins and other fish of prey.[[41]](#endnote-41)

T. H. Bramston, a lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade on his way to South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century to quell the latest disturbances on the frontier of the Cape Colony, provided a soldier’s perspective on the marine animals that surrounding his ship, HMS *Megaera*, as it proceeded south through the Atlantic. Several weeks after leaving Portsmouth, they caught a glimpse of some porpoises for the first time. They were, Bramston remarked, ‘jolly brutes, jumping out of the water and playing around the ship’.[[42]](#endnote-42) A little later in his voyage, Bramston was moved to record ‘as pretty a thing as I have ever seen since I have been on board’: ‘Three dolphins swimming along, now close under her sides and then darting off leaving a train of fire behind them and all keeping together the whole time, they kept up with us for 20 minutes.’[[43]](#endnote-43) Large aquatic animals of the kind noted by Bramston had long been remarked upon by travellers in Atlantic waters. Edward Terry, accompanying Sir Thomas Roe to India at the beginning of the seventeenth century, marvelled at the sight of whales, ‘of an exceeding greatnesses’, which ‘appear like unto great rocks’.[[44]](#endnote-44) Over two centuries later, Minnie Wood also remarked on seeing whales in the waters around the Cape, ‘such huge black monsters, throwing the water from their nostrils into the air’.[[45]](#endnote-45) And at Tristan da Cunha, on his way to Australia, Jonathan Binns Ware saw ‘several whales large and small playing about and around the ship in every direction, spouting, blowing and tossing themselves so as to give us the most excellent view of them’.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Of course, the marine animal that elicited the strongest reaction from travellers was the shark. They invariably responded with a mixture of wonder and awe, fear and loathing. Sharks were ‘a kind of sea dog’ and ‘certainly the most voracious animal living’, according to one account. The cause of its ‘extraordinary greediness’ was ‘the greatness of its liver’.[[47]](#endnote-47) Guy Tachard’s assessment of the creature corresponded with a pattern of European representation of the shark that endured into the nineteenth century.[[48]](#endnote-48) Nevertheless, such reports did not dissuade the crew of the *Southampton* from trying to catch a shark on their voyage to India in 1856. When one of the creatures was spotted near the ship as it passed Dakar, in West Africa, a hook baited with pork was immediately thrown out. Although ‘the brute bit in a few minutes’, the hook was not strong enough to hold it and it escaped.[[49]](#endnote-49) Perhaps this was for the best, if Edward Towle’s experience is representative. Towle—a passenger on board the SS *Great Britain* in 1852—recorded his terrifyingly close encounter with a shark when an ‘enormous creature jumped right out of the water as if longing for a taste of one of us’. It was much larger than Towle had expected, speculating that ‘two of us could have easily found very comfortable accommodation in his interior’.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Catching a shark and hauling it in was, unsurprisingly, a hazardous operation. But records of the event shed further light on human-animal encounters in the Atlantic, and a recognition of the cruelties and harshness of the natural world. Grose recounted that ‘as soon as they touch the deck, they make all shake again with the violent flounces of their tail, capable of breaking a man’s leg’. In such situations, violence was rather more in evidence than awe. For the safety of all on board, any shark brought on deck had to be immediately exterminated with the ‘cut of an ax [sic]’.[[51]](#endnote-51) For another traveller, the taking of a shark provided an interesting interlude on his passage from Port Glasgow to Bombay in 1828. It took three men to haul the shark on board, whereupon ‘in the last agonies it beat the deck with [its tail] like a man with a large hammer or club’. The traveller ‘noticed here what I have often heard of viz the antipathy which sailors have to these animals. As soon as it was fairly in every one began to load it with execrations and strive who should get a cut or stab at it.’[[52]](#endnote-52) Campbell Mackinnon observed that the sailors on the *Frances Anne*, the small brig taking him to India in 1830, dispatched the shark they caught ‘with peculiar gusto’. It was ‘sliced and cut up in about 5 minutes’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Anna Kate Fowler, bound for Australia, remarked that the shark caught on their passage ‘was killed and hacked about in a most merciless manner’ as a result of the sailors’ ‘intense animosity to them’. One of the passengers wanted to make a necklace from the shark’s teeth, which he considered ‘a potent charm’ and he agreed ‘to spare us one each as a curiosity’.[[54]](#endnote-54) The interest in collecting such ‘curiosities’ and natural history specimens extended, as we will see, beyond those derived from sharks and illuminate many facets of human-animal interactions in the Atlantic.

Travellers were also attracted by the skies above their heads and fascinated by the birds that inhabited them. Again, wonder and awe suffuse many descriptions. For William Harwood, the albatrosses that he encountered in the South Atlantic were ‘the largest birds I ever saw except the swan’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Horatio Bridge remarked on the fact that his ship was continually followed by Mother Carey’s chickens, leading him to speculate about the nature of this bird:

Mysterious is the way of this little wanderer over the sea. It is never seen on land; and naturalists have yet to discover where it reposes, and here it hatches its young; unless we adopt the idea of the poets, that it builds its nest upon the turbulent bosom of the deep. It is a sort of nautical sister of the fabled bird of Paradise, which was footless, and never alighted out of the air.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Mary Greene recorded the examination of a Cape pigeon on board the *Resolute*, the vessel in which she was sailing to Australia. Caught by the ship’s doctor, Greene observed that the bird was ‘a very pretty creature but it bit my hand savagely while I was stroking it’.[[57]](#endnote-57) And as he sailed through the Atlantic in 1850, Francis Taylor described the catching of an albatross. It was an event that enlivened the entire ship: ‘the pushing and crowding to get a sight prevented my getting at [it] until this had subsided a little’. Taylor eventually managed to get ‘a good sight of it’, reporting that ‘it is the largest and handsomest bird I ever saw’.[[58]](#endnote-58) Some birds had particularly strong associations with specific places or parts of the journey. Cape pigeons were linked with the waters around Southern Africa, while albatrosses were sometimes called ‘old East Indian Nabobs’ by sailors on East Indiamen.[[59]](#endnote-59) The connection between these birds and the vessels plying the Company’s trade with Asia was underlined by the captain of the *Lady Campbell* who told Robert Ramsay that it was ‘often the custom in Indiamen for the passengers to catch albatrosses and other birds, to fasten a piece of copper to their necks or legs with the name of the ship, with the Lat[itude] and Long[itude] at the time engraved on it, and then let them fly again’.[[60]](#endnote-60) Unfortunately, the albatross caught by the crew of the ship in which Francis Taylor was sailing was not so lucky: ‘It is now skinned and will carefully be preserved by the surgeon.’[[61]](#endnote-61) The bird’s fate points to yet another way in which travellers engaged with the natural world: scientific investigation and specimen collecting.

*Natural history investigation and collecting*

Scholars of human-animal encounters suggest that we need to take account of the tactile, as well as the visual, nature of these interactions.[[62]](#endnote-62) Apart from eating them, perhaps the closest travellers got to a sustained tactile engagement with the marine animals around and over their ships was through collecting them. Collecting natural history specimens was a widespread and popular activity undertaken by crew and passengers alike in the early nineteenth century. A live or preserved specimen was the most credible way to bring evidence ashore of what had been seen at sea.[[63]](#endnote-63) The encomium bestowed by the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society on Captain W. H. Cawne Warren is typical of the interest shown in natural history at the time. Warren had ‘rendered good service to zoological science, and has shown what may be done by an intelligent use of the opportunities for collecting natural objects which belong to his profession’.[[64]](#endnote-64) At another level, collecting such specimens also demonstrated a mastery of nature that John MacKenzie has identified as an important feature of the period.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Given the length of the voyages discussed here, the act of collecting specimens served both as scientific practice and enjoyable pastime that could be pursued from the deck via shooting, dredging and fishing, and continued below deck through the sketching, painting, mounting and stuffing of specimens. In this way, the ship served as laboratory, instrument and field site.[[66]](#endnote-66) As Anne-Flore Laloë observes, when crew and passengers recorded pelagic plants and animals, they transformed ships into spaces of geographical knowledge production *at* sea, which forged knowledge *about* the sea.[[67]](#endnote-67) There is much evidence of this empirically grounded approach to marine animals. John Nott’s journal, which recorded his voyage to India in 1784 on board the *Ponsborne*, amply demonstrates his amazement and fascination with the natural world. It also provides a detailed and fastidious account, replete with Enlightenment curiosity, of the non-human maritime world that he sailed through, befitting his role as the ship’s surgeon:

A dolphin taken today was remarkably luminous and the finger rubbed over it and particularly on the wounded part retained a phosphoric quality for a long time. The sea too was very luminous hence I conjectured that appearance in the sea derives from fish. It has been remarked that mackerel hung up in the moonshine very soon grow putrid.[[68]](#endnote-68)

A little later in the voyage, Nott recounted taking ‘a large bright red blubber’, or jellyfish, out of the sea that he supposed was ‘a large water snake’. But he was soon disabused of this as ‘it stung like other blubbers’.[[69]](#endnote-69) By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, natural history had become a standard part of a ship’s surgeon’s role.[[70]](#endnote-70) Arthur Bowes Smyth fulfilled the same function on the *Lady Penrhyn*, which was transporting 109 female convicts to New South Wales in 1787. He took the opportunity of his voyage through the Atlantic to preserve one of the accompanying ‘sucking fish’ in spirits when the crew caught a shark near the Cape Verde Islands.[[71]](#endnote-71) Just over a week later, he ‘preserved the wings of some flying fish’, and then went on to take up a bucket of water from the sea, full of ‘luminous bodies which gave a most beautiful appearance’, which he also preserved in spirits.[[72]](#endnote-72) But a determination to investigate and speculate on the wonders of the sea was not just confined to men of science like Nott and Smyth.

Unlike specimen or artefact collecting on land, which generally only required the physical body of the collector to hunt and gather a specimen, collecting from a ship nearly always involved an intermediary agent—a gun, net or dredge—to bring the item on board. And scientifically inclined passengers, observers and collectors also required and received substantial help in their work from the ship’s crew, such as hauling the dredge to trawl for marine organisms (an operation requiring the full co-operation of the ship’s company, from the captain down) or assisting in the collection and identification of specimens.[[73]](#endnote-73) Clarke Abel sailed through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans as part of Lord Amherst’s British embassy to China in 1816. Although it was part of his duty as the expedition’s botanist, Abel pointed out the ubiquity of collecting activities at sea, which often permeated every level of the ship’s company: ‘I have repeatedly seen an ardent curiosity excited by my pursuits in the minds of those whose general habits of life would appear least likely to render them observers of nature; and I have been indebted to their industry, intelligence and kindness, for the possession of a number of specimens and remarks.’[[74]](#endnote-74)

For all prospective collectors, the process of observing and gathering started early in the voyage. A few weeks into her journey, Sarah Norman Eaton—emigrating to South Africa in 1818—recounted the fact that the sea was ‘covered with crabs’, whereupon ‘the mate took up one with the cook’s ladle [and] I sketched it to mark the difference between it and those [common crabs]’.[[75]](#endnote-75) The luminous creatures spotted by Arthur Bowes Smyth were also noted by Edward Snell on the *Bolton*: ‘One of these luminous particles came on deck with some spray last night and on being examined turned out to be an animal of the centipede species … the light came from his tail’. Snell, a farmer going to Port Philip and somebody described as being ‘very fond of studying Entomology’, ‘gummed him [the centipede] down on a card and preserved him’.[[76]](#endnote-76) During their voyage to South Africa, one of T. H. Bramston’s colleagues on board HMS *Megaera* took his amateur experimenting too far: ‘We caught a Portuguese Man of War [*Physalia physalis*, a large jellyfish-like animal] when we were in the boat, which came to an untimely end being pricked with a pin by Paddy Larse who wanted to see what it was made of.’[[77]](#endnote-77)

Fish were particularly problematic to collect and transport because no fully effective method to preserve the specimens existed. Carl Linnaeus dried the skins on to heavy paper, making them easier to store: they were often bound in books like herbaria specimens. But the drying process severely distorted the fish’s shape, and the skins turned a uniform shade of muddy brown that obscured the few remaining distinctive characteristics. Smaller fish could be stored in jars of alcohol. Unfortunately, the preserving spirits eliminated their colours and often so altered the specimens that study by dissection was difficult.[[78]](#endnote-78) Nevertheless, these problems did not dissuade some passengers. When the crew on William Johnstone’s ship caught a shark, ‘the jaws were preserved, cleaned and hung up in the rigging to dry’.[[79]](#endnote-79) A flying fish excited a great deal of curiosity on Jonathan Binns Ware’s ship. Indeed, ‘one of the passengers has commenced to skin and stuff it’.[[80]](#endnote-80) James Morant’s vessel, the *Carnatic*, was another where flying fish were preserved. A number were caught and put in bottles of spirits. The ship’s surgeon, Mr French, put the animal presented to him by Morant ‘in a bottle of spirits and partially extended its wings’.[[81]](#endnote-81) Later in the voyage, Morant offered a detailed description of the Portuguese man-of-war from a specimen that sat before him ‘in a tumbler of salt water’. This was the gift of Mr French, who had evidently succeeded where Morant had failed: ‘Thousands have floated by the vessel during the day and I vainly endeavoured to catch some of them, and in the attempt lost a very pretty little basket which we bought at Madeira.’[[82]](#endnote-82)

As we have seen, birds were equally susceptible to the collecting effort. George Macartney, who led the British embassy to China in 1792, reported on the attempts of his secretary, George Staunton, to preserve an albatross for his collection:

His skin which may without prophanation be called his immortal part, has been very carefully preserved and is intended to be properly stuffed and fitted up so that the curious ornithologist may probably be one day gratified with an ocular inspection of it among the rarities in the Museum Stauntonianum.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Howard Malcom succeeded in catching a booby and a petrel on his voyage and, ‘as the plumage of both birds was in fine order, I preserved and stuffed their skins’.[[84]](#endnote-84) Jonathan Binns Ware described how a variety of birds—albatrosses, Cape hens, African swallows or snowy petrels, and Cape pigeons—had ‘all been taken with the hook and line and also shot and numerous specimens are being prepared by the passengers for their friends in England’.[[85]](#endnote-85)

The object of collecting on Atlantic voyages was not always the advancement of scientific knowledge. Sharks presented a number of opportunities in this regard. Lady Anne Barnard noted with satisfaction that she had kept ‘the skeleton of the jaw’ of the creature, observing that it promised to make ‘a very handsome wild cap … for a masquerade’.[[86]](#endnote-86) Robert Ramsay reported that sharks’ vertebrae were said to make ‘good walking sticks when dried and painted’.[[87]](#endnote-87) Meanwhile, in the case of Alfred Withers’s companions, the capture of four albatrosses was most definitely not for the purposes of natural history, but rather for those ‘who indulge in the use of tobacco’: ‘They make snuff boxes of the skull, pipe stems of the wing bones, and tobacco pouches of skin of the foot.’[[88]](#endnote-88) Joseph Sams described the plumage and characteristic colours of the Cape pigeon on his voyage to Australia on board the *Northumberland*, concluding that ‘their wings are greatly prized for ladies’ hats’.[[89]](#endnote-89) Sams made a similar assessment of the albatross the next day, observing that ‘their skins make very nice muffs, their legs good pipe stands’.[[90]](#endnote-90) The albatrosses caught by the crew and passengers on the *Stag* were also destined for a fate other than the progress of science. Francis Taylor recalled that many of his companions were ‘begging even for a foot or feather to keep in remembrance of this part of our voyage, the skin of the feet are made into purses, and even the sculls are carefully cleaned and preserved’.[[91]](#endnote-91) The three-dimensional specimens and objects derived from human-animal encounters in the Atlantic provided tangible and distinctive mementoes of the maritime voyage for many travellers.

*Conclusion*

Historians have become increasingly aware of the connections between the study and collecting of animals and plants on the one hand, and the expansion of European empires on the other.[[92]](#endnote-92) Access to specimens often relied on the projection of British maritime power, for example, and the growth of knowledge of the natural world generally followed the contours of an expanding empire.[[93]](#endnote-93) But this was an empire in which the maritime connections forged by sailing ships played a fundamental part and in which encounters with animals took on many different forms. Humans do not just exert their agency on animals; human actions and societies are partly shaped by their interactions and encounters with animals. In this way, marine animals played their own roles in marking the passage of travellers through the Atlantic Ocean in the age of sail.

1. NMM, JOD/79, unpaginated. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Flying fish were popular collector’s items. See Davies, ‘Collecting and preserving fishe’, 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. BL, APAC, Mss Eur F454, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ritvo, ‘History and animal studies’, 3–6. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Fudge, ‘A left-handed blow’, 6. There is relatively little evidence of inter-species relationships in the accounts investigated here. The human recorders of these episodes inevitably intervened to situate themselves and their perspectives at the heart of these encounters. These relationships must have existed, however, as the cramped space of wooden sailing ships forced every living thing into sometimes uncomfortably close proximity with their fellow travellers, of every species. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Brantz, ‘Introduction’, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kete, *A cultural history of animals*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Barnard, *Cape journals*, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. NLSA, MSB 523, unpaginated, 28 Mar. 1825. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. NLSA, MSB 371.1, 2–3, Richard Gubbins to Anne Gubbins [sister], 16 Sep. 1809. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. CRO, D HUD 13/2/2, Andrew Fleming Hudleston to his father, 10 May 1814. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. NMM, JOD/5, 5, 3 Jan. 1825. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Diary entry, 3 Aug. 1856, in Wood, *From Minnie with love*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Diary entry, 2 Sep. 1856, in ibid., 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Roberts, *The East India voyager*, 8–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kete, *A cultural history of animals*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Edward Lacey, Journal, 8 Aug. 1862, in Bell, ed., *Diaries from the days of sail*, 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Journal entry, 9 Aug. 1787, in Smyth, *The journal of Arthur Bowes Smyth*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. NLSA, MSB 224.1, 300, 13 Apr. 1831. On 23 June he recorded its fate: the antelope was landed safe and sound and then ‘conveyed to Fenchurch St [John Borradaile’s place] where it created some amusement and curiosity by its graceful form and movements and soon brought several persons wishing to purchase it. Mr Wombwell the proprietor of a large menagerie was very anxious to possess it. He said it was the first that had been landed alive in England and free from blemish, all others having come to grief by being allowed their liberty on board. So that after all my treatment proved the best. It had been a great pet on board. It was forwarded at once to Repton Priory, Cheshire as a present to my intended partner for life’ (315). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For more on this, see Grigson, *Menagerie*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. BL, Add MS 24931, 190, 30 May 1705. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. De Courcy, *The fishing fleet*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. O’Connor, *The chaplains of the East India Company*, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. NLSA, MSB 340, 56, 2 Oct. 1838. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Henry Martin Lightoller, Diary entry, 29 July 1878, in Charlwood, *The long farewell*, 295. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Tytler, *An Englishwoman in India*, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. NLSA, MSB 224.1, 22–3, 6 Aug. 1830. Sadly, the goat did not make it to South Africa. Less than a week after this entry, on 12 August, Harrison was disturbed by ‘a shrill bleat which proved its death note’ and it was unceremoniously ‘consigned to a watery grave’ (29). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Diary entry, 21 Aug. 1849, in Snell, *The life and adventures of Edward Snell*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kete, ‘Animals and ideology’. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. CBS, D 152/A/1, 24, 19 Aug. 1830. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 25, 20 Aug. 1830. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 66, 27 Sep. 1830. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. #  Scribner, ‘“Such Monsters Do Exist in Nature”’.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Payne, ‘Seaside visitors’, 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Grose, *A voyage to the East Indies*, vol. 1, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Malcom, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*, vol. 1, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hickey, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Twining, *Travels in India*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. HRO, [DC/F2/1/2](http://calm.hants.gov.uk/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=DC%2fF%2f2%2f1%2f2), 8, 29 Dec. 1783. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. HRO, 65A05/B4, unpaginated, 7 July 1851. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Nugent, *Lady Nugent’s East India journal*, 9 (23 Aug. 1811). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. HRO, 170A12W/D/1075/27, 3, 31 Jan. 1852. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 6, 8 Feb. 1852. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Quoted in Chatterton, *The old East Indiamen*, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Diary entry, 5 Oct. 1856, in Wood, *From Minnie with love*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. NMM, TRN/28, 183, 30 Sept. 1839. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. ###  Tachard, *A relation of the voyage to Siam*, 28.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Crawford, *Shark*. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Diary entry, 18 Aug. 1856, in Wood, *From Minnie with love*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. NMM, NAI/2/24, 9, 26 Aug. 1852. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Grose, *A voyage to the East Indies*, vol. 1, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. NLS, MS 9594, 4, 1828. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. CUL, RCMS/81, 11, 30 Apr. 1830. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Anna Kate Fowler,Journal entry, 16 July 1866, in Hume, ed., *A Victorian engagement*, 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. BL, APAC, Mss Eur D565, 12, 23 Feb. 1781. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Bridge, *Journal of an African cruiser*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. HRO, 65A05/B4, unpaginated, 13 Aug. 1851. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. NMM, JOD/75, 100, 27 Apr. 1850. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. NMM, JOD/5, 55, 13 Mar. 1825. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 61, 24 Mar. 1825. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. NMM, JOD/75, 100, 27 Apr. 1850. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Rothfels, ‘Touching animals’. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Millar, ‘Sampling the South Seas’, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Quoted in Loughney, ‘Colonialism and the development of the English provincial museum’, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. MacKenzie, *The empire of nature*, 27–8, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Millar, ‘Sampling the South Seas’, 116. See also Warrior and McAleer, ‘Objects of exploration’. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Laloë ‘“Plenty of Weeds & Penguins”’, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. HRO, [DC/F2/1/2](http://calm.hants.gov.uk/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=DC%2fF%2f2%2f1%2f2), 12, 22 Jan. 1784. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 28, 12 Mar. 1784. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. On the role of the naval surgeon in particular, see Cock, ‘Sir Francis Beaufort’, 176, n. 880. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Journal entry, 27 June 1787, in Smyth, *The journal of Arthur Bowes Smyth*, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Journal entries, 8 July 1787 and 11 July 1787, in ibid., 22, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Cock, ‘Sir Francis Beaufort’, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Abel, *Narrative of a journey in the interior of China*, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. NLSA, MSB177.1, 7 July 1818. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Diary entry, 11 Sep. 1849, in Snell, *The life and adventures of Edward Snell*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. HRO, 170A12W/D/1075/27, 8, 1 Mar. 1852. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Larsen, ‘Not since Noah’, 53, 74–5, 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Greenhill and Giffard, *Women under sail*, 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. NMM, TRN/28, 77, 15 Aug. 1839. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. NLSA, MSB 340, 38, 7 Sep. 1838. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., 51, 27 Sep. 1838. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. WL, MS3352, 68, [1792]. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Malcom, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*, vol. 1, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. NMM, TRN/28, 185, 30 Sep. 1839. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Barnard, *Cape journals*, 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. NMM, JOD/5, 56, 14 Mar. 1825. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. NMM, JOD/171/1, 86, 6 Mar. 1857. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Diary entry, 17 Oct. 1874, in Sams, *Diary*, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Diary entry, 18 Oct. 1874, in ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. NMM, JOD/75, 101, 27 Apr. 1850. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. See, for example, Cosby, *Ecological imperialism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. See, for example, Browne, ‘Biogeography and empire’; Colley, *Wild animal skins in Victorian Britain*. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)