

***The Wager*, by David Grann**

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Non-fiction writer David Grann is having quite a year. The movie version of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, his prior blockbuster, is set for release this fall. Grann's latest book, *The Wager*, a riveting seafaring saga, has topped best-seller charts all summer.

Aptly subtitled "A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder," *The Wager* centers on the ill-fated mid-18th century ship, HMS *Wager*. A 28-gun war ship, the *Wager* was part of a British squadron on a secret mission to the Chilean coast. Led by Commodore George Anson, aboard the flagship *Centurion*, the fleet set sail in September 1740.

As the convoy sailed southward, the sailors were beset by illness. (To shield ailing seamen from storms, the sick men were sent belowdecks; hence the term "under the weather.") When the captain of the *Wager* perished, Commodore Anson promoted David Cheap as its new leader. At first, the officers and sailors respected Captain Cheap, but soon they chafed under his harsh leadership.

The author is adept at describing the "wooden world of a ship" and the seamen who inhabited it. Onboard the *Wager* was sixteen-year-old John Byron, a midshipman from an aristocratic family. The young midshipman, a keen writer, kept a daily journal of the voyage. (Decades later, the poet Lord Byron—his grandson—would pen forlorn verses about the sea.) Gunner John Bulkeley, a true sailor and an instinctive leader, also wrote a detailed logbook.

Captain Cheap's first test as commander was to navigate the *Wager* around Cape Horn, "the watery graveyard at the end of the Earth." Pelted by huge waves, the squadron made the northwestern turn around the tip of South America. However, instead of following the fleet westward toward the wide Pacific Ocean, the *Wager* sailed too close to the Patagonian coast and crashed between jutting rocks. The shipwreck's 145 survivors were marooned on a desolate island, where "they built an outpost and tried to re-create naval order. But as their situation deteriorated, the *Wager's* officers and sailors descended into a Hobbesian state of depravity."

Against all odds, two factions of the castaways eventually made it back to England. Each group presented a contradictory account of what had happened to the *Wager* and its crew. In 1746, the Admiralty summoned a court martial. Mutiny, after all, was a hanging offense.

"The only impartial witness was the sun," David Grann notes in *The Wager's* Preface. "I've tried to present all sides, leaving it to you to render the ultimate verdict—history's judgment."