

THE INTERROGATION OF A DUTCH PRISONER BY THE CAPTAIN-GENERAL OF THE YUCATAN, IN THE YEAR 1681

David Marley

The following extract is a **verbatim** account taken from the interrogations of five foreign seamen captured by the Spaniards in the Laguna de Términos early in the year 1681. The original is to be found in the Mexican National Archives [Archivo General de la Nación] in the Ramo **Marina**, Volume 1, Pages 74-95. It is a rare and highly detailed record – a transcript, in fact – of the questions put to these interlopers by the Spanish viceregal officials more than three centuries ago, and the replies that they made. As such it gives us an intimate glimpse of the naval history of the Caribbean during the latter half of the Seventeenth Century.

One of the respondents was a Dutchman by the name of Willem Jan Ent, a young seaman caught in a difficult situation a long way from home. How he came to be in this particular place at this particular time is an interesting story, and gives us an understanding of the energetic maritime movement then flowing out of Northern Europe. The following brief account constitutes a microstudy of this phenomenon, a fractional representation of the whole. But since the record itself is so complete, why not let it speak for itself?

The day prior to the one described here had been given over to the questioning of an Irish prisoner from this same group, who had the identical queries put to him as Ent and all the rest of the captives would. This was done so as to facilitate the compilation of the information obtained from all of them, and to make it easier to spot discrepancies. These, then, are Willem Ent's replies:

"In the City of Mérida, on the 23rd of April, 1681. General don Antonio de Layseca y Alvarado, Knight of the Order of Santiago, His Catholic Majesty's Governor and Captain-General for the Province of Yucatan presiding.

The second of two prisoners remanded from the City of San Francisco de Campeche was brought before His Excellency, in order that this man's sworn deposition might be received. This would be accomplished through the interpretation of don Diego de Roo, and in the presence of myself, the undersigned clerk. As the prisoner identified himself as a member of the Protestant faith, I administered the oath as is the custom amongst them, by having the prisoner swear on a copy of the Holy Bible. This done, the following questions were put to him, and his replies recorded.

Q. – The prisoner was asked to give his name, birthplace and citizenship; and to state his

age, occupation and marital status.

He replied that his name is Willem Jan Ent, that he was born in Rotterdam in Holland, is 25 years of age, a seaman by trade, and unmarried.

Q. – He was asked who had brought him to the Laguna de Términos, in what vessel, its tonnage, armament and crew, and where it had sailed from?

He replied that he had come as a crewmember of a twelve-gun pink owned and commanded by an Englishman named John Hart, which had been manned by 24 men plus one black slave. He had signed on in Jamaica for a voyage to New England, but once at sea the vessel had made for the Laguna de Términos instead. When the crew realized this they had complained to the captain, who told them that he had no choice but to lay a course for said lagoon, as he had been unable to contract for a voyage out of Jamaica. The prisoner further adds that as the vessel had drawn near the Laguna many warlike preparations had been made aboard ship, such as breaking out the powder and shot and constructing a screen on the forecastle.

Q. – He was asked how it is that the captain could thus deceive the crew on their departure from Jamaica, as they – the crewmembers – must perforce have been aware of what had entered the holds and so realized that they were sailing without a cargo? Also, why else would they be bringing along three additional launches, if not to lay in Campeche wood at the Laguna de Términos?

He replied that some but not all of the crewmembers had known the captain's true intentions from the very outset, and that since he and the remaining men had never been in New England before, they were not to know whether all those launches were needed there or not. And that although they had complained on learning the truth they had not dared resist further, as the captain and the English seamen siding with him had control of the arms chest. Moreover, the captain had indicated that if they persisted in their complaints he would have them charged with mutinous behaviour on reaching port, for which they would be punished. As to the cargo, the prisoner says the pink did leave Jamaica with four butts of rum and others of wine and beer aboard, as well as a quantity of sugar.

Q. – He asked how long he has been in the West Indies, both at sea or on land in port; when he had left Holland, and who he had come out with?

He replied that some sixteen months previously he had sailed from London as part of the 40-man crew of a 22-gun English frigate, bound on a slaving voyage. They had travelled all down the Guinea coast, and at Arda and Santo Dahomey had taken on upwards of 500 slaves, which they had brought to Jamaica in the hopes of selling them there. However, their vessel did not have a license to engage in this trade and word of their voyage had preceded them, so that on approaching the island they were intercepted by the King's ship which does coast-guard duty there, boarded and taken into Port Royal, where the ship and its cargo were impounded. The blacks were eventually sold to a Spanish vessel which had come to Jamaica looking to buy slaves, the profits going to the King of England and the Royal African Company.

Q. - He was asked if the recent clearing of the Laguna de Términos by the Spaniards is known about in Jamaica?

He replied that while it is common knowledge that the Spanish have made certain captures, it is not known that the entire length and breadth of the Laguna has been cleared.

Q. - He was asked how much wood had already been taken aboard the pink when the Spaniards had surprised them and captured their launches, taking him and his fellows prisoners? Also whether they had found the Campeche wood already stacked or whether they had cut it themselves, and where they had found it?

He replied that when the pink fled it had been somewhat more than half full, and that they had found the wood already cut at several different places inland. But only in one spot had it been stacked, and they had seen no other wood than this.

Q. - He was asked who is presently Governor of Jamaica, and whether or not he permits English ships to sail for the Laguna de Términos?

He replied that the Governor's name is Henry Morgan, and that he does not allow any vessels to go to said Laguna. The prisoner further states that the pink in which he himself travelled to the Laguna had not actually anchored in Port Royal but rather had remained outside beyond the harbour castles, as it did not have a license to traffic in these waters.

Q. - He was asked if he knows how much Campeche wood there is in Jamaica, and what it sells for?

He replied that while in Jamaica he had seen very little of said wood, as most of it is sent right on up North. He had heard its price to be twenty pounds sterling per ton in Jamaica, but that in London a pound of the same wood sells

for four shillings. In Holland it sells for a little more.

Q. - He was asked what he has heard regarding the French Duc d'Estrées; whether he is operating some vessels out of Jamaica, or what his plans might be?

He replied that he has never heard of any such flotilla. He only knew, from conversations he had had with the Elector of Brandenburg's crewmen in Jamaica, that they had met up with six French warships of some 60 to 70 guns each; but as to whether or not they were part of said Duke's fleet, he could not say. Nor had he ever heard the Duke's name mentioned while in Jamaica.

Q. - He was asked to state what vessels - both merchantmen and warships - had been in Port Royal when he left there, along with their respective registries, tonnages, armaments and crews.

He replied that it seems to him there were some 18 to 20 vessels there at the time of his departure, as well as numerous other smaller craft. They were for the most part of English registry, plus one Spaniard and the six Brandenburgers. Of the latter, one was a fireship.

Q. - He was asked to give the tonnages of the Brandenburgian frigates, their armament and number of crews, as well as their intention in coming to these waters.

He replied that he believed the largest to be of 36 guns, and the rest of 28, 24, 18 and 16 pieces respectively. The combined crews total approximately 500 men. From these same men he had heard that the Elector of Brandenburg, while not officially at war with Spain, had nevertheless sent said ships to these waters on a privateering expedition to obtain restitution for the expenses he had incurred on behalf of Spain in the recent conflicts, and for which he has yet to be paid.

Q. - He was asked who made up the crews of said flotilla, who the individual ship captains were, as well as the registry and make of the vessels themselves?

He replied that the frigates are Dutch, as are the crewmembers and the ship commanders themselves, although he cannot give any of their names. He has seen the flotilla commander, who is a Flushingier. The troops comprise a mixture of nationalities: Brandenburgers, Danes, Poles and Russians, all from the Elector's guard, judging by their liveries.

Q. - He was asked if he knew of any prizes these ships may have made while at sea, or of any other hostilities they may have carried out against His Catholic Majesty's dominions?

He replied that in Jamaica he had heard it said that just outside the Port of Ostend they had

captured a Spanish merchantman bound for Cadiz with a cargo of clothing goods; but that to his own certain knowledge they had taken another three Spanish ships, which he had seen in Port Royal. The first of these, he had heard it said, was laden with a cargo of wines and rum and had been taken directly from under the gunfire of the fortress at Santa Marta. The second prize was a ship called **El Toro**, and the last a lugger carrying a cargo of salt. All of these captures had been made with the flotilla flying Dutch colours, so as to be all the more certain of taking them. The prisoner further states that while in Jamaica the Brandenburghers began work on converting **El Toro** into a privateer by arming it and putting troops aboard, but that they first removed some English seamen from among the flotilla's crews.

Q. – He was asked if he knew what the present intentions are of said frigates, and whither they will be sailing next?

He replied that while he cannot tell for certain, he does know that two of the frigates and the fireship were being careened when he left Port Royal, so that their departure must be imminent. It seems likely to him that the flotilla will split up and go on separate forays, and that while they spoke of the annual plate fleet from Spain, they do not have sufficient force to attack it, so that what they would do would be to search out a straggler and snap it up instead. This is all that he has heard on the matter.

Q. – He was asked if he knew what had become of the people Irrua he sent to Portobelo, and had then passed from there on to Panama?

He replied that he knew nothing and had not heard anything on this subject. That he had only heard that somewhere in the Gulf of Honduras – he does not know exactly where – a council of pirates was to be held, although he does not know what their intentions might be; and he had heard Captain Coxon and his deeds spoken of.

Q. – He was asked whether the Governor of Jamaica permits any pirates to enter into his ports?

He replied that no pirates are allowed there, and that a bare two weeks before he himself arrived in Jamaica four pirates who had entered the city by land were recognized, taken up and hanged. Also during his sojourn in Port Royal, he one day heard that the Governor had sent guards to apprehend some other pirates who were said to be off the coast, in the event that they should attempt to come ashore; and that in fact when they did try to land in a launch, two of the pirates were killed. For which reason the pirates now frequent other ports, as they are no longer safe in Jamaica.

Q. – He was asked if he knew of any vessels still remaining in Jamaica which might have the intention of coming to either the Laguna de Términos or the Gulf of Honduras; and if so, for what purpose?

He replied that at his departure a small pink had just left for Honduras, and that a small four-gun frigate was also about to weigh anchor. Furthermore, the very frigate on which he himself had sailed from England – and which had been taken by the King's ship – was also being made ready for sea, although he was not certain if for the Laguna or Honduras. It was intended to gather up a crew of some 70 men for her, and possibly have some medium-size craft assist her on this expedition.

Q. – He was asked what said vessels intend to do, be it in the Laguna de Términos or the Gulf of Honduras?

He replied that they can only be coming in search of wood; for the most part **brazilete** in Honduras, from what he had heard, although some Campeche wood as well. Despite the great risks, he said, they must perforce come from Jamaica in search of these woods as it is the principal source of trade for that island; if it were not for this trade, ships would stop going there and the rest of their commerce would suffer. He avers that the Governor gives his consent for them to come for wood, as it is to his benefit as well. This is implicitly acknowledged by the fact that it is against the law for anyone to transport this wood to England or anywhere else without the royal seal first being affixed in Jamaica, and if any is found aboard ship it is confiscated for the King's account. Therefore, if the pink on which he himself had come to the Laguna de Términos had not then sailed to Holland or some other point outside England, its cargo of wood would have been forfeited.

Q. – He was asked if he had heard of any vessels being in the Cayman Islands or near there, and whither they might have been bound?

He replied that between the largest two Cayman Islands they had met up with a shaloupe, whose people had said they were bound for the coast of Cuba; and before that, shortly after leaving Jamaica, they had encountered a lugger commanded by a Captain Spargh with a nine-man crew, which said it had been trading on the Cuban coast as well. Aside from these two sightings, they had spotted no other vessels during their crossing.

Q. – He was asked if he had heard speak of an intended assembly in Jamaican waters, or anywhere else?

He replied that he has heard of no other such meeting than that one planned for the Gulf of Honduras, which he alluded to before, and that no one had known why this council was being held, nor where the pirates intended to go afterwards.

Under cross-examination the prisoner affirmed that he had told all that he knew, and gave his oath that he had spoken the truth. The above was then confirmed, ratified and signed by those present with the exception of the prisoner, as he said he did not know how to read or

write.”

Following their interrogations, Ent and O’Gilligan were to be returned to Campeche and reincarcerated there with the rest of their fellow captives, and we hear no more of them. Unfortunately for us, the Spanish authorities were of course more concerned with the larger issues such as the safety of the plate fleet, the attitude of the pirate-turned-Governor of Jamaica and the threat of raids on their coasts, so that the records give us no inkling as to the eventual fate of these prisoners.

According to Spanish Crown policy, all pirate leaders and their lieutenants were to be tried and sentenced by the local authorities where they were apprehended. However, in the case of these log cutters, it is unlikely that they were thus treated. In all likelihood, they were remanded to Veracruz and from there to Mexico City to be dealt with by the Viceroy. Oftentimes such prisoners were hired out as virtual slave labour, although exchanges of prisoners were not unknown either. Naturally, in the case of Ent – being as he was a Protestant – there is a good possibility that he was brought before the Inquisition as well.

It is to be hoped that Willem Jan Ent will reappear in some other document at the Mexican National Archives; we would like to know more as to the eventual fate of this young seaman, and his difficulties in a strange land. It is unlikely, though, that we will ever know the complete story ... and quite possibly it might be better if we never do.