



**NEW ANTECEDENTS ON THE DISCOVERY OF THE SOUTH SHETLAND ISLANDS: THE JOURNAL OF MIDSHIPMAN CHARLES W. POYNTER, 1819-1820**

NUEVOS ANTECEDENTES SOBRE EL DESCUBRIMIENTO DE LAS ISLAS SHETLAND DEL SUR: LA BITÁCORA DEL GUARDIAMARINO CHARLES W. POYNTER, 1819-1820

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1819, on a voyage between Buenos Aires and Valparaiso, the British captain William Smith, sailing far to the south of Cape Horn with the intention of finding better winds, saw land at 62°S. Although his first report of this discovery was not believed, on a subsequent one Smith managed to confirm his discovery. As a result of this, the senior British naval officer in Valparaiso hired Smith and his ship, the *Williams*, to carry out a reconnaissance of the islands, today known as the South Shetlands. The analysis of the recently discovered journal of Charles Poynter, one of the midshipmen who accompanied Smith, together with the pre-existing documentation, allows us to both confirm certain facts and opinions, and to refute other asseverations published in later documents, thus amplifying our knowledge about the British contribution to the discovery of the areas related to the Antarctic at the beginning of the XIX Century.

**KEY WORDS:** South Shetland Islands – Antarctic – Charles W. Poynter – Captain William Smith

**RESUMEN:** En 1819, en una travesía entre Buenos Aires y Valparaíso, el capitán británico William Smith navegó más al sur del Cabo de Hornos tratando de encontrar mejores vientos y avistó tierra a los 62° S. Aunque su primer Informe fue rechazado, en un viaje posterior Smith logró confirmar su descubrimiento. Como resultado, el oficial naval británico apostado en Valparaíso contrató a Smith y a su barco, el *Williams*, para efectuar una expedición de reconocimiento a las islas, hoy conocidas como Shetland del Sur. El análisis comparativo de la bitácora recién descubierta de Charles Poynter, un guardiamarina que acompañó a Smith en ese viaje, con la documentación conocida hasta la fecha, permite tanto comprobar ciertos hechos y opiniones considerados válidos hasta ahora como también refutar aseveraciones inexactas publicadas en textos documentales posteriores, así ampliando el conocimiento acerca de la contribución británica al descubrimiento geográfico de áreas relacionadas con la Antártica a inicios del siglo XIX.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Islas Shetland del Sur – Antártica – Charles W. Poynter – Capitán William Smith

The South Shetland Islands are located to the south of the Drake Passage, around 450 nautical miles south south west of Cape Horn or 600 nautical miles to the south of the Falkland Islands, on the

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northern side of the Antarctic Peninsula, from which they are separated by the Bransfield Strait. They were discovered in 1819 by William Smith who was in command of the brig *Williams*. When news of this discovery appeared in United States newspapers, a number of Boston and New York papers said that in fact that they had really been discovered by North American sealers. Nevertheless, the exhaustive investigation of the historian Thomas Stevens<sup>1</sup>, published by the Department of State, not only was unable to substantiate this claim, but rather demonstrated that none of the North American ships that hunted seals in Antarctic waters, between the years 1812 and 1819, returned with a cargo of seal skins of a size that would have indicated a visit to the Shetlands. In fact within three years of Smith's discovery being made known so extensive was the hunt that there were no longer any fur seals to be found in the islands.

The first sighting of the islands of which we have knowledge is that of the Spanish 74 gun warship *San Telmo*, under the command of Captain Don Joaquín Toledo, with 644 men on board, that formed part of the squadron sent by King Ferdinand VII to reinforce the forces of the Viceroy of Peru, in 1819. Smith's fourth expedition encountered the remains of the *San Telmo* in Sherriff Cove on Livingston Island. According to what Robert Fildes, who was master of the brig *Cora*, recorded in his description of Shirreff's Cove: "If you walk over the land you will find a fine sandy beach or bay  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile in length in form of a crescent and called the half-moon beach, here was found the half of an anchor stock of a 74 iron hooped and copper bolted, stud-sail booms and other spars were found here likewise, the melancholy remnants of some poor fellows misfortune... This anchor stock Captain Smith brought home to have a coffin made of, it has been identified and found to have belonged to a Spanish 74 that was bound round Cape Horn with 1400 men against the Patriots and has never more been heard of"<sup>2</sup>. Although some members of the *San Telmo*'s crew were undoubtedly the first Europeans to have sighted the South Shetland Islands, the fact that none of them survived to inform the competent authorities of their discovery, eliminates their right to claim the first discovery.

William Smith (1790-1847) began his maritime career hunting whales near Greenland. Afterwards he traded between London and Buenos Aires in command of the brig *Williams*, which was built in Blyth in 1811-12 for a partnership of four investors, one of whom was Smith, and it was called that because the other three partners were called Williams. When Smith returned to England in 1821, after his voyages to the South Shetlands, during which he had loaded a full cargo of 30.000 sealskins, he found that due to the bad business decisions of his partners, he had gone bankrupt together with them. Their creditors seized the *Williams* and its cargo. As a result of this, Smith presented in December 1821 a "Memorial" to the Admiralty in which he requested a monetary reward for his discovery.<sup>3</sup> He never received anything and he finally gave up the attempt in 1838. He managed to emerge from bankruptcy in June 1822 and began to work as a pilot for Trinity House<sup>4</sup> on the Thames River. Between 1830 and 1834 he commanded at least two whaling voyages to the Davis Strait. He finally retired from Trinity House in 1839 and from 1840 onwards he lived in one of the homes for the retired that this organization maintained until his death in 1847.<sup>5</sup>

On January 16, 1819, William Smith sailed from Buenos Aires with a varied cargo destined for the firm of McNeill, Dixon & Co of Valparaiso. In order to find favourable winds, Smith decided to navigate far to the south of South America. As a result, on February 19 he sighted land in latitude 62°15'S and according to his chronometer longitude 69°01'W. When he reached Valparaiso, on March 11, he informed Captain Shirreff of *HMS Andromache*, the highest ranking British naval officer

then on the station, who did not believe him as he considered that Smith had in reality probably just sighted ice. Smith left Valparaiso on May 16 for Montevideo and, as he then encountered ice and bad weather in the area of his discovery, he was unable to see anything. On his return from Montevideo, where he had also not been believed, he sighted land on October 15 in the same place as before, and he now navigated towards the west following the coast to the end. Then, when he finally found an appropriate landing place on October 17, he sent a boat to land and took possession of it in name of His Majesty George III, calling it New South Britain. Afterwards he navigated to the southeast following the line of the coast for around an additional 150 miles, when “having a Merchants Cargo on board, and perhaps deviating from the insurance”<sup>6</sup> he decided to head for Valparaiso. The next day he was surprised when he saw more land, but due to this he became convinced that this land extended for at least 250 miles. When he reached Valparaiso, on November 29, and once more informed the British naval authorities of his discovery, their reaction was now very different from before.

Captain Shirreff was absent in Santiago engaged in diplomatic conversations with the Chilean government when William Smith arrived in Valparaiso with the confirmation of his discovery. The British merchants in the port immediately began preparations to send a ship to the islands, enthused about Smith’s reports of the abundant seal population there present. However, as soon as Shirreff received notification, he chartered the *Williams*, retaining the services of Smith, who was to act under the orders of the master of the *Andromache*, Edward Bransfield. As well as Bransfield, three midshipmen from the *Andromache* were assigned to the expedition, Charles Wittit Poynter, masters mate, Thomas Mein Bone and Patrick John Blake, as well as the assistant surgeon from *HMS Slaney*, Dr. Adam G. Young.<sup>7</sup>

After embarking additional supplies and live animals, the brig sailed on December 19, 1819, under orders from Shirreff that gave priority to the taking of possession and to charting the coast and the possible ports: “In case of your meeting with any foreign Vessel upon the coast, which may be about to make settlements there, you will inform the Captains or Masters that the Country has already been taken possession of, but more strongly to insure the Right to Great Britain, you will yourself on each separate quarter of the land, take possession of it in the Name and behalf of His Majesty King George the Third his heirs and successors, planting a board with an Union Jack painted on it, and words written under to the above purpose... Altho’ I have thought it necessary to point out in these instructions, many things which may be of great utility to Natural History, you will remember that the great and leading object of which you are to attend to, and which is on no account to be delayed for the other objects of minor importance, is the Survey of the Coast and Harbours”<sup>8</sup>.

Initially they faced light and changeable winds and the current took them to the north of Valparaiso. It was not until December 30 that they managed to actually get to the south of Valparaiso, and they only reached the South Shetlands on January 16, 1820. They sailed through the islands until they finally found an adequate port where they could land so that Bransfield was able to finally take possession of the islands with all the due ceremony that his orders demanded, naming it New South Britain. According to the Journal of Midshipman Poynter who had remained on board: “As soon as everything was secured we tossed out the Whale and long boats, the former of which was armed. After breakfast Mr. Bransfield proceeded in her to effect a landing where he might plant the British Union, taking possession of this Land in the Name and on behalf of HM George the 3<sup>rd</sup>, his Heirs and

Successors and Naming it 'New South Britain' –At 1/2 past 8 we observed the Boat land on a shingle beach bearing NNW of us and perceiving soon after with the aid of our Glasses the Jack planted- we hoisted on board the Ensign and Pendant, Fired a Gun and concluded the Ceremony by serving to each Man a Glass of Grog to drink His Majesty's Health–Besides planting the 'proud old British Union' he had but a few yards from it buried a Bottle containing several Coins of the Realm given him by the Officers of the *Andromache* and several of the English residents in Valparaiso for that purpose"<sup>9</sup>.

On January 29, they were the first men to sight the Antarctic Continent: "They continued southward to get away from the land and in the afternoon were amazed, during a clear spell, to find themselves 'half encompassed with islands' with a 'high rude range running in a NE and SW direction' beyond"<sup>10</sup>. They continued their explorations until March 19, when due to the increasing presence of ice in the ocean they considered the season ended and decided to navigate towards the north. In addition to mapping the islands they also carried out extensive observations of the fauna during their frequent landings. Poynter wrote in his Journal: "For this purpose I landed on the Island [Penguin Island], abreast of us, deeming it the most convenient for getting on board a supply [of water] should it produce a sufficiency –It would appear incredible was I even to give a rough calculation of the Multitude of Penguins I met on landing, however within bounds I might be induced to curb my opinion; suffice it to add our progress was completely arrested by these Gentlemen who with the most determined obstinacy disputed our right to proceed and it was not until great slaughter had been committed and an opening forced through them with Lances, Seal clubs etc. we were enabled to further our research- It is well known that every Animal however timid at other times will with the most determined courage defend its young and this being the breeding Season here may account for the decided opposition we met with....On each little ridge Albatrosses had formed their nests, composed of nothing more than small stones regularly and neatly placed on which their Eggs were deposited –So unaccustomed were they to the sight of Man that we were eyed, with great indifference and to obtain an Egg or Young one were obliged to force them away with sticks which they bit with the most savage determination- They consisted of Four different Species the White, Spotted, Brown and common Grey: the whole of them whenever approach vomit their food cased in an oily substance at their intruder –Besides there was a large bird of a dusky brown [colour] with a few white feathers on the upper part of the wing; web-footed with a sharp and pointed beak- these construct a comfortable nest of Moss & situated among the Albatross –They seem particularly savage and with loud screeches pounce down and frequently strike with the wing- a Dog we had was completely covered with blood by being attacked in this manner"<sup>11</sup>.

Not only Captain Smith, but also the naval officers were conscious of the economic possibilities of their discovery. While Smith took the opportunity to load his ship with sealskins, the naval officers commented in their reports on how important these new "fisheries" would be for Great Britain. Poynter stated in his Journal: "That New South Britain may add another Fishery to the Crown of Great Britain remains only to be proved by arrival of a few ships on her shores whose expedition in filling will at once decide how profitable a harvest may be reaped –and this will be found to consist of Whale oil, Sea Elephant oil and Seal skins"<sup>12</sup>. In the account that Dr. A Young published in the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* of April 1821, he stated: "The discovery of this land must be of great interest in a geographical point of view, and its importance to the commercial interests of our country; must be evident from the very great numbers of whales with which were daily surrounded; and the

multitudes of the finest fur-seals and sea-lions which we met both at sea and on every point of the coast, or adjacent rocky islands, on which we were able to land. The fur of the former is the finest and the longest I have ever seen; and from their now having become scarce in every other part of these seas, and the great demand for them both in Europe and India, they will, I have no doubt, become, as soon as discovery is made public, a favourable speculation amongst our merchants. The oil procured from the sea-lion is, I am told, nearly equal in value to that of the spermaceti whale. And the great number of whales we saw everywhere near the land, must also be an important thing to our merchants, as they have lately been said to be very scarce to the northward”<sup>13</sup>.

On their return voyage, they visited Cumberland Bay in the Juan Fernandez Archipelago before they arrived at Valparaiso on April 14, where they delivered all of the charts and journals that had been prepared during the voyage to Captain Searle of *HMS Hyperion* who was at that time the most senior British officer on the station, given that Captain Shirreff in the *Andromache* had departed for Callao shortly before the departure of the *Williams*. As well as requiring the delivery of all the documentation regarding the voyage, Captain Searle also prohibited any contact with the shore. “Soon after 8 we Bore up NNW and shewed our Colours to the Signal Station –Just after Noon we rounded the Point of Angels when we perceived HMS Hyperion lying in the Bay- On Mr. Bransfield’s waiting on Captain Searle all our Logs, Charts and every document relating to the Voyage were ordered as customary to be immediately delivered in and at the same time strictly forbidding any particular point of the result to be spoken of”<sup>14</sup>. These were standard procedures for all voyages of discovery carried out by British naval vessels since at least the beginning of the seventeenth century, but the decision to prohibit contact with the shore indicated that it was felt that important discoveries had been made that would prove of great economic and political importance. “The Brig *Williams* had returned to Valparaiso from a survey of the land said to have been discovered to the south of Cape Horn, but Capt. Searle of the *Hyperion*, had prevented all intercourse with the shore which led to the opinion that some discovery of great importance had been made”<sup>15</sup>.

In 1822, the Admiralty published a chart with the results of the expedition, titled *New or South Shetland, seen in 1819 by Will<sup>m</sup> Smith, Master of the Brig WILLIAMS, Surveyed by E. Bransfield Master R. N. in 1820*. Until recently there was no knowledge of the existence of any of the original documentation of the voyage or of the three initial voyages made by Smith. Apparently neither the logbook of the *Williams* or the journals of the officers on board had survived. What did exist, concerning the fourth voyage, in addition to the reports and documents in the Admiralty archives, were two accounts that were published, and then republished many times, based on original material belonging to the participants. These were:

- a) *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal*, April 21, 1821, a short account written by Dr. Young.
- b) *Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*, in three parts published the 3, 10 and 24 of November of 1821, based on a combination of the journals of the midshipmen Poynter and Bone.<sup>16</sup>

However, recently Charles W. Poynter’s original manuscript of his journal was discovered in the Alexander Turnbull Collection of the National Library of New Zealand. Given how legible the writing is it appears to be a revised copy produced on board the *Williams* during the voyage or after

their return to Valparaiso. The Journal consists in 73 pages of text; a drawing entitled “Killing Sea Elephants”, probably drawn by Thomas Mein Bone; a small scale chart of the region titled “New South Britain, measured by officers of the *Andromache* in the chartered brig *Williams*”, two plans, one of George Bay, now King George Bay, and the other the bay to the south of Cape Shirreff, a page with three views, the first, titled “Trinidad Land and Islands”, the second “Hope Island” showing the Trinidad Peninsula in the background, and the third “O’Brien Islands”, drawings of the “Seal Islands and rocks to the west”, and finally a page without a title showing views of two groups of islands.<sup>17</sup>

Charles Wittit Poynter, the penultimate of seven children of James Methurst Poynter, a naval officer in the service of the British East India Company and Elizabeth, the youngest daughter of James Peck, surgeon, was baptized March 22, 1798. He entered the Royal Navy as a first class volunteer August 28, 1811 on board *HMS Inconstant*, Captain E. W. C. R. Owen, a friend of the family, and later he transferred to *HMS Cornwall*, March 3, 1813, navigating in the North Sea and in front of the Ditch coast. In 1814, he became a midshipman, and on November 5, 1817 he passed the examination for lieutenant. On the twentieth of the same month he joined the *Andromache* and left with it for the South American station, where he was transferred to the *Williams* as the second in command for the expedition to the South Shetland Islands. After the end of this expedition, he continued to serve in a number of different vessels in South American waters as masters mate, master, interim lieutenant and finally in 1823 as a full lieutenant, only to finally to return to England in 1824. In December 1825, he asked for leave to live in Hornfleur in France with Harriette Sophia Desmond until 1830, when he entered the Coast Guard service, where he remained until he retired in 1860 as a Commander. He married Louisa, daughter of John Illenden, Esq. at Dover, on August 8, 1835. He died at Plymouth on August 11, 1885, leaving behind him a numerous family consisting in at least sixteen children.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of Poynter’s journal is that in addition to intimate details of the expedition that are not mentioned in the official reports, it also gave the reasons that existed to give names to the places on land, some of which were not included in the accounts published at the time. Additionally, the journal included a large number geographical positions that made it possible for the first time to accurately establish a chart of the route followed by the *Williams*, as this information was also missing from the documents and accounts previously available. This makes it possible to evaluate the accuracy of the navigation during this short but important voyage.

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<sup>1</sup> T. A. Stevens. *The First American Sealers in the Antarctica 1812-1819 and the First Voyage of the Brig Hersilia of Stonington, Conn., 1819-1920* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of State, 1954), 10-14 y 17-29.

<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office, Admiralty 55/143.

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<sup>3</sup> R. J. Campbell. *The Discovery of the South Shetland Islands 1819-1820* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2000), 63-6.

<sup>4</sup> Trinity House was founded by Henry VIII in 1517. At the present time the Corporation is responsible for the construction and maintenance of lighthouses, lightships and buoys and other navigation aids within English coastal waters and also issues licenses to pilots. (Author's note)

<sup>5</sup> Campbell (2000), 4-6.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell (2000), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Public Record Office, ADM 51/2131, 37/6074, 37/6471.

<sup>8</sup> Public Record Office, ADM 1/2548

<sup>9</sup> Campbell (2000), 112-113.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell (2000), 73 and note 1.

<sup>11</sup> Poynter Journal in Campbell (2000), 113-24.

<sup>12</sup> Poynter Journal in Campbell (2000), 160.

<sup>13</sup> A. Young. *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* (April 1821), 345-8 in Campbell (2000), 80-1.

<sup>14</sup> Poynter Journal in Campbell (2000), 166-168

<sup>15</sup> *The Times* (10 August 1820) in Campbell (2000), 207.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell (2000), 79-90.

<sup>17</sup> Poynter Journal in Campbell (2000), 91-168.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell (2000), 8-12.

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