

# **William Dampier**

## **Life of a Buccaneer (Pirate)**

When a young man, William Dampier lived a life of lawless daring, constantly fighting and stealing, meeting with the wildest adventures; often captured by the American natives and still more often by the Spaniards, but always escaping to enter upon exploits of fresh danger.

In 1688 Dampier joined a company of buccaneers (pirates), who proposed to make a voyage around the world and steal on their way. It took them more than a year to reach the East Indies, where they spent a long time, sometimes attacking Spanish ships or Dutch fortresses. But eventually the time came when it was necessary to seek a quiet spot where they would be able to clean and repair the bottoms of their ships. So they landed on the north-west coast of Australia. They lived there for twelve days at the place now called "Buccaneers' Archipelago". They were the first known Europeans who held any communications with the natives of Australia and the first to publish a detailed account of their voyage.

## **Change of Direction**

Growing tired of the lawless life (and having become wealthy), Dampier bought an estate in England, where he lived some years in retirement, till the love of adventure led him out on the seas again. This time he was determined that his trip should be more honest; and his thoughts reverting to the great unexplored land (Australia), he asked permission from the English Government to go on a voyage of discovery.

## **First Impressions of Australia**

In 1699 a small vessel, the Roebuck, was given to him and with this he explored the west coast of Australia, from Shark Bay to Dampier's Archipelago : then along the north-west coast as far as Roebuck Bay; of which he published a full and fairly accurate account. He was a man of keen observation and delighted in describing the habits and manners of the natives, as well as the peculiarities of the plant and animal life, of where ever he visited. During the time he was in Australia he frequently met with the Aborigines and became well acquainted with them. He gives this description of their appearances –

The inhabitants are the most miserable wretches in the universe, having no houses, nor garments. They feed upon a few fish, cockles, mussels and periwinkles. They are without religion and without government. In figure they are tall, straight-bodied, thin with small long limbs.

The country itself, he says, is low and sandy with no fresh water and scarcely any animals, except one which looks like a racoon and jumps about on its long hind legs. He says of his adventure, that the only pleasure he had in his voyage was the satisfaction of having discovered the most barren spot on the face of the earth.

This account is, in most respects, correct, so far as regards to the portion of Australia visited by Dampier. But, unfortunately, he saw only the most inhospitable part of the whole continent. There are many parts whose beauty would have enchanted him, but he sailed along nearly a thousand kilometres of coast, without seeing any part that was not miserable, barren, it is no wonder that he reported the whole land to be worthless.

He was subsequently engaged in other voyages of discovery, but, amid all his subsequent adventures, he never again entertained the idea of returning to Australia.

### **Dampier as Author**

Dampier published a most interesting account of all of his travels in different parts of the world and his book was for a long time exceedingly popular. Defoe used some of the materials it contained for his celebrated novel, "*Robinson Crusoe*". The work also became the standard book of travels. But it turned away the tide of discovery from Australia; for those who read of the beautiful islands and rich countries he had visited, no one dreamed of incurring the labour and expense of a voyage to so dull and barren a spot as Australia. Thus we hear of no further explorations in this part of the world for nearly a century, and even then, no one thought of sending ships especially for the purpose.