
THE DEADLY DON

by

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It is a long run - some 5,000 miles - from Valparaiso to Papeete. In the late spring of 1841 the American bark Don Quixote, 260 tons burthen, plowed its way along this path. Captain John Paty was bound for Honolulu via Tahiti, on the home passage of a round trip to Chile.¹ A few days out of Valparaiso it came - the sudden high fever and nausea, the blinding headache and the back pains, the dreaded rash, and finally, on the ninth day, the pustules that can turn a man into a mass of putrefaction.² Eight Hawaiians made up half of the Don's crew. Six of them caught the pestilence; before Tahiti was raised they were dead.³ Two lucky Hawaiians, already immunized, escaped the fatal virus.⁴

On June 12 the Don Quixote made port. Paty warned off the pilot, who reported the sickness on board. Governor Paraita of Tahiti conferred with his advisers among the foreign residents. All agreed the vessel should stand off.⁵ What happened next is in dispute. Paty, reporting twelve years after the event, said that the Don Quixote lay under quarantine for fifteen days, that she stayed

only three days after quarantine was lifted, that she employed a few Tahitians on board while in Papeete, and that about three days after she left, one of the employed men fell ill.⁶

Samuel R. Blackler was the U. S. consul at the Society Islands. At the time he was locked in bitter controversy with the Tahitian authorities.⁷ The Tahitians, trying to oust Blackler, told this story: When the sickness became known, Paraita urged that the Don Quixote stop at Matavai, a few miles east of Papeete. Within less than a week Blackler declared the bark safe and demanded she be brought to Papeete, to discharge and copper. Paraita refused, but the Don entered port. The consul then insisted that cargo be landed. Again Paraita refused. On June 17 Blackler handed the governor a paper threatening a penalty of \$40,511. Paraita, though still withholding consent, relaxed vigilance. On June 19 those aboard the vessel came ashore near Blackler's house and discharged and sold goods. Soon after the bark sailed a white man died of the pestilence, and two Tahitians soon shared his fate. By August the disease was devouring the island. Blackler, knowing the horror carried in the Don Quixote, was a deliberate killer.⁸

Paraita's letter charged many other sins to Blackler's account. The consul attacked it as an "accumulation of falsehoods", without making direct reference to the epidemic.⁹

Just how long was the quarantine? The evidence is inconclusive. Blackler did issue the Don Quixote a bill of health, but as usual did not record the date of the fee.¹⁰ Was the consul guilty of mass murder? We know only that he survived the accusation.¹¹ This fact, however, is certain: In June of 1841 Honolulu's deadly Don brought smallpox to Tahiti.

NOTES

1. Polynesian, August 6, 1853.

2. Ibid.; Kurt Wiener, Skin Manifestations of Internal Disorders (St. Louis: The C. V. Mosby Company, 1947), pp. 114-116.

3. Paty in his 1853 report to the Polynesian said he believed one recovered, but the consular return lists only two foreign crewmen (Despatch, S. R. Blackler, U. S. Consul, to John Forsyth, U. S. Secretary of State, July 3, 1841, enclosing "Consular Return of Vessels Arriving and Departing Tahiti from January 1 to June 30, 1841," Despatches from U. S. Consuls in Tahiti, 1836-1906, Vol. 2 (July 2, 1841-December 31, 1850), National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration (Washington, D. C.: 1954), microfilm. Cited hereafter as Despatches, with appropriate volume.

4. Polynesian, August 6, 1853.

5. Paraita to the President of America, August 18, 1841. Despatches, Vol. 2. Governor Paraita acted as regent during the absence of Queen Pomare IV, who was visiting the island of Eimeo.

6. Polynesian, August 6, 1853.

7. Long-standing friction existed. In January, 1841, the Tahitians requested Blackler's recall, charging flagrant disregard of the laws of the land (Buareia to the President of America, January

20, 1841. Despatches, Vol. 1). Blackler countered with a long recital of outrages, enclosing numerous depositions (S. R. Blackler to French Forrest, Commanding the U. S. Corvette St. Louis, March 1, 1841. Despatches, Vol. 1). Then, on May 31, Tahitian soldiers attacked Blackler at his consulate as he tried to free two sailors from arrest and give them asylum (Blackler to U. S. Secretary of State, No. 32, June 5, 1841, and enclosed depositions. Despatches, Vol. 1). This question of the consul's right to remove Americans from Tahitian jurisdiction was a chronic hot issue.

8. This account is compiled from two letters: Paraita to the President of America, already cited, and Paraita to the Captain of the American Ship of War, undated (Despatches, Vol. 2). The captain addressed was J. H. Aulick, commanding the U. S. S. Yorktown. He was in Papeete during July and August, 1841.

9. Blackler to Daniel Webster, U. S. Secretary of State, No. 47, September 26, 1842 (Despatches, Vol. 2). Blackler said the letter to Aulick was the work of J. A. Moerenhout, former U. S. and current French consul at Tahiti, who prepared it for Paraita's signature. An affidavit supported this statement (Samuel Wilson, July 30, 1841. Despatches, Vol. 2).

10. S. R. Blackler, "Consular Statement of Fees Received at the Island of Tahiti from January 1 to June 30, 1841," enclosed in despatch of July 3, 1841. (Despatches, Vol. 2).

11. Blackler died at his post in September, 1844 (George R. Chapman, Acting U. S. Consul, to U. S. Secretary of State, September 15, 1844 (Despatches, Vol. 2). Paty, who was a business partner of his brother in Honolulu in the 1840's, became one of the islands' best-known foreign residents, and a highly-respected one. In his account of the smallpox he said that by the time the Don Quixote, reached Honolulu it was clean, and that the ship never transmitted another case of the disease (Polynesian, August 6, 1853).