



Introduction

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In September 1769, William Falconer (1732–70), then a purser with the Royal Navy, boarded the *Aurora* accompanied by a group of East India Company commissioners. The *Aurora* arrived at Cape Town in December and was sighted at Madagascar in early 1770.¹ Yet the ship never reached India, presumably going down with all hands north of Madagascar. Thus, Falconer, who had survived one shipwreck in 1749 and made his literary career with a poem inspired by that shipwreck, died by shipwreck too. At his death, Falconer was the most famous sailor poet and naval lexicographer of the era. The son of an Edinburgh wigmaker, Falconer went to sea at fourteen, and served at various ranks on both merchant and Royal Naval vessels (Jones, 1–2). As his logbook from 1760–61 shows, he often wrote poetry at sea, his poems drafted alongside hourly reports of bearings and weather. Falconer's major work, *The Shipwreck* (1762, expanded in 1764 and 1769), dedicated to his patron, Edward Augustus, the Duke of York (1739–67), sold well in the 1760s and was translated, anthologized, and lavishly illustrated through the end of the nineteenth century. Robert Burns and Lord Byron praised *The Shipwreck*, and it served as an inspiration for

Eighteenth-Century Life

Volume 47, Number 2, April 2023 DOI 10.1215/00982601-10394844

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later sailor poets. Falconer's other major work, *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1769), was no less influential, and, as Falconer's modern editor William Jones declares, the *Dictionary* "remained the standard nautical dictionary until the end of the days of sail."²

This special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* brings together nine pieces to mark the recent 250th anniversary of Falconer's death and to reassess his legacy as a laboring-class poet who had firsthand experience of the sea and of sailing ships. Falconer has never been a household name, even in the households of literature professors, and books and special journal issues focusing entirely on single authors unfamiliar even to most specialists are increasingly rare. What can this overlooked sailor poet reveal about wider trends in postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to the eighteenth century? What can his writings tell us about questions of empire, of class, and of temporality, concerns that scholars across disciplines grapple with today? Quite a lot, in fact, as the essays collected here will demonstrate. Since Jones's critical edition of the *Poetical Works of William Falconer* appeared in 2003, studies by Siobhan Carroll, Margaret Cohen, Janet Sorensen, and Bridget Keegan have deepened our knowledge of Falconer's poetry immensely.³ Yet this is still too modest a body of scholarship for a poet so often published, and, as these essays will show, so influential.⁴ Falconer has been neglected, to be sure, but we want to stress that this issue is not chiefly an exercise in historical recovery. New research in the fields of oceanic studies, laboring-class studies, and the Black Atlantic continues to redefine how we think about the role of eighteenth-century transatlantic exchange in forming modern concepts of nation and identity. The authors in this issue share the conviction that Falconer makes a unique contribution to conversations about the origins and impact of the global economy and helps us theorize how the unique but perilous mobility afforded by the sea reshaped notions of the self.

As several of the essays in this issue demonstrate, Falconer's life and writings offer a valuable resource for scholars working in the emerging, interdisciplinary fields of oceanic studies and blue humanities. In her 2010 field-defining article, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," Hester Blum calls on scholars to move beyond the sea as a symbol and metaphor and consider "the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world."⁵ Many scholars, including Kevin Dawson, Sidney Diobrin, and Steve Mentz, have heeded Blum's call in recent years, approaching the sea as a natural force uniquely shaping minds and bodies, while spawning its own practices,

languages, and technologies.⁶ Few writers would better reward such an approach to the sea than Falconer, whose writings not only recount the mechanics of sailing and the rhythms of sea life and labor, but also use the sailing vocabulary formed from encounters with an unforgiving maritime environment. If oceanic studies and blue humanities aim, above all, to challenge a land-based view of the ocean as an inert backdrop for human drama, travel, and cultural exchange, Falconer's writings remind us of the ocean as a material entity, constantly moving and changing. Those seeking insights into the ocean's agency and impact on humans could do worse than turn to Falconer, who wrote in intervals off-watch or when waiting for wind, and whose poems and *Dictionary* show the epistemologies and technologies—sails, logs, maps—that humans used to understand and traverse the ocean.

Scholars of laboring-class lives and literatures will also take great interest in Falconer's writings and in this special issue. While a sailing career promised more social mobility than the other professions described in eighteenth-century laboring-class poetry—threshing, bricklaying, shoemaking—Falconer's attention to the complex processes of rigging the ship, as well as the exhaustion and suffering of common sailors, places him squarely in the tradition of laboring-class writing. However, his career is more similar to that of bookseller Robert Dodsley (1703–64) than of field laborer Stephen Duck (1705–56). By the end of his life, having risen in the ranks both literally and economically, Falconer had achieved the aspiration of many a writer from a humble background: his success, both as a writer and a seaman, had allowed him to transcend the limits of his birth. Just as Dodsley successfully sought patrons and supporters (including Alexander Pope) who helped him be remembered primarily as the most significant publisher of poetry of midcentury (and not as the “footman poet”), so too did Falconer skillfully engage patrons who also assisted him, in particular through finding him positions that gave him greater freedom for intellectual instead of manual labor. Yet Falconer never forgot his own roots, as both his poems and *Dictionary* raise awareness about the dreadful conditions of shipboard labor.

We must not forget that Falconer's opportunities to gain greater control over his time and work resulted directly from his participation in a system of trade largely driven by the violent and forcible loss of agency and life of enslaved Africans.⁷ We have no evidence that Falconer ever participated directly in slave-trading, and, one might add, many sailors, if they

had any degree of skill, would have avoided serving on slavers due to their notoriously horrific conditions. What is particularly intriguing is that he never comments anywhere on the slave trade, even though he surely knew sailors in the trade, and sailed on ships financed through slavery that carried slave-made goods. The *Shipwreck* laments the Ottoman “enslavement” of Greece, but this hardly means he rejected African slavery, and his East India Company involvement suggests no strong objections to colonialism.⁸ While it may be argued that it was the Somerset case, in 1772, two years after Falconer’s death, that sparked widespread discussion of abolition and, ultimately, the end of the slave trade, it is nonetheless remarkable that a poet as observant of the details of all aspects of maritime life should pass over without comment such a major part of life at many of the ports Falconer called at. As Bridget Keegan’s essay details, sailor poets such as Edward Rushton and James Field Stanfield, less than twenty years later, wrote extensively about the trade, focusing not only on the suffering of those enslaved but also drawing attention to how the trade exploited and dehumanized the sailors themselves. If we consider Falconer’s commitment to the dignity and importance of sailors, his failure to mention the trade that exploited and destroyed seamen and their captives alike remains puzzling. Falconer may ignore the horrors of the slave trade in his surviving works, but let us not forget that the trade made his own writings possible. The implications of Falconer’s silence about slavery will continue to unsettle scholars.



The essays that follow are ordered according to shared concerns, and readers are encouraged to see this special issue as a coherent whole, the later essays building on the earlier ones. The first essay, “William Falconer: Sailor, Poet, Lexicographer,” by William Jones, provides an intellectual biography of the poet. Using internal evidence from Falconer’s writing, Jones identifies his literary and scientific influences. Although the roster of his poetic precursors reveals few surprises (Milton, Thomson, and Pope’s translations are among the most noteworthy), what is remarkable is the sheer depth and range of his self-education, gained, moreover, in a brief time and doubtless under difficult circumstances. Jones traces Falconer’s efforts at authorial self-fashioning, as sailor, poet, and scholar, and the tensions among those identities, evident from his earliest publications to the

culminating work of the *Universal Dictionary of the Marine*. These tensions are poignantly exemplified in Falconer's surviving manuscript logbook, which offers insight into how he navigated his dual occupations as writer and seaman. Unlike many writers from humble origins, who are often prevented from achieving financial and intellectual independence, by the time of his death, Falconer had provided himself with economic and scholarly opportunities, the fruits of which were denied him by his untimely death.

Falconer's death, by shipwreck, on a voyage taking him to an administrative post in the East India Company, underscores the very real dangers assumed by those participating in the expansion of the British Empire. Suvir Kaul's essay, "*Britannia* and the Weight of Empires Past: The Instance of Falconer's *The Shipwreck*," charts Falconer's engagement with the fate of classical empires, as the *Britannia* travels through Mediterranean sites that evoke monitory historical reflections on the fate of Greek and Roman civilizations. With special attention to the figure of "Memory," Kaul describes how *The Shipwreck* engages with myth and history not only to perform the expected neoclassical poetic work of allusion, but also to suggest an ambivalence about Britain's imperial enterprise, derived from the lessons of the past. Moving between meditations upon the ruins of previous empires and the technically specific depiction of the sailors' efforts to prevent their own destruction, Falconer's poem ennobles the work of the sailors. However, it also serves as a critique of the human costs of expanded international commerce. The merchant marine is as important as the navy to Britain's success and prestige, and the perils they experience in their service are as devastating as any battle.

Julia Banister's essay, "William's Falconer's 'Sons of Neptune': The Merchant Service, the Royal Navy, and *The Shipwreck*," next considers the influence of Falconer's Royal Navy service on his depictions of sailors in *The Shipwreck*. While Falconer's efforts to celebrate the achievements of the merchant marine are familiar, as Kaul explains, how his involvement in the Royal Navy from 1762 onward shaped this celebration has been overlooked. Written and revised at a time when merchant sailors were often compared disadvantageously to their Royal Naval brethren, Falconer's revisions to *The Shipwreck* after his Royal Navy service reveal an effort to equalize the two groups of sailors. After tracing his skepticism about the supposed superiority of Royal Navy sailors in early poems like "The Midshipman" and "Description of a Ninety Gun Ship," Banister demonstrates that Falconer's revisions in the 1764 and 1769 editions of *The Shipwreck* "combat long-

standing prejudice against merchant sailors, specifically the notion that merchant sailors value money over duty, safety over bravery.” Some of the most recognizable passages in *The Shipwreck*, including Falconer’s referring to the *Britannia*’s captain as “A fetter’d Captive to the oar of Gain,” receive careful revisions in the later editions so as to challenge the stereotype of merchant sailors as greedy and superstitious. Ultimately, in an essay that will appeal to both social historians as well as literary specialists, Banister demonstrates how Falconer blurs the lines between naval and merchant, using military metaphors in the later *Shipwreck* editions, for example, to imply a heroism among merchant sailors that equals anything in the Royal Navy.

While Falconer claimed to write for his fellow seamen, the revisions to *The Shipwreck* demonstrate his concern with representing the experience of the working sailor for a landlocked audience. Janet Sorensen’s essay, “Of Reef Tackles and Halyards: ‘Marine Language’ and the Technologies of Immediacy in William Falconer’s *The Shipwreck*,” examines Falconer’s linguistic and stylistic strategies to bring a sense of immediacy to a narrative that occurs at a great physical—and experiential—distance from its reader. Sorensen argues that Falconer deploys “technologies of immediacy,” primarily connected to the sense of sound and hearing, to allow readers to apprehend the sailors’ fate more fully, to make their distant tragedy viscerally present, and to engender sympathy. Sorensen also shows how, paradoxically, the unfamiliar “terms of art,” both their meaning and their “uncouth” sound, allow Falconer to make the terror of the storm and the ensuing wreck more powerfully present. “Sounding,” Sorensen notes, is a nautical technique to determine location, and it is through the disruptive sounds that fill the poem, the noises that make up its subject and its style, that readers can better locate themselves in the events of the poem.

Next follow two essays on the *Shipwreck*’s early and subsequent receptions. In the first, “Rescaling Falconer’s *The Shipwreck*: Time, Labor, and the Problem of Immersion,” Michael Edson investigates an oddity of early responses to *The Shipwreck*: while none of the three authorial editions (1762, 1764, 1769) were overly long by the standards of an era known for long poems, readers and reviewers often complained about their length. This prompts a question with relevance for emerging inquiries into literary scale and histories of reading far beyond *The Shipwreck*: when does a short poem feel excessively long, and what meanings do readers assign to this feeling? The answer in Falconer’s case, Edson suggests, requires considering not

only Falconer's increased attention to the durations of ship labor in the revised editions of 1764 and 1769, but also the mid-eighteenth-century fashion of immersive reading, reading that offered a welcome escape from both time and labor. Falconer expands and reorders events in the later editions of the poem to increase both the time of reading and reader awareness of this time. In doing this, he resists readers who seek an immersive adventure while also adding sentimental episodes inviting just that immersion. Reading time in Falconer's hands, Edson concludes, serves to "convey temporal experiences that poets cannot represent," including the slow pace of ocean travel and the extended durations of labor on a sailing vessel.

The second essay on Falconer's reception, Sandro Jung's "The Visual Anatomy of Falconer's *Shipwreck*, 1762–1818," charts Falconer's changing reception through the illustrations in editions after 1780. Contrary to the focus in recent scholarship on *The Shipwreck* as a georgic poem providing accurate information about technical sailing processes, early illustrators prioritized images drawn from the romance plot of Anna and Palemon, which Falconer had added in the 1764 edition. Ranging from the frontispieces in cheap pocket volumes by Joseph Wenman and John Roach to more upmarket editions with increasing numbers of plates designed by notable artists, Jung shows how these illustrations offered cues to interpreting Falconer's poem. Later editions dropped the diagram of the ship and the map of the voyage that had featured in early, authorial editions. In their place, publishers added illustrations of Palemon's parting from Anna, Palemon's death, and other scenes evoking moods and emotions. As Jung argues, such illustrations reshaped its initial reception, in effect reorienting perceptions of the poem's genre. In tracing this evolution of *The Shipwreck* from a maritime georgic offering information to a tragic or sentimental narrative where human moods, not technical and vocational concerns, dominate, Jung offers a fascinating case study of illustration's power to define genre, a study of interest to scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maritime literature as well as scholars of illustration and visual culture generally.

In her essay, "William Falconer and the Rhetoric of the Sea," Jamie M. Bolker shifts focus from Falconer's poetry to his *Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, which she situates in a longer history of navigational pilot books and maritime dictionaries, stretching from John Smith's *Sea Grammar* (1627) and John Seller's *English Pilot* (1671) to Thomas Blanckley's *Naval Expositor* (1750). As Bolker suggests, technical manuals and dictionaries "bring us close to humans' historical experience of the sea in ways that

imaginative works cannot.” Such writings, notwithstanding their claims to organize and clarify their subjects, betray the limits of ordering a complex, ever-changing maritime world. Taking a cue from Falconer’s and Samuel Johnson’s shared struggles to define so deceptively simple a term as “sea,” Bolker surveys the dizzying layers of representation—definitions, diagrams, dialogues, tables—used by lexicographers to solve “the problem of legibility” in communicating “what sailors did in practice.” As Bolker shows, efforts at simplifying sea experience, by multiplying words and images, defy the simplification they promise. Historians of lexicography as well as scholars in oceanic studies and blue humanities will find much to consider in Bolker’s analysis of Falconer’s contribution to a rhetoric of the sea that fails to comprehend and control the material it presents.

Continuing to suggest additional contexts within which to appreciate Falconer’s achievement, Bridget Keegan’s essay, “*Britannia’s* ‘Gallant Crew’: Sailor Poets and the Legacy of William Falconer,” offers a literary history of British poetry written by those who, like Falconer, served at sea and who shared with him key themes established by *The Shipwreck*. Some of these poets were officers, others were common sailors, like Falconer himself. In the late eighteenth century, these poets comment upon the cultural construction of empire, paying particular attention to the slave trade and the cause of abolition. The early nineteenth-century poems focus on naval warfare. Finally, Victorian poetry tends toward representations of the perils of life at sea, often within a religious framework. Material common across all the works includes descriptions of the harsh working conditions, depictions of shipboard routines and sailor culture; a focus on maritime technology, technical language, and terms of art; voyages of discovery and adventure; and, finally, autobiographical elements. Although only some writers directly refer to Falconer, there is no question that his achievement created the grounds of possibility for subsequent authors.

Finally, this special issue presents a transcription of the draft poems found in Falconer’s logbook of 1760–61, along with several images of key pages. Because Falconer left little by way of a personal documentary record, including reflections on his creative process, the extended revisions of two of his shorter poems, “To Cleora,” and *Ode on the Duke of York*, published here for the first time, give us the best and only insights into his approach to his poetic work and reveal how he must have had to balance versifying with the maritime work captured in the other half of the logbook, with its records of bearings and weather. Since it is clear how laboriously Falconer

rewrote these minor pieces, his extensive revisions to the much longer *Shipwreck* appear all the more remarkable. As William Jones's commentary on the transcriptions of these draft poems demonstrates, although we unfortunately do not have any early attempts at Falconer's most famous poem, we can see images that would make their way into his later, longer work.



A final note about abbreviations. Falconer published three editions of *The Shipwreck* during his lifetime—in 1762, 1764, and 1769. For the sake of efficiency, the articles in this issue will refer to the 1762 edition as *Shipwreck A*, the 1764 edition as *Shipwreck B*, and the 1769 edition as *Shipwreck C*. A parenthetical citation for lines 2–4 from canto 2 of the 1762 *Shipwreck* would therefore read A, 2:2–4. The same lines from 1764 cited parenthetically would read B, 2:2–4.

Notes

1. *A Critical Edition of the Poetical Works of William Falconer*, ed. William Jones (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003), 9.
2. William Jones, "William Falconer's *The Shipwreck* and the Birth of the *Dictionary of the Marine*," *Annotation in Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Michael Edson (Bethlehem: Lehigh Univ., 2017), 23–43.
3. Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2015), 84–92; Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 2010), 120–26; Janet Sorensen, *Strange Vernaculars: How Eighteenth-Century Slang, Cant, Provincial Languages, and Nautical Jargon Became English* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 2017), 234–72; and Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 122–47.
4. In addition to Jones's 2017 book chapter on *The Shipwreck* and the *Dictionary* (see note 2 above), other recent articles on Falconer include Melvyn New, "Laurence Sterne and William Falconer: Soldiers and Sailors," *Philological Quarterly* 99 (2020): 229–44, and Keegan, "'Diving into the Wreck': Learning from Maritime Georgic," *John Clare Society Journal* 34 (2015): 16–21.
5. Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125 (2010): 670–77; the quotation is from 670. See also Blum's "Introduction: Oceanic Studies," *Atlantic Studies* 10 (2013): 151–55.
6. Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2018); Sidney I. Dobrin, *Blue Ecocriticism and*

the Oceanic Imperative (London: Routledge, 2021); and Steve Mentz, *Ocean* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

7. This special issue publishes, for the first time, the manuscript poems from Falconer's logbook of 1760–61, UK National Maritime Museum, shelf mark BRK/13; kept by Falconer on voyages as chief mate of the merchant frigate *Vestal*, the poems are here transcribed and annotated by William Jones.

8. For Falconer's comments on the Turkish oppression of the Greeks, see *Shipwreck*, C, 1:163–95, C, 1:439–47, and C, 3:220–21.

