

## Christopher Middleton (ca. 1690 -1770)

In his will Christopher Middleton described himself as a master mariner of Norton, County Durham, the same county where he had been born at Newton Bewley, near Billingham. He appears to have gone to sea at quite an early age, his service aboard Hudson's Bay Company ships beginning around 1719, possibly even earlier. Appointed to command the Company's ship *Hannah* in 1725, Middleton rose rapidly to become one of its most experienced and trusted captains. He was twice given command of new vessels on their maiden voyages to Hudson Bay (*Seahorse I* in 1734 and *Hudson's Bay V* in 1737) and for 16 successive seasons commanded these and other Company ships on their annual voyages to the various posts in the Bay without mishap.

Early in his career Middleton established his reputation as a meticulous and innovative navigator: in the spring of 1726 he published a paper in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* on the variation of the magnetic needle in Hudson Bay. The following year he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, a great honour for a ship's captain of only two years' standing.

Shortly afterwards, Middleton's path crossed that of Arthur Dobbs, an influential Anglo-Irish landowner and a hard-line free trader who bitterly resented the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly. Furthermore, Dobbs was convinced that a practicable Northwest Passage could be found via Hudson Bay and he decided to pursue its discovery, incidentally hoping to break the Company's monopoly in the process.

Using his considerable influence in London, Dobbs persuaded the Admiralty to mount an expedition to search for the Northwest Passage via Hudson Bay. Further, by arranging a commission for Middleton in the Navy, Dobbs induced him to leave the Company and to command this enterprise. The expedition's ships, the bomb-vessel *Furnace* and the ex-collier *Discovery*, sailed from the Thames in June 1741.

Reaching the vicinity of Coats Island on 1 August, Middleton and his officers decided to winter at Fort Prince of Wales (Churchill). It was a winter marked by oscillating relations between the Navy expedition and the resident Hudson's Bay Company personnel, led by James Isham. While relations were on the whole cordial, Middleton undoubtedly caused serious problems for Isham by his lavish distribution of alcohol, a generosity he extended both to the Company personnel and to the Indians. Worse still, in order to compensate for the men he lost to scurvy, Middleton persuaded five Company men to join the expedition when it sailed in the spring of 1742.

Leaving Churchill on 30 June 1742, Middleton's ships headed north. They discovered and entered Wager Bay but were then locked in the bay for several weeks by drifting ice. By means of boat journeys, however, Middleton established to his own satisfaction that the Northwest Passage did not lie through Wager Bay. Emerging again into Roes Welcome Sound

pushed north once more, only to have his hopes dashed on reaching the cul-de-sac of Repulse Bay. Frozen Strait was still ice-covered; hence, there was no chance of pursuing the search into Foxe Basin. Having called at Marble Island for water, Middleton sailed for home, satisfied in his own mind that there was no route to the Pacific through Hudson Bay.

Initially Dobbs accepted this verdict, if reluctantly. But then somehow his suspicions were aroused. He conceived the notion that Middleton had indeed found a route west via Wager Bay but had deliberately falsified his log and journals to conceal the evidence, having been bribed to do so by his former employer, the Hudson's Bay Company. Dobbs even went to the length of persuading various junior officers, including Middleton's mate, Lieutenant John Rankin, to perjure themselves by providing written statements to support his version of the story.

Early in May 1743 Dobbs laid a number of charges along those lines against Middleton with the Admiralty. There followed a protracted pamphlet war between Dobbs and Middleton and a formal inquiry in which Middleton was entirely cleared of Dobbs' charges.

Despite these findings, despite the country being at war, and despite Middleton's vast experience, he was not immediately given a command; one suspects Dobbs's influence yet again. In May 1745 he was given command of the little sloop *Shark*, but it was only a temporary appointment. In the summer of 1748 Middleton again found himself on the beach, on half-pay of 4s. 0d. per day. He never received another command in the Navy, and not surprisingly, he was never again employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. He died on 12 February 1770 at Norton, County Durham.

To Middleton we owe the exploration and mapping of Wager Bay, the northern part of Roes Welcome Sound, and Repulse Bay. Such a highly qualified judge as Captain W.E. Parry, for whom Middleton's discoveries were the starting point of his own second expedition, was extremely impressed by the carefulness and accuracy of Middleton's observations and surveying. It is extremely ironic that, while the names of Lieutenant John Rankin and Arthur Dobbs are commemorated in the place names of Rankin Inlet and Cape Dobbs, Christopher Middleton's name appears nowhere on the map of the Hudson Bay area. Rectification of this situation is long overdue.

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A  
VINDICATION  
OF THE  
CONDUCT  
OF

Captain *Christopher Middleton*,

IN A

Late Voyage on Board His Majesty's  
Ship the FURNACE,

FOR

Discovering a North-west Passage to the *Western  
American Ocean.*

IN ANSWER

To certain *Objections* and *Aspersions*

OF

**ARTHUR DOBBS, Esq;**

WITH AN

**A P P E N D I X:**

CONTAINING

The Captain's Instructions; Councils held; Reports  
of the Inferior Officers; Letters between Mr.  
*Dobbs*, Capt. *Middleton*, &c. Affidavits and other  
Vouchers refer'd to in the Captain's *Answers*, &c.  
With as much of the *Log-Journal* as relates to  
the DISCOVERY.

The Whole as lately deliver'd to the Lords Commissioners  
of the ADMIRALTY.

To which is Annex'd,

An ACCOUNT of the Extraordinary Degrees and Surprising  
Effects of COLD in *Hudson's-Bay*, *North America*, read  
before the ROYAL SOCIETY.

By **CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON**,  
Late Commander of the FURNACE, and F. R. S.

L O N D O N:

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*Jacob Robinson*, at the *Golden-Lion* in *Lincolns-Street*. 1743.

FURTHER READINGS

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