

UNCHARTED

THE PERILOUS VOYAGES OF JOHN HENRY LOWRY

At times of great upheaval and anxiety we look for things to help give us meaning, signs to help us navigate events we cannot control. In 2014 as my father was entering the final leg of his long journey with Alzheimer's disease, his final days were spent at the family home.

As time went on and looking for things to occupy myself and my mother, I finally sat and looked through my great grandfather's sea diaries from the 1890s. These had been in a bookcase in my father's study for decades. Only my father, John, had read his name sake's handwritten account of his voyages from over 120 years ago.

In one diary I read about John Henry's perilous predicament, trapped in sea ice off Patagonia. High in the crow's nest he guided his crew and his ship to safety. Passing and negotiating massive icebergs for over 300 miles, away from certain death, coming home.

Mortality, fate, luck – an uncharted route opened up before me at a time of loss. Without an unbroken thread of family narratives, I would not be here to tell the tale, my father would never have existed. As I look back, I also see an uncharted future ahead, as do we all. It should be celebrated and explored.

This work features maps, words, images, hope and echoes of the sea. The coast, trade winds and currents- they have all helped create this exhibition. It's a culmination of trying to chart the uncharted, noting glimpses and fragments of the past to help me reflect upon now and tomorrow.

THE WOODEN DISPLAY CASES

These cases contain three diaries, journals only ever written at sea. As soon as he arrives in port, the writing stops. John Henry travelled all over the Pacific, he went to Australia, Tasmania. He did many transatlantic voyages to South America, delivering coal and returning with beef and other exports. He travelled extensively across Europe as well as North America too. After reading them all, I can ascertain that he was no adventurer, he loved Cornwall and his family, that was his focus and why he was prepared to risk his life – for them to have a better life.

John Henry was an economic migrant, something we can have some empathy with today. As a working class Cornishman born in 1867, he had little opportunities or education. Going to sea and hopefully working hard to become a master mariner was his only way to ensure financial security for his family, if he died they may have collected a pension. This was an extremely dangerous occupation. Hurricanes, the doldrums, storms, sea ice, starvation, lack of water. Injury, death from drowning, unfriendly ports due to civil war in South America.

JHL faced it all. As a good Methodist, JHL made it to second in command on board packet (trade ships), leaving from Cornwall, Cardiff or Liverpool. It was his job to keep the crew in check, as a tea totaller, he could be trusted. He was reliable and incredibly knowledgeable. He notes more than once he had to collect drunken sailors from jail in South American ports.

Please note the drawings in the diaries, the small boat rescuing a sailor from a shark and the drawings of home and the poignant drawings of his wife and daughters maybe reading a letter from him, so far away.

See also my grandfather's cigarette card that inspired me to find that Worcester plate in the V&A. Discharge papers from a couple of my great grandfathers voyages, photographs of John Henry the master mariner. See the three John Henry Lowrys, the young man was my grandfather who I remember well.

THE MODEL SHIP

My great grandfather could turn his hand to anything. He made this ship, possibly even at sea as he would have been away for over 100 days at a time. This war ship is made from really basic materials, the painted sea is the bottom of an old tomato crate.

THE ALTERED SEA CHARTS ON THE WALLS

The three altered sea charts are based on passages found in the diaries. Maps only tell us so much. The individual stories and lives of those who made these epic journeys are not often heard. I have hand cut the passages into those charts like carving words into a stone, a memorial, an epitaph for a life well lived. It makes me think of all the millions of people who have traversed the oceans looking for a better life or forced against their will to take to sea and who have never had a voice.

ROLLING HOME TO HAPPY OLD ENGLAND.

On this chart, Jack is desperately homesick. Even though he travelled the globe, he only ever wanted to be back in St Mawes. *'Oh Cilla, Cilla, if I could be home now...'* He never talks about the places he visited, it's very frustrating, the diaries only chart the journeys, not the destinations.

Around the text in this piece you can find glimpses of pottery sherds like you find at the beach. Traces of things incomplete. Some of the sherds have John Henry's diary drawings in them. Including the two little girls brushing their hair, he had small daughters. The other a death at home with grieving relatives.

HIS TROUBLES ARE OVER

John Forst falls from the fore royal. This is the tallest part of the sail ship. The ship is 'Taken aback' and cannot find him, even though they put out a life boat. it's dark and dirty weather and the ship cannot be stopped. With a little research I discovered that John Forst is in fact Johannes Forst, a 22 year old merchant sea man from Kheil in Germany. Another economic migrant and a young life cut short far from his home and family. As well as sinuous elements of marine life, ropes of sailors knots surround the text. A reminder of the fundamental basics of a sailors life and how easily things can become undone.

BORN AT SEA

This is one of the saddest stories from the diaries. In 1896 John Henry is second Master on the Fontenaye. It is a very difficult journey travelling back to Cornwall across the Atlantic. The weather is against them, they cannot get on, no wind for the sails. Water is rationed, food is running out. Mrs Bennett, the Captains wife is aboard. I have no idea why a heavily pregnant woman is on board a trade ship. She gives birth, possibly prematurely, to a baby boy and then dies of sepsis after a few horrible feverish days. She is put in a barrel of nitrate to be taken home to be buried.

My great grandfather seems very depressed and hopeless as the Captain is consumed by grief and cannot cope. These old sailors keeps this little baby alive, I have no idea how. Only 400 miles from home they get powdered milk from a passing German ship. 'Oh dear, oh dear oh dear, poor little chap'. Then the diary stops.

With a little research I discovered that George May Bennett was christened 6 months later in Plymouth - he survived! I researched further but George was born in 1896, perfect fodder for the horrors of WW1. He may have survived, I intend to do more research and see if I can find George and possibly chart what happened to him next.

Marine egg cases surround the text. Octopus, dogfish, whelk and shark. Fragile traces of new life at sea, with no mother to guide them other than the currents. Like George, little trace of what happened to them after they were born.

