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WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

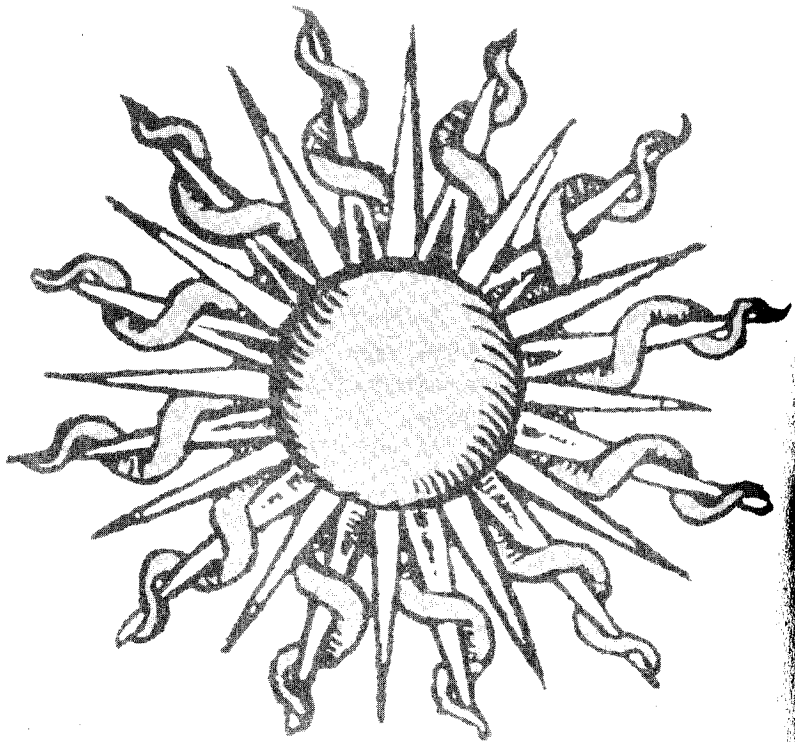
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AMERICA'S VOYAGE  
OF DISCOVERY  
THE U.S. EXPLORING EXPEDITION

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# *Sea of Glory*

America's Voyage of Discovery,

The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842



PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003, 452 PAGES

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After more than a decade at the Patent Office Building, the collection of the Ex. Ex. found a new and permanent home. Congress had finally established the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 with the understanding that it would take over stewardship of the Expedition's collection. As the Institution's first secretary, the scientist Joseph Henry, saw the Smithsonian as a research organization, and one of his first moves was to refuse the Expedition's collection. Like Charles Pickering, Henry was interested in original research, not the maintenance and display of a momentous pile of artifacts that would require a large, expensive building and sizeable staff. Henry was part of a young group of scientists who were replacing the amateur collectors of the previous era, and he wanted to reserve as much as possible of the Institution's resources for the practice of new science—for laboratories and the publication of results, not specimen cases.

But there were some influential congressmen who were determined that the Smithsonian Institution would become America's national museum. In spite of Henry's protestations, bids went out to architects for a palatial new building. The winner turned out to be Wilkes's nephew James Renwick, Jr., whose ornate Norman design is still known today as the "Castle on the Mall." By 1850, it was clear that Henry needed an assistant, and although Titian Peale was a leading candidate for the job, Henry hired the much younger Spencer Baird from Dickinson College. Baird's personal natural history collection was big enough to fill two boxcars, and he looked with enthusiasm to the possibility of expanding the Smithsonian's holdings, particularly since the many expeditions into the American West were sending back a steady stream of specimens and artifacts to Washington.

Reluctantly, Henry realized that he had no choice but to surrender to the inevitable. In 1858, when the Smithsonian finally acquired the objects of the Exploring Expedition, the Institution's collection had already grown to the extent that the Ex. Ex. objects accounted for just one-fifth of the Institution's total natural history holdings. But no one could deny that the addition of the Expedition's collection added immeasurably to the Smithsonian's importance and prestige. The larger space of the Smithsonian's hall allowed Baird to expand and refresh the original Ex. Ex. exhibit, and much as Wilkes had done at the Patent Office fifteen

years before, the words NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE UNITED STATES were placed above the entrance to the hall. In the words of William Stanton, whose book about the Expedition stands as the definitive account of how science in America was forever changed by the Ex. Ex., "[the] Great National Expedition had created a great national museum."

There were other national institutions whose genesis can be traced to the Exploring Expedition. By this point, Brackenridge's plants in the greenhouse behind the Patent Office had been moved to a new structure located at the foot of Capitol Hill that is now the home of the U.S. Botanic Garden, while the more than four million specimens currently in the National Herbarium began with the dried plants brought back by the Ex. Ex. Soon after Wilkes's return to the United States, the Depot of Charts and Instruments and its small observatory were moved from his home on Capitol Hill to a new location in Washington that became the predecessor of the Naval Observatory and the U.S. Hydrographic Office.

Suddenly it was possible for a scientist to earn a living in the United States—something that had been almost unimaginable when the Expedition had first sailed. This may have been the Expedition's—and its leader's—greatest contribution. "Without Wilkes's incredible energy and Byzantine mind," Stanton writes, "the Expedition's achievements might have been no more lasting than the wake of its ships upon the waters of the world. . . . By putting science into government and government into science he had made it possible for the American scientist to live by his profession—like other respectable people."

But the Expedition's scientific impact was not wholly institutional. It had an indirect, but nonetheless crucial role in introducing Darwin's theory of evolution to the United States. About the same time that Commodore Matthew Perry was establishing diplomatic relations with Japan in 1853, the navy, with the assistance of the Smithsonian and the Coast Survey, sent out an exploring expedition to the North Pacific, led by Wilkes's former lieutenant Cadwalader Ringgold. In many ways it was the Ex. Ex. redux. Included in the squadron of five vessels were the *Vincennes* and the *Porpoise*. There was a botanist named Charles Wright. And like its great predecessor, the North Pacific Expedition would be controversial. Once in China, Ringgold began to act strangely. Instead

of pushing on to the north, he remained in port, ceaselessly repairing his vessels. Finally, Commodore Perry, just back from Japan, interceded and, declaring Ringgold "insane," relieved him of command.

Wilkes's beloved *Porpoise* would be lost with all hands in a typhoon but Charles Wright eventually returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts where Asa Gray was given the opportunity to examine the botanist's notes. Gray recognized similarities between several Japanese plants described by Wright and those from the East Coast of the United States. The evidence seemed clear that these species of plants—from opposite sides of the earth—had at some point in the distant past come from a common ancestor. Several years later, in 1858, when Darwin sent Gray advance proofs of *On the Origin of Species*, Gray recognized that his own observations validated Darwin's work, and he would become America's foremost promoter of the theory of evolution.

Cadwalader Ringgold was not the only Ex. Ex. officer who would lead a major naval operation in the years preceding the Civil War. Soon after the discovery of gold in California, James Alden returned to his old haunts in California and the Pacific Northwest and expanded on the Expedition's original surveying efforts, this time under the aegis of the Coast Survey. In 1857–58, William Hudson commanded the steamer *Niagara* in an unsuccessful attempt to lay the first telegraph cable across the Atlantic Ocean.

During the 1850s America became involved in an English obsession: the hunt for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin, who had sailed in 1845 in search of the Northwest Passage and never returned. In the years after Franklin's disappearance, many English explorers, including Wilkes's old rivals James Ross and Edward Belcher, led expeditions into the Arctic, their efforts encouraged by Franklin's widow and the offer of prize money. It had been briefly rumored that Wilkes would lead an American voyage to find Franklin, but his health and personal situation precluded it. Instead, Lieutenant Edwin DeHaven, the same man whose inclusion in the Ex. Ex. at Callao had so angered Wilkes's junior officers, led a privately financed two-vessel expedition north. In a conscious evocation of America's first Exploring Expedition, DeHaven

was given an ensign from the *Peacock*. Whether or not the flag of the wrecked exploring vessel proved a curse, this and the next four U.S. voyages to the Arctic—all of which took along the *Peacock's* flag—would be, in varying degrees, unsuccessful.

DeHaven's surgeon was a dashing, physically frail aristocrat from Philadelphia named Elisha Kent Kane. Even though the expedition accomplished little, Kane wrote a narrative of his experiences amid the arctic ice that became a best-seller. In the tradition of Frémont (or at least of Frémont's wife), Kane's book made real the weird and frightening world of a wilderness. He also wrote quickly, and he was soon on his way back into the northern ice in 1853, this time as the expedition's commander. Kane proved to be a far worse leader of men than even Wilkes, but he did not have to suffer the indignity of a court-martial. After being saved by a rescue ship commanded by yet another Ex. Ex. veteran, Lieutenant H. J. Hartstene (sent home by Wilkes aboard the *Relief*), Kane set to work on *Arctic Explorations in the Years 1853, 54, 55*. The public was enthralled, and *Arctic Explorations* became one of the biggest selling travel books of all time.

Once again, Wilkes watched as another explorer received the accolades that had been denied him. At least he could take some consolation in knowing that the U.S. Exploring Expedition was now almost universally referred to (when, of course, it was referred to at all) as the Wilkes Expedition. Still, deep down he knew that he had never achieved the fame he had originally envisioned for himself as a boy in New York. Then, in 1860, at the age of sixty-two, he got his second chance: the Civil War.

In August 1861 Wilkes was given what he craved—command of a vessel. The steam sailer *San Jacinto* was on station along the west coast of Africa, and he was ordered to deliver her to Philadelphia. Quickly reverting to his old, impetuous ways, Wilkes decided, instead, to go in search of rebel privateers.

He eventually made his way to the West Indies, where he learned that two Confederate commissioners, James Mason and John Slidell, were in Cuba, awaiting passage to England on the British vessel *Trent*.

By this time, Wilkes had been instructed to join Commodore Samuel Du Pont's impending attack on Port Royal, where the North hoped to establish a base of operations off the coast of South Carolina. But he had other ideas. He would remove the rebel diplomats from the British ship. That there was no legal precedent for such an act did not greatly concern Wilkes, who hastily consulted several books of international law and convinced himself that the seizures were justified.

On November 8, 1861, the *San Jacinto* lay in wait off the Bahamas. "It was a beautiful day and the sea quite smooth," Wilkes wrote. "The lookout descried the smoke of the Steamer, and it was then time to inform my officers of my intentions." Wilkes positioned the *San Jacinto* in the path of the *Trent* and fired a warning shot. The British vessel stopped, and Wilkes ordered First Lieutenant Donald Fairfax to board the *Trent* and return with the commissioners. Despite being slapped in the face by Slidell's daughter, Fairfax succeeded in arresting the diplomats, and the *San Jacinto* was soon on her way north. Wilkes described it as "one of the most important days in my naval life."

It was a brazen and illegal grab for celebrity, but it worked. When Wilkes arrived in Boston, he had already been declared a hero. A nation that was still reeling from a Confederate victory at Bull Run was desperate for some good news. Wilkes and his officers were whisked away to a reception at Faneuil Hall, where Boston's mayor extolled Wilkes for his "sagacity, judgment, decision, and firmness." As the joyous mob cheered, Wilkes affected humility: "I have only to say that we did our duty to the Union and are prepared to do it again." He would shake so many hands that day that his fingers became covered with blisters. "[A] pretty severe punishment," he wrote, "for the honor of a public reception."

As the city debated the legality of his actions (the author and lawyer Richard Henry Dana claimed the *Trent* was "a lawful prize"), there was a run on books of maritime and international law. Then it was on to New York, where the president of the city's historical society remarked, "It is, sir, your prerogative to make history; ours to commemorate it." When Wilkes finally returned to Washington, President Lincoln assured him "that I had kicked up a breeze, but he intended to stand by me and rejoiced over the boldness, as he said, of my act." But as an out-

raged British government threatened to enter the war on the side of the Confederates, the Lincoln administration was forced to hand over Mason and Slidell. Convinced that "my conduct had been correctly American," Wilkes "felt a glow of shame for my country."

Just as he had done so many times during the Exploring Expedition, Wilkes's subsequent actions would sabotage everything he had so far achieved. His new status as a hero won him the rank of acting rear admiral (marking the fulfillment of Mammy Reed's prophecy), and in September 1862 he took command of a "flying squadron" in the Caribbean that was to search out and capture the notorious raiders *Alabama* and *Florida*. The assignment had been forced upon Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, who had already seen enough of Wilkes's reckless arrogance. "He is very exacting toward others," Welles recorded in his diary, "but is not himself as obedient as he should be. . . . He has abilities but not good judgment in all respects. Will be likely to rashly assume authority, and do things that might involve himself and the country in difficulty, and hence I was glad that not I but the President and the Secretary of State suggested him for that command."

As Welles had predicted, Wilkes almost immediately began to make trouble for himself and his country. Claiming that he was without sufficient means to achieve his goals, Wilkes detained several U.S. naval vessels intended for other stations. He took particular delight in securing the plushly appointed *Vanderbilt*. "This is the vessel for me," he wrote his wife. "She has speed and all the appliances for comforts I am entitled to."

He also repeatedly violated the neutrality of ports throughout the Caribbean, and soon Washington was swamped with protests from Spain, France, Denmark, Mexico, and Britain. The final straw, as far as Welles was concerned, was Wilkes's apparent greed. Instead of searching out raiders, he spent most of his time taking blockade-runners. Since each captured vessel earned him a significant amount of prize money, he was, he boasted to his wife, "filling my pockets" even as he served his country. But on June 1, 1863, Welles chose to recall him. In his annual report, the secretary chastised the former hero for detaining the *Vanderbilt* when she might have otherwise succeeded in taking the *Alabama*.