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#1 New York Times *bestselling* author of
KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON

THE
WAGER

A tale of SHIPWRECK,
MUTINY *and* MURDER

ALSO BY DAVID GRANN

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The
WAGER

*A Tale of Shipwreck,
Mutiny, and Murder*

David Grann



DOUBLEDAY

New York

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www.doubleday.com

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Maps designed by Jeffrey L. Ward

Cover painting: *Ships in Distress in a Storm*, circa 1720–30, by Peter Monamy © Tate, London / Art Resource, NY

Cover design by John A. Fontana

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Grann, David, author.

Title: The Wager: a tale of shipwreck, mutiny and murder / David Grann.

Description: First edition. | New York: Doubleday, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022028630 (print) | LCCN 2022028631 (ebook) | ISBN 9780385534260 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780385534277 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Wager (Ship) | Shipwrecks—Patagonia (Argentina and Chile) | Shipwreck victims—Patagonia (Argentina and Chile) | Shipwreck victims—Great Britain. | Mutiny—Great Britain.

Classification: LCC G530.W25 G73 2023 (print) | LCC G530.W25 (ebook) | DDC 910.9164/1—dc23/eng20221202

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022028630>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022028631>

Ebook ISBN 9780385534277

ep_prh_6.1_143280112_c0_r0

FOR KYRA, ZACHARY, AND ELLA

We are the hero of our own story.

—MARY McCARTHY

Maybe there is a beast....Maybe it's only us.

—WILLIAM GOLDING, *LORD OF THE FLIES*

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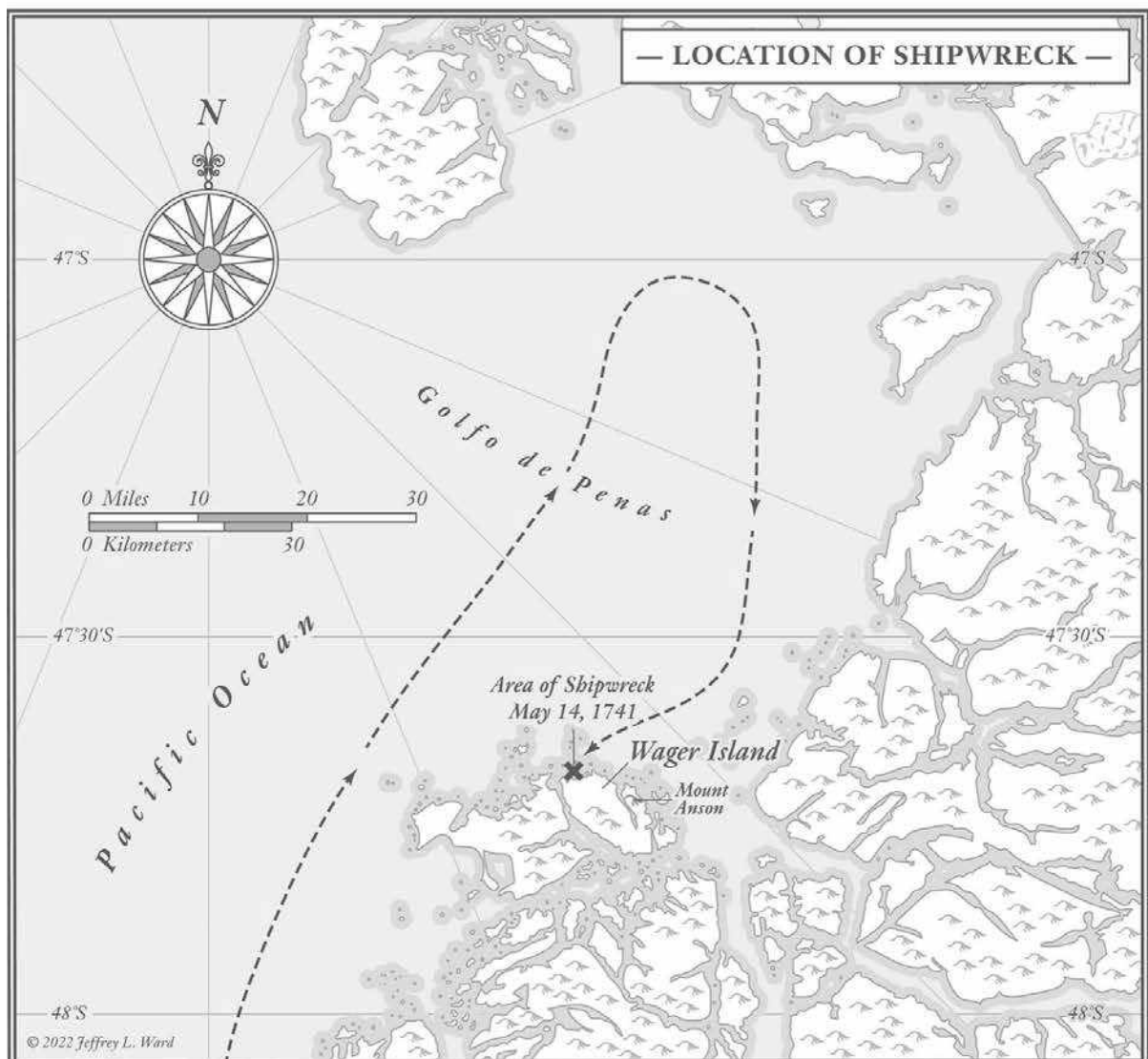
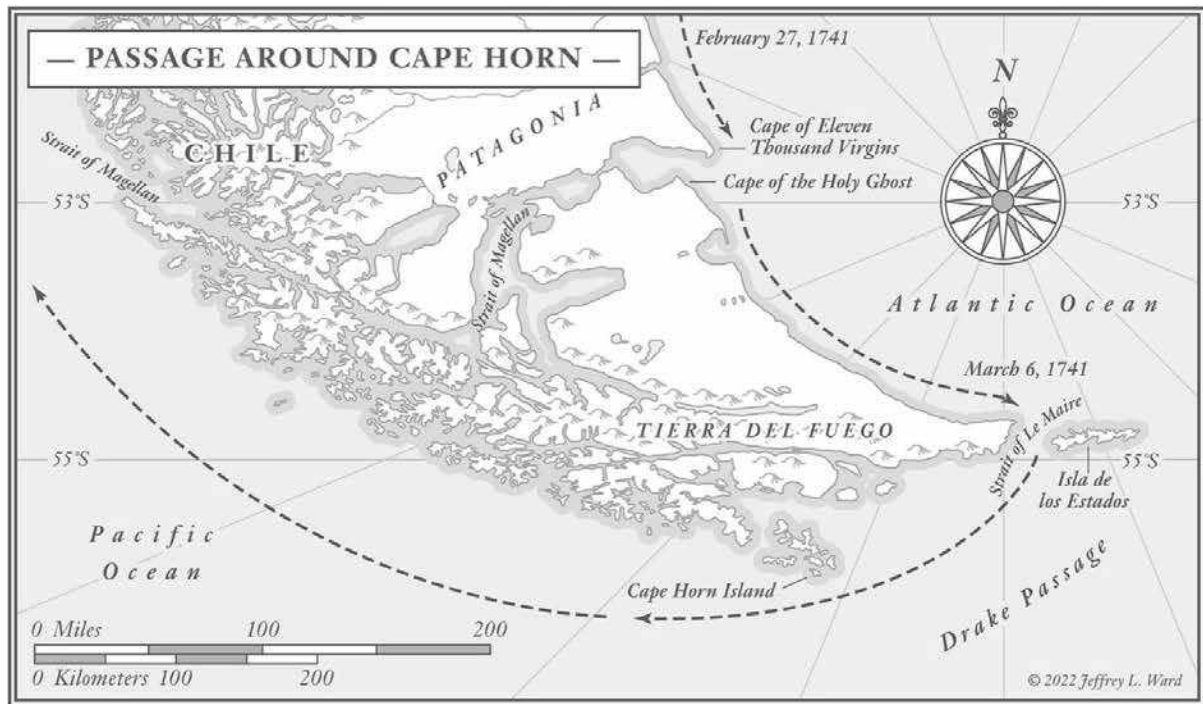
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— THE ROUTE OF HMS WAGER —





— FIRST CASTAWAY PARTY'S ESCAPE ROUTE —



— SECOND CASTAWAY PARTY'S ESCAPE ROUTE —



Author's Note

I must confess that I did not witness the ship strike the rocks or the crew tie up the captain. Nor did I see firsthand the acts of deceit and murder. I have, however, spent years combing through the archival debris: the washed-out logbooks, the moldering correspondence, the half-truthful journals, the surviving records from the troubling court-martial. Most critically, I have studied the accounts published by those who were involved, who not only witnessed the events but also shaped them. I tried to gather all the facts to determine what really happened. Still, it's impossible to escape the participants' conflicting, and at times warring, perspectives. So instead of smoothing out every difference, or further shading the already shaded evidence, I've tried to present all sides, leaving it to you to render the ultimate verdict—history's judgment.

Prologue

THE ONLY IMPARTIAL WITNESS was the sun. For days, it watched as the strange object heaved up and down in the ocean, tossed mercilessly by the wind and the waves. Once or twice the vessel nearly smashed into a reef, which might have ended our story. Yet somehow—whether through destiny, as some would later proclaim, or dumb luck—it drifted into an inlet, off the southeastern coast of Brazil, where several inhabitants laid eyes upon it.

Above fifty feet long and ten feet wide, it was a boat of some sort—though it looked as if it had been patched together from scraps of wood and cloth and then battered into oblivion. Its sails were shredded, its boom shattered. Seawater seeped through the hull and a stench emanated from within. The bystanders, edging closer, heard unnerving sounds: thirty men were crammed onboard, their bodies almost wasted to the bone. Their clothes had largely disintegrated. Their faces were enveloped in hair, tangled and salted like seaweed.

Some were so weak they could not even stand. One soon gave out his last breath and died. But a figure who appeared to be in charge rose with an extraordinary exertion of will and announced that they were castaways from His Majesty's Ship the *Wager*, a British man-of-war.

When the news reached England, it was greeted with disbelief. In September 1740, during an imperial conflict with Spain, the *Wager*, carrying some 250 officers and crew, had embarked from Portsmouth in a squadron on a secret mission: to capture a treasure-filled Spanish galleon known as “the prize of all the oceans.” Near Cape Horn, at the tip of South America, the squadron had been engulfed by a hurricane, and the *Wager* was believed to have sunk with all its souls. But 283 days after the ship had last been reported seen, these men miraculously emerged in Brazil.

They had been shipwrecked on a desolate island off the coast of Patagonia. Most of the officers and crew had perished, but eighty-one survivors had set out in a makeshift boat lashed together partly from the wreckage of the *Wager*. Packed so tightly onboard that they could barely move, they traveled through menacing gales and tidal waves, through ice storms and earthquakes. More than fifty men died during the arduous journey, and by the time the few remnants reached Brazil three and a half months later, they had traversed nearly three thousand miles—one of the longest castaway voyages ever recorded. They were hailed for their ingenuity and bravery. As the leader of the party noted, it was hard to believe that “human nature could possibly support the miseries that we have endured.”



Six months later, another boat washed ashore, this one landing in a blizzard off the southwestern coast of Chile. It was even smaller—a wooden dugout propelled by a sail stitched from the rags of blankets. Onboard were three additional survivors, and their condition was even more frightful. They were half naked and emaciated; insects swarmed over their bodies, nibbling on what remained of their flesh. One man was so delirious that he had “quite lost himself,” as a companion put it, “not recollecting our names...or even his own.”

After these men recovered and returned to England, they leveled a shocking allegation against their companions who had surfaced in Brazil. They were not heroes—they were mutineers. In the controversy that followed, with charges and countercharges from both sides, it became clear that while stranded on the island the *Wager*’s officers and crew had struggled to persevere in the most extreme circumstances. Faced with starvation and freezing temperatures, they built an outpost and tried to recreate naval order. But as their situation deteriorated, the *Wager*’s officers and crew—those supposed apostles of the Enlightenment—descended into a Hobbesian state of depravity. There were warring factions and marauders and abandonments and murders. A few of the men succumbed to cannibalism.

Back in England, the principal figures from each group along with their allies were now summoned by the Admiralty to face a court-martial. The trial threatened to expose the secret nature not only of those charged but also of an empire whose self-professed mission was spreading civilization.

Several of the accused published their sensational—and wildly conflicting—accounts of what one of them called the “dark and intricate” affair. The philosophers Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu were influenced by reports of the expedition, and so, later, were Charles Darwin and two of the great novelists of the sea, Herman Melville and Patrick O’Brian. The suspects’ main aim was to sway the Admiralty and the public. A survivor from one party composed what he described as a “faithful narrative,” insisting, “I have been scrupulously careful not to insert one word of untruth: for falsities of any kind would be highly absurd in a work designed to rescue the author’s character.” The leader of the other side claimed, in his own chronicle, that his enemies had furnished an “imperfect narrative” and “blackened us with the greatest calumnies.” He vowed, “We stand or fall by the truth; if truth will not support us, nothing can.”



We all impose some coherence—some meaning—on the chaotic events of our existence. We rummage through the raw images of our memories, selecting, burnishing, erasing. We emerge as the heroes of our stories, allowing us to live with what we have done—or haven’t done.

But these men believed their very lives depended on the stories they told. If they failed to provide a convincing tale, they could be secured to a ship’s yardarm and hanged.

Part One

THE WOODEN WORLD

CHAPTER 1

The First Lieutenant

EACH MAN IN THE squadron carried, along with a sea chest, his own burdensome story. Perhaps it was of a scorned love, or a secret prison conviction, or a pregnant wife left on shore weeping. Perhaps it was a hunger for fame and fortune, or a dread of death. David Cheap, the first lieutenant of the *Centurion*, the squadron's flagship, was no different. A burly Scotsman in his early forties with a protracted nose and intense eyes, he was in flight—from squabbles with his brother over their inheritance, from creditors chasing him, from debts that made it impossible for him to find a suitable bride. Onshore, Cheap seemed doomed, unable to navigate past life's unexpected shoals. Yet as he perched on the quarterdeck of a British man-of-war, cruising the vast oceans with a cocked hat and spyglass, he brimmed with confidence—even, some would say, a touch of haughtiness. The wooden world of a ship—a world bound by the Navy's rigid regulations and the laws of the sea and, most of all, by the hardened fellowship of men—had provided him a refuge. Suddenly he felt a crystalline order, a clarity of purpose. And Cheap's newest posting, despite the innumerable risks that it carried, from plagues and drowning to enemy cannon fire, offered what he longed for: a chance to finally claim a wealthy prize and rise to captain his own ship, becoming a lord of the sea.

The problem was that he could not get away from the damned land. He was trapped—cursed, really—at the dockyard in Portsmouth, along the English Channel, struggling with feverish futility to get the *Centurion* fitted out and ready to sail. Its massive wooden hull, 144 feet long and 40 feet

wide, was moored at a slip. Carpenters, caulkers, riggers, and joiners combed over its decks like rats (which were also plentiful). A cacophony of hammers and saws. The cobblestone streets past the shipyard were congested with rattling wheelbarrows and horse-drawn wagons, with porters, peddlers, pickpockets, sailors, and prostitutes. Periodically, a boatswain blew a chilling whistle, and crewmen stumbled from ale shops, parting from old or new sweethearts, hurrying to their departing ships in order to avoid their officers' lashes.

It was January 1740, and the British Empire was racing to mobilize for war against its imperial rival Spain. And in a move that had suddenly raised Cheap's prospects, the captain under whom he served on the *Centurion*, George Anson, had been plucked by the Admiralty to be a commodore and lead the squadron of five warships against the Spanish. The promotion was unexpected. As the son of an obscure country squire, Anson did not wield the level of patronage, the grease—or "interest," as it was more politely called—that propelled many officers up the pole, along with their men. Anson, then forty-two, had joined the Navy at the age of fourteen, and served for nearly three decades without leading a major military campaign or snaring a lucrative prize.

Tall, with a long face and a high forehead, he had a remoteness about him. His blue eyes were inscrutable, and outside the company of a few trusted friends he rarely opened his mouth. One statesman, after meeting with him, noted, "Anson, as usual, said little." Anson corresponded even more sparingly, as if he doubted the ability of words to convey what he saw or felt. "He loved reading little, and writing, or dictating his own letters less, and that seeming negligence...drew upon him the ill will of many," a relative wrote. A diplomat later quipped that Anson was so unknowing about the world that he'd been "round it, but never in it."

Nevertheless, the Admiralty had recognized in Anson what Cheap had also seen in him in the two years since he'd joined the *Centurion's* crew: a formidable seaman. Anson had a mastery of the wooden world and, equally important, a mastery of himself—he remained cool and steady under duress. His relative noted, "He had high notions of sincerity and honor and practiced them without deviation." In addition to Cheap, he had attracted a coterie of talented junior officers and protégés, all vying for his favor. One

later informed Anson that he was more obliged to him than to his own father and would do anything to “act up to the good opinion you are pleased to have of me.” If Anson succeeded in his new role as commodore of the squadron, he would be in a position to anoint any captain he wanted. And Cheap, who’d initially served as Anson’s second lieutenant, was now his right-hand man.

Like Anson, Cheap had spent much of his life at sea, a bruising existence he’d at first hoped to escape. As Samuel Johnson once observed, “No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.” Cheap’s father had possessed a large estate in Fife, Scotland, and one of those titles—the second Laird of Rossie—that evoked nobility even if it did not quite confer it. His motto, emblazoned on the family’s crest, was *Ditat virtus*: “Virtue enriches.” He had seven children with his first wife, and, after she died, he had six more with his second, among them David.

In 1705, the year that David celebrated his eighth birthday, his father stepped out to fetch some goat’s milk and dropped dead. As was custom, it was the oldest male heir—David’s half brother James—who inherited the bulk of the estate. And so David was buffeted by forces beyond his control, in a world divided between first sons and younger sons, between haves and have-nots. Compounding his upheaval, James, now ensconced as the third Laird of Rossie, frequently neglected to pay the allowance that had been bequeathed to his half brothers and half sister: some blood was apparently thicker than others’. Driven to find work, David apprenticed to a merchant, but his debts mounted. So in 1714, the year he turned seventeen, he ran off to sea, a decision that was evidently welcomed by his family—as his guardian wrote to his older brother, “The sooner he goes off it will be better for you and me.”

After these setbacks, Cheap seemed only more consumed by his festering dreams, more determined to bend what he called an “unhappy fate.” On his own, on an ocean distant from the world he knew, he might prove himself in elemental struggles—braving typhoons, outdueling enemy ships, rescuing his companions from calamities.