

## NELSON AND THE RIVER SAN JUAN

*By C. J. Britton*

IN January 1924 the late Commander C. N. Robinson contributed a Note on two sketches in connexion with Nelson's activities on the river San Juan, Nicaragua, in 1780.

On the first of these sketches there is a manuscript note in what appears to be Nelson's own writing; this point will be discussed later. The note states that the castle of San Juan was 30 miles below Lake Nicaragua, while on the second sketch the castle is said to be about 100 miles up the river from San Juan harbour, thus making the total distance from sea to lake about 130 miles. Clarke and M'Arthur's *Life of Nelson* (1809) gives the fullest account of the expedition that I have seen, and here, in Nelson's 'Sketch of my Life' the distance to the fort is given as 100 miles, as in the second sketch. Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813) gives the distance as 32 and 69 miles. As his work was originally a review of the various biographies of Nelson, it is to be presumed that he had read Clarke and M'Arthur.

The discrepancy between 69 and 100 miles for the distance from the castle to the sea, or between 101 and 130 for the whole length of the river, appears somewhat large, while on an unimportant map of the country I found Fort San Juan marked roughly one-fifth of the way down the river from Lake Nicaragua. On going further into the matter I discovered some interesting facts and was fortunate enough to acquire two scarce books dealing with the river and mentioning the expedition.

One of these is entitled *Notes on the Isthmus of Panama and Darien, also on the River St Juan, Lakes of Nicaragua, etc...* by Captain George Peacock, F.R.G.S., Exeter, 1879. The author claims that in 1831 he discovered an error of longitude on the east coast of Nicaragua of no less than 52 miles too far east; this discovery was transmitted to the Hydrographic Office through the proper channels, as will be seen in Peacock's report

printed in the book. Captain Peacock, after detailing his discovery, proceeds as follows: 'Now should the *west* coast of Nicaragua be laid down correctly, the east coast being so much in error, the distance across to the Pacific by the Lake route will by this discovery be nearly 60 miles shorter than hitherto supposed by geographers; for I have reason to believe, that nearly the whole of the coast line, from about the Island of Escudo to Cape Gracias-a-Dios, will be found to be nearly a degree wrong in latitude.' Peacock quotes Southey with regard to the expedition, but does not mention distances in this connexion.

A point worth noticing is the precision of Southey's distances, since he might just as well have written 'about 70 miles'. If the error in longitude existed when he wrote the *Life*, as it seems to have done, from where did he get his precise figures? According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911 edition) the distance from the mouth of the river to San Carlos, where it leaves the lake, is 95 miles; this makes Southey's figures much nearer the truth than those on the sketches or Nelson's estimate of 100 miles to Fort San Juan, though still not exact.

Peacock also gives interesting facts about the silting up of the harbour of San Juan (Greyfields) about the year 1859. 'Captain Frederick, R.N., afterwards one of the Lords of the Admiralty, commanded H.M.S. *Rodney* of 90 guns at that time, and remained in the harbour for a long period during 1858-59, when, seeing the daily growth of the bar or spit, and that his ship must inevitably have been shut up, he wisely determined to come out and anchor outside—and not a bit too soon, for the dry spit joined the mainland shortly afterwards.'

Now to revert to Commander Robinson's sketches. He stated that, so far as he had been able to discover, no other plans of the expedition had been preserved, and asked whether this was the case. In this connexion it may be as well to mention that Clarke and M'Arthur say definitely (vol. 1, p. 40) that charts of both river and lake were made and were in the possession of Mr Arrowsmith, presumably the map-maker. Is it possible that these charts may still exist in some attic or lumber-room?

It will be noticed that the sketch of the castle with the manuscript footnote already mentioned as perhaps by Nelson is more of a sketch than the second, which is, as the note calls it, a plan. Why should not Captain Despard, the 'Chief Engineer' of the expedition, have made the plan, while Nelson sketched the castle? These two officers seem to have worked well together (Nelson always worked well with officers who were any good), for in the despatches announcing the surrender of the fort, as given by Clarke and M'Arthur, it is said that 'there was not a gun fired but was pointed by him [Nelson] or Captain Despard, chief engineer'. That Nelson was not without ability with a pencil can be judged from a sketch he made of Collingwood in their young days, a sketch reproduced in Earl Nelson's *The Nelson whom Britons Love*, p. 11.

The suggestion that Despard made the plan is pure conjecture, but the assumption that Nelson made the sketch is at least based on something more tangible, since there is a remarkable similarity between the writing on this sketch and Nelson's writing before he lost his right arm. Samples of Nelson's early writing are to be found in Clarke and M'Arthur (vol. 11, p. 33), the early editions of Southey (vol. 11, frontispiece) and in Nicholas's *Dispatches and Letters of Lord Nelson* (vol. 1, p. 20).

In April 1780, when it is suggested that he inscribed the footnote to the sketch, Nelson was 21 years of age. Just about three years earlier he wrote a letter to his brother, of which Nicholas gives the facsimile just mentioned. The Southey facsimiles contain an example of the same year, taken from Nelson's signature as it appeared when he was made a lieutenant. All these are very similar. Compare the 'N' in 'Navy Office' or in the signature with the 'N' in 'Nicaragua'; also the word 'the' wherever it appears. There is also little difference in the 'L' of 'Lake' on the sketch and in 'London' on the verso of the letter.

More striking instances of similarity are to be found in the capital letters 'S' and 'C' in Clarke and M'Arthur's facsimile and on the sketch. The facsimile shows Nelson's writing in 1797, just before he lost the hand that wrote the original, and

is particularly useful because it illustrates the change in his writing from that of a student to that of a man of decision and forceful activity. The pronounced slope of the 'S' seems to me to be individual and not the result of the general similarity of copper-plate writing, while I doubt if the elongated 'C' was generally in use at the time. There are other letters sufficiently similar to justify the suggestion that the handwriting may be Nelson's, but the decision on this subject must be left to an expert.

In connexion with this tragic but well-intentioned expedition there is one other point which I think no biographer of Nelson has mentioned. His instructions seem to have limited his activities to the landing of troops and stores, presumably at the mouth of the river, and if this is so, he evidently exceeded his orders. In view of the appalling results of the expedition, why was no notice apparently taken of this disregard of instructions? In mitigation of so typical a Nelsonian 'crime' it might well have been argued that if he had not helped the expedition up the river, the probability is that not a soldier would have reached the fort. It is strange that these orders, so far as I know, have never been printed. When the contents of the Public Record Office are once more accessible, it may be possible to supplement this article in this respect by way of a Note or Document.

To pass to the other scarce book dealing with that interesting river, the San Juan. It is a *Narrative of Voyages and Excursions on the East Coast and in the Interior of Central America; describing a Journey up the River San Juan...*, by Orlando W. Roberts, published by Constable and Co., Edinburgh, 1827. In a preface a Mr Edward Irving states that the author afterwards 'was employed... in the squadron under the command of Sir Edward Pellew, now Lord Exmouth'.

The book contains an emphatic refutation of Bryan Edwards's statement that the river is navigable for ships of size, and this refutation seems to be confirmed by what was found by Nelson's expedition. Peacock also confirms it, but it is only fair to remember that the way in which the harbour silted up indicates very rapid changes; while the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggests

that sea-going craft did ascend the river in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though it describes the lake as being only about 5 ft. deep towards its exit (1911).

The author was captured by the Spaniards in 1802 at the harbour of San Juan de Nicaragua. He was treated atrociously and was only just saved from being shot by the arrival of a Government express from San Carlos. According to the narrative he was already seated on a barrel before the firing party when the splashes of oars were heard and a boat with his reprieve came in view round a bend in the river. He was then told to hold himself in readiness to be sent up the river San Juan together with some Indians he had with him, and when evening came he was put with two of the Indians, all of them in irons, into a large craft called by the Spaniards a *bongo*. This boat was laden with dry goods and with large jars called demijohns of brandy and Dutch gin. The author evidently had some standing, since he lay in the after part of the boat, while the Indians were kept forward; he also had his irons removed after a short time.

He seems to have been keenly observant and interested in boats, for he makes the following notes with regard to the *bongos*. They were

from thirty-five to forty feet in length; the bottom, and sides, to the height of three feet, is composed of a single piece of mahogany or cedar, generally the latter, rounded similar to that of a canoe, without a keel; the stern square. Their risings consist of two planks from sixteen to eighteen inches broad; and from three and a half, to four inches thick; reaching from stem to stern, and strongly secured, as well as the bottom, by very stout timbers of the wild calabash, bally, or Santamaria wood; in other respects they are fitted up like a ship's launch, their oars are stout poles, about twelve feet in length, at the end of which is a piece of board, four feet long, and eighteen inches wide, tapered off something in the shape of an oar blade; these oars are secured to the thowel by straps of raw hide. A space of about eight feet in length at the afterpart of these bongos is planted, or decked, within a foot or eighteen inches under the risings; and over this deck is thrown an arched awning of raw hides, much in the shape of coverings for waggons in England, completely sheltering the passengers from the sun and weather. These boats are from six to seven feet wide, draw from three to five feet water, and are pulled by from sixteen to twenty-two oars. On an average they carry about sixteen tons, and are the largest craft hitherto used on this river.

This last statement appears to contradict what is said in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* about earlier navigation on the San Juan.

Roberts describes the fort which commanded the entrance of

the harbour and both mouths of the river. It stood on an island of sandy soil overgrown with bamboo, mohoe and cane. The entrance on the south or larboard side was nearly half a mile wide, but too shallow to admit a loaded *bongo*. The north or starboard side, by which they proceeded, was not so wide

being little more than two hundred yards across; its greatest depth about seven feet, and frequently not more than five; the current in its channel runs stronger than in that which is on the other side, and the island itself seems to have been formed by the accumulation of sand, trees etc., brought down the river during the rainy season. The main body of the river is here about half a mile wide, and becomes deeper as we ascend from the island.

During the journey the party landed for meals, making the boat fast to a tree. Roberts says he observed but little current in the river all that day, and it was nearly the same width as above the island at its entrance. In the afternoon they passed a schooner of 'about 80 tons, which, after being lightened, had been hauled over the bar, into the river for safety, previous to the arrival of the two schooners from the Havannah'.

At about 4 o'clock the next morning, 'the usual orison and hymn being repeated', they proceeded as before, the river maintaining the same aspect as before, there being no visible difference in its breadth.

The banks were low, and lined with patches of long grass, upon which it was evident the manati had been feeding, those singular creatures, being equally numerous here, as in the small creeks, adjoining the harbour.

By breakfast time they had come to Serapiqui, where a considerable stream branches off to the southward, joining the Rio Colorado, which empties itself into the ocean about ten miles from the harbour of San Juan. This branch of the river is about thirty miles from the battery at the harbour, and was the scene of an episode in the life of 'the celebrated Captain Mitchell'.

A few miles farther up there was a very material difference in the current. The river became wider and shallower, and for the first time the author

observed small islands in the middle, varying from a quarter to half a mile in length. The three bongos kept close together, and the three padrones frequently consulted together as to which side of an island it would be most advisable to keep to avoid the current, invariably following the advice of the padrone of our boat, who seemed the most experienced of the three.

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The crews seem to have had very little rest, for after labouring harder than usual at the oars they landed, supped, slept and resumed their labours after midnight.

One morning they

came to a very shallow part of the river, where it was with much difficulty that the twenty-two men pulling our boat could stem the current, and the banks were so muddy, that it was not possible for men to track her up by means of a tow-rope.

Great numbers of large alligators basked on the muddy banks, and the noise of the boats and the 'songs of the mariners' invariably sent these creatures sliding into the water.

This day was one of excessive labour and fatigue to the people, as they had several small runs to overcome, the deep water being only at intervals, for a mile, or a mile and a half.

In fact, all through the narrative, the general impression of the river is one of currents, counter-currents, rapids, runs or shallows; of islands, much vegetation, and of hard work rowing. In parenthesis it may be mentioned that according to a survey made in 1885 by Civil Engineer A. G. Menocal of the United States Navy the rise by means of locks for a proposed canal amounted to a total of 116 ft. within 5 miles at one point, while the fall of the river from the lake to the first of these locks at a distance of about 73 miles from the lake is shown as  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. per mile.

The sixth day found the river clearer of rapids and islands, its greatest breadth not being more than a quarter of a mile, and the banks rising from 10 to 15 ft. above the level of the water. On the last complete day of the journey to the fort the boat started at 3 o'clock in the morning, everyone doing his utmost in the hope of reaching the old fort of San Juan by the evening. They were, however, opposed by a strong current all day, the river being very low (in the opinion of the padrone). The crew ceased their labour only once during the day, and though there were latterly none of the rapids or shallows that they had encountered on the preceding days, they became so exhausted that they had to give up the attempt to reach the

castle that night. Next morning they proceeded, and soon came to a low island nearly a mile in length.

Our bongo took the lead as usual, through a narrow channel, on the right side of the island, where, in some places, there was barely sufficient space to use their oars:—the other channel I observed to be of much greater width, but not so deep.

Soon they came in sight of the castle, about two miles above the island just mentioned. Here the river was

as wide as in any part of its course: the current was strong, but the water, close in with the banks, was deep, and the eddy, or counter current, assisted us in getting up to the only complete rapid we had yet seen.

The *bongos* were hauled into a small basin, apparently dug for the purpose of landing goods, and the crews proceeded to the castle, where Roberts was at once placed under guard. He relates his adventures and goes on to a description of the then dilapidated Fort San Juan:

It was situated on an eminence, and was the only remaining part of the Castle of San Juan. . . . It completely commands the rapid in such a manner, that no boat or vessel of any kind could pass; but, having been suffered to become ruinous, a small battery of eight brass field-pieces had been constructed at the foot of the eminence; two of these guns pointed down the river, two up, and a few across the rapid. The place, independent of the castle and battery, only consists of lodgings for the soldiers, and a few houses, apparently occupied by their wives, or followers.

The rapid is little more than a quarter of a mile in breadth, extending quite across the stream; the strongest part of the current is in the middle. The descent is gradual, like the sloping banks on the shore, which appear not more than five or six hundred yards in length. Some idea may be formed of its force, and of the difficulty in surmounting it, by considering that, on the second morning after our arrival, it required above an hour's exertion of a numerous crew to haul the empty bongos up the stream.

I may here observe that I had seen Bryan Edwards' account of the Mosquito Shore, and had otherwise heard it asserted that the Rio de San Juan was *navigable through its whole course to the lake of Nicaragua for vessels of considerable burthen*, and that a schooner of thirty tons had actually sailed up the lake, and afterwards returned, down the river, to Jamaica. Many authors, from this single report of Bryan Edwards, have boldly asserted, that the lake is navigable for ships of the line, and that the San Juan is also navigable for large ships, through its whole course. From what I have already stated, the absurdity of the latter assertion must be very evident, as also the story of the schooner's voyage; for, admitting that in the rainy season, when the river was full, or at its greatest height, she might have stolen past the station at the river's mouth, and got over the minor rapids, she never could have passed this great rapid, or escaped the vigilance of the garrison



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here; or finally, at the castle of San Carlos, situated on an eminence, at the entrance of the lake, commanding a view of at least ten miles of the river, and forty or fifty of the Lake of Nicaragua. In short, I consider the whole story fabulous, and not entitled to the slightest credit.

The author continues his description of the river as far as San Carlos, where he says it is more beautiful. However, as this article is in the main about the connexion of Nelson with the river, I am quoting passages relating to that subject only. He proceeds as follows:

I . . . saw several of the old Indians who had been with Lord Nelson when he ascended the river San Juan. They uniformly agreed that the expedition had been undertaken at an improper season of the year; that they had been restricted in their mode of acting, and obliged to conform to habits, discipline, and diet, which dispirited them. Disease, discontent and disappointment were the consequences, and the enterprise was abandoned, after a partial success.

One final note is perhaps worth preserving:

I agreed, at my departure, to take charge of two very large dories. . . . These boats were each cut out of a single tree, one mahogany, the other cedar; measuring about thirty-five feet in length; nearly six feet in breadth; and above five feet in depth.

BARGE FLAGS OF THE CITY LIVERY  
COMPANIES OF LONDON

*By H. G. Carr*

THE history of the Livery Companies of the City of London contains many vivid pictures of bygone days and manners. Many curious sidelights of early civic life are brought to our notice in the descriptions of their pageant-tries, their feasts and customs. Much has been written of their grandeur and magnificence, and the halls of the companies contain many records of the pageants performed.

Those who lived in London before the advent of coaches in England during the middle of the sixteenth century had to rely on water transport when they found it necessary to make journeys of any distance to places within reach of the River Thames. The Royal Palaces, the residences of the nobility and well-to-do citizens of London were for the most part on or adjacent to the river, and the owners embarked and disembarked from their landing stages, water-gates, or stairs. Most of the roads by the river were very poor, in many cases only tracks leading through swamps, and could only be used during certain months of the year. Barges and small craft were, therefore, regarded as much a necessity of life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as motor-cars have become to-day.

During this period, and even into the seventeenth century, many water processions and pageants were held when the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs and the City Livery Companies were required by precept or otherwise to attend on various sovereigns or princes, or welcome distinguished visitors on their entry into the city from Westminster or from abroad. In the latter case, when a visiting sovereign was to be received, an ambassador to be met, or a royal bride to be welcomed into the country, it was almost invariably at Gravesend, the gateway of the port of London, that the ceremony took place. It was usually