

George Nicolson: Third Time Unlucky

George Nicolson (1822–81) was my wife Barbara's great-great-grandfather. We do not know where he was educated; but, wherever it was, he developed beautiful neat handwriting.¹ At the age of 22, he was 5 feet 7½ inches tall, had light brown hair, was of fair complexion and had grey eyes. He had already acquired a tattoo on his left hand with the initials "GN" and an anchor.² George spent most of his adult life on sailing ships, and it was at sea that he had many adventures and met his death. Much of this experience is recounted in Lloyds Lists.

George was born to James Nicolson and Elizabeth Sinclair on 22nd June 1822 at Tingwall near Lerwick, Shetland, and baptised four days later. On 28th September 1848, in Aberdeen, he married Margaret Davidson.³ Their daughters were Clementina⁴ (born c. 1851) and Elizabeth (born 5th March 1855). Elizabeth, always known as Eliza, was my wife's great-grandmother (see Journal No. 81, Nov 2001, pp. 40–3). The family lived in Aberdeen, moving house a few times. On 5th March 1855, they lived at 3 Forbes Street; at the 1871 census, the address was 22 Albion Street; and when Eliza was married on 18th June 1875, it was 15 Wales Street.

George first went to sea on 1st June 1840 on board the brig *Ariel*, operating on the Baltic trade out of Aberdeen. After four years as an apprentice, he served as a seaman on the same ship from 1st June 1844 until 4th January 1845. This earned him his Seaman's Ticket, no. 15436, issued in London on 7th February 1845. On 4th January 1845, he joined the brig *Paragon*, operating out of Aberdeen on the foreign trade, serving as second mate up to 16th November 1846, then as first mate up to 12th July 1848, and finally as master up to 16th October 1850. Setting down all this background on his application form, he applied for and received his Master's Certificate of Service, no. S44645, issued at Aberdeen on 6th January 1851.⁵

The first report (in the Lloyds Lists) of George's captaincy of the *Paragon* is not, as would be expected, on an outward-bound voyage from Britain but on a return journey starting from St Petersburg, Russia. The background is as follows. On 17th April 1848, after a voyage across the Atlantic from Brazil, the *Paragon* arrived in Cork, southern Ireland, under the command of Captain T. Simpson, with George second-in-command. A few days later, the *Paragon* set out for St Petersburg, arriving on 1st June 1848. This was to be Captain Simpson's last trip, as their arrival at St Petersburg coincided with a severe outbreak of cholera. The severity of the outbreak can be judged by the numerous quarantine notices issued by foreign governments, from Denmark to Portugal, and published in Lloyds Lists. Just one example, from Lübeck, a German port which was at that time an independent state, suffices:

Quarantine Regulations

Lübeck, 6th July 1848

A Decree, issued by the Senate to-day, imposes a Quarantine of five days (the days occupied by the voyage included) upon all vessels coming from all ports in which the cholera has broken out, or from those which are suspected ... All vessels lying in quarantine are ordered to obey unconditionally the quarantine authorities, and to abstain from any communication with the land. For the present, since the cholera has already broken out in St Petersburg, all vessels coming from the Russian Baltic Ports, and the other ports on the Gulf of Finland, as far as Hangoudd inclusive, are to be treated according to this order.

It seems that Captain Simpson contracted cholera, from which he died. George was promoted to captain on 12th July 1848, and two weeks later the *Paragon* left St Petersburg for the port of London under his command. The voyage ended at Gravesend in Kent on 25th August 1848. One month later, on 28th September 1848, George married Margaret Davidson in Aberdeen.

Another month on and he was out at sea again, not to return home for another 11 months. At some stage between 25th August and 27th October, George sailed the *Paragon* from Gravesend up the east coast to Shields, the port of Newcastle. The *Paragon* then voyaged to Messina, Constantinople, Cork, Galway and Archangel by 16th July 1849, retracing much of this route before finally returning to Gravesend on 17th September 1849. During October 1849, George brought the *Paragon* from Gravesend up to Hartlepool, and on 30th October 1849 she once again set sail for the Mediterranean Sea, calling at Naples, Messina and Catania, then leaving for Liverpool on 4th March 1850 and arriving on 8th April.

Although we have not found a specific reference to it, the next voyage of the *Paragon* must have commenced during May or early June 1850, when she again set out for St Petersburg, Russia, via the Baltic Sea. She was one of six ships carrying cotton, and this cargo evidently caused a problem as the ships passed the northern coast of Denmark. On 9th June 1850, a quarantine notice was issued from Elsinore, Denmark. The notice stated:

The Paragon, Nicholson [sic] (plus 5 other ships), all from Liverpool for St Petersburg, have been put under a preliminary Quarantine of observation, in the Roads (a narrow section of Sea between Denmark and Sweden), having Brazillian cotton on board.
Signed Chapman, Norrie & Co., Agents for Lloyds.

The journey must have suffered only a short delay, because the *Paragon* arrived at St Petersburg on 19th June 1850. On the return journey, the *Paragon*, under George's captaincy, experienced extremely difficult sailing conditions as she passed through the narrow channel separating Denmark and Sweden. The following notice was issued from Elsinore, Denmark, on 28th August 1850:

The PARAGON, Nicholson, of Aberdeen, from St Petersburg to Liverpool, drove out of the sound with both anchors down, and got on shore on the Swedish coast, near the Swine Bottoms, but was shortly after assisted off, with the loss of both anchors, but apparently tight.

The same report refers to some six other ships that lost sails or suffered in some other way. The weather was obviously unusually bad, because a separate report from Elsinore, dated 28th August 1850, states: "Last night and this morning it blew a heavy gale at W and SSW, which abated this afternoon". Presumably after replacing her anchors, the *Paragon* was able to get under way again, calling at Rotterdam on 30th September before arriving in Liverpool on 11th October. George's claim for a Master's Certificate, filed in December 1850, shows that he completed his period of captaincy of the *Paragon* on 16th October 1850.

The records in Lloyds Register of Shipping show that, after this voyage, the *Paragon's* owner – R. Spring of Aberdeen – sold her to W. Oxley, operating out of Liverpool, who installed a new skipper, Captain Burnley. His first voyage was to prove a nightmare. On 13th November 1850, the *Paragon* left Liverpool bound for Boston, Massachusetts, calling at Bangor, North Wales, on 10th December. On 25th December, she arrived at Milford Haven in south-west Wales with her tanks leaked out, and on 31st January 1851 she reached Queenstown near Cork in a desperate state, with the loss of main rigging, chain plates and fore-yard sprung. Despite all these problems, Captain Burnley sailed on for Boston on 28th February. On 26th April, the authorities in New York issued the following notice:

The Paragon, from Bangor, via Cork, to Boston, has put into Newport, R. I. in distress: will have to discharge cargo, and it is feared be condemned.

Just over two weeks later, on 13th May 1851, a further notice was issued from New York:

The Paragon, from Bangor and Cork to Boston, which put into Newport, R I, in distress previous to 28th April is advertised for sale.

Ten weeks later, a third and final notice was issued from New York, on 23rd July 1851:

The Paragon, from Bangor to Boston, which put into Newport, R I, in distress, previous to 28 April, and was advertised for sale, has been repaired and cleared for St Stephens, N B, Canada.

Remarkably, the *Paragon* survived this adventure, but must have cost her new owner a fortune in repair bills and after failing to deliver the cargo. Later in 1851, she safely crossed the Atlantic from Cork to Halifax, Nova Scotia, under a Captain King. She remained under his captaincy at least until 1853, the last date for which we have records of the *Paragon*.

It seems that George Nicolson did not enjoy his experience as a ship's captain. Once he was parted from the *Paragon*, we have no evidence that he ever captained a ship again. All the records we have found show him as serving as mate, second-in-command. From October 1850 through to 1868, we have been unable to find much information on George's career. The one voyage we know about was a trip on the *Elizabeth Duncan*, in the period 1853–4, when he was on the Baltic trade.⁶

From 1868 until his death in 1881, full records exist. He served on a dozen or more different ships⁷ – always second-in-command, employed as mate, though he held a Master's Certificate. He sailed out of various ports, including Aberdeen, Clyde, Liverpool and London, to all corners of the globe – the Baltic, the Mediterranean, the West Indies, North America, Brazil and the Cape Colonies (South Africa). He also travelled round the British coast – and it was while sailing in British waters that he experienced his first known major dice with death. He was on board the brig *Elgin*, laden with a cargo of salt, and bound for Newcastle from Liverpool. On 10th June 1876, in the night and during a dense fog, the ship struck a rock off Eriskay, South Uist, in the Outer Hebrides. The crew, including George, made for Eriskay and landed safely. The ship's back was broken, and she was wrecked. The master and the mate (George) remained on the island to save the ship's sails, but the cargo was totally lost.⁸

On 21st October 1880, George was on board the schooner *Edward Vittery*, bound from London for the Cape Colonies.⁹ On 7th January 1881, the ship reached Port Nolloth, a small port some 300 miles north of Cape Town.¹⁰ From there, she sailed on to St Helena, a small island in the southern Atlantic, arriving on 3rd March 1881.¹¹ Two days later,¹² she departed for another tiny British island colony – this time Tristan da Cunha, even further south in the Atlantic. It was there that George experienced his second major disaster.

The *Edward Vittery* was shipwrecked, but all the crew survived.¹³ On 26th March 1881, after a few days spent on Tristan da Cunha, the captain of the *Edward Vittery*, his wife and six crew (including George) were fortunate enough to spot a passing ship, the *Trevelyan*, and rowed out in two small boats. After much pleading, the captain agreed to take all eight on board. The *Trevelyan* was en route for Australia and continued on her way, crossing the Indian Ocean, next making land at Melbourne¹⁴ on 10th May 1881. George needed to get back to Britain somehow and to earn a wage – but, although the *Trevelyan* was a British ship, she was next bound for San Francisco. So, George decided that he and the *Trevelyan* had to go their separate ways. The obvious way home was to find a ship and to work his passage; in any event, he probably could not have afforded to pay as a passenger.

While George was experiencing his adventures on board the *Edward Vittery*, another ship, the *Eurynome*,¹⁵ had set out on 21st December 1880 from Liverpool for Melbourne. In passage, she lost a sailmaker as a result of a collision with a ship named the *Harkaway*.¹⁶ Apart from this loss, the *Eurynome* had a full complement of crew, including a captain and his mate, on arrival in Melbourne on 26th March 1881.¹⁷ On 23rd April, she left Melbourne,¹⁸ arriving in Geelong, a nearby port, the next day.¹⁹ Either in Melbourne or in Geelong, George joined the *Eurynome* – not as a mate, his normal role, for which there was no vacancy, but as an able seaman.²⁰ At the age of 59, he was filling a humble role that he had not experienced on board ship for 35 years. The *Eurynome* sailed on 19th May 1881 from Geelong with a cargo of grain, bound for Liverpool, setting out across the Tasman Sea heading for Havre, a small island to the north-east of New Zealand. Although he did not know it, George's good fortune was finally about to come to an end. The ship must have been wrecked, as she was never heard of again and was formally reported missing seven months later on 22nd December 1881.²¹ In February 1882, George's death was formally recorded. In the report, it was noted that the *Eurynome* had been missing since 19th May 1881, and he was assumed to have drowned. After two previous shipwrecks and two lucky escapes, for George this time it was third time unlucky.

Acknowledgement

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¹ Master's claim for Certificate of Service, December 1850, National Maritime Museum (written in his own hand).

² File BT 113/8 at PRO, Kew, relating to his application for a Seaman's Ticket.

³ Copy of entry in Old Parish Record for St Nicholas parish, Aberdeen, 1848.

⁴ Death certificate of Margaret Davidson.

⁵ Master's certificate of service, George Nicolson, 44645.

⁶ File BT 116/66, Register of Seamen, Series III, 1853-7, at PRO, Kew.

⁷ Lloyds Captains Register, 1868-73, 1874-9, 1880-7, at Guildhall Library, London.

⁸ Lloyds Lists, Tuesday 20th June 1876, Column 32, Guildhall Library, London.

⁹ Lloyds Lists, 22nd October 1880, Column 29, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁰ Lloyds Lists, 5th February 1881, Column 16, Guildhall Library, London.

¹¹ Lloyds Lists, 5th March 1881, Column 16, Guildhall Library, London.

¹² Lloyds Lists, 9th March 1881, Column 18, Guildhall Library, London.

¹³ Lloyds Lists, 10th June 1881, Columns 31-2, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁴ Lloyds Lists, 23rd June 1881, Column 38, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁵ Mercantile Navy List, 1875, at PRO, Kew.

¹⁶ Lloyds Lists, 12th March 1881, Column 23, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁷ Lloyds Lists, 28th March 1881, Column 19, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁸ Lloyds Lists, 23rd June 1881, Column 29, Guildhall Library, London.

¹⁹ Lloyds Lists, 25th June 1881, Column 27, Guildhall Library, London.

²⁰ George's death is recorded in file BT 159/9, page 95, Registers of Deaths at Sea of British Nationals, at PRO, Kew, as well as on his official death certificate.

²¹ Lloyds Lists, 22nd December 1881, Column 30, Guildhall Library, London.