

From the Coral Strand
to the Dulais Brook:
Thomas Phillips
(1760-1851)

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The late, great, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, Dr Austin Farrer, it is said, believed that by looking at a man's bookshelves, you could tell when his mind died. If such a judgement is right, then it is clear from his legacy to Lampeter that the mind of Thomas Phillips remained lively to the end. From 1834 consignments of books and manuscripts, of all ages, shapes and sizes, and encompassing a bewildering variety of subject matter, arrived regularly at St David's College, shipped by sea and by carrier's cart on Phillips' instructions and at his expense. When he died a few weeks short of his 91st birthday, there were still more books ready and waiting for despatch at his Brunswick Square, London, home. In all, Phillips donated some 22,500 books to Lampeter, which, when added to the collections given and

bequeathed by Bishop Burgess and the Bowdler family, made the library of the infant college the largest and most comprehensive in Wales. Within twenty-five years of opening its doors on 1st March 1827, the students of St David's College could browse through and borrow from the open shelves (or pick up from the floor, onto which the collection overflowed) something on just about everything. Even the restless and energetic vice-principal, Rowland Williams, rarely at a loss for words and usually prepared to assault the seemingly insurmountable, found the teetering piles of books "vexing to my eyes" and the prospect of reducing the chaos to order daunting. In fact, the true significance and worth of the library, and of the Phillips' benefactions in particular, has only become apparent in recent years, and discoveries are still being made, not the least in the realization that some of the books are almost certainly from the shelves of their donor's own library.

So who was Thomas Phillips? The bust in the Old Dining Hall of the College, and the portrait now hanging in Llandovery College, reveal a man of robust physique and of great strength of character. These representations do not lie. Between 1780, when his adult life can be said to have begun, and 1817, when he retired, Phillips' experiences and adventures were worthy of the pen of a C.S. Forrester or a Patrick O'Brian.

He was a London-Welshman, though his roots were in Radnorshire, where, at Gladestry, he spent much of his childhood. The family was not wealthy. His father was an Exciseman, and, after schooling, the young Thomas was bound apprentice to a country surgeon-apothecary in Hay-on-Wye. Clearly the family fortune did not run to a university education - the gateway to the ministry of the church or to a career in

*A view of Quebec from
Thomas Phillips copy of
Sketches in the Canadas
by Coke Smith*

medicine as a physician - or to the required fee for an apprenticeship to a London surgeon. It was only when he had learned his 'trade' in Hay that he returned to the metropolis, there to walk the wards of the London hospitals and to study under one of the greatest comparative anatomists of all time, John Hunter, the mercurial and irascible surgeon at St George's Hospital. It was the best possible training for what was to follow, and for a young man of promise. However, ability without money and without 'connection' in the late eighteenth century all too often went unrecognized. No small wonder, then, that the nineteen year old surgeon turned, not back to rural Wales, but to the Royal Navy. In 1780 he was appointed surgeon's mate aboard HMS *Danae*, and his adventures then began.

Danae was a 32-gun frigate, and, like Phillips, new to the Royal Navy. She was French built, and had been captured in May 1779 when stranded at St Malo. Fast and flexible, suitable for detached service or as the 'eyes of the fleet', the frigate was a young man's ship. *Danae* sailed for Canadian waters, and here, during the next two years. Phillips witnessed the final endeavours of the British to retain their American colonies, culminating in "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in 1781 and Lord Cornwallis' capitulation at Yorktown on 19th October, only two days later. Much remains to be learned of Phillips' sea-service on the *Danae*, and subsequently aboard the smaller *Hind* (28) to which he transferred; the lieutenants'



log-books of both ships survive at the National Maritime Museum. Sharing his off-duty hours with the midshipmen in their cramped berth below the water-line, Phillips' world was that of the sick-bay and - if action threatened - the cockpit in the orlop. The seaman's life was harsh, if not that of the "rum, sodomy and the lash" of popular folklore. From 1780-1782 Phillips would have been faced with a constant trickle of patients suffering from shipboard accidents (hernia was common), the diseases of overcrowding (such as typhus) and inadequate nutrition (especially scurvy) and, if runs ashore were possible, their inevitable



*A Franco-British
engagement in the
Thousand Islands from
Sketches in the
Canadas.*



*A view of Quebec from the
Chateau which would have
been familiar to Thomas
Phillips, taken from
Sketches in the Canadas.*

aftermath, venereal disease. Phillips was never to forget Canada, and regarded it with great affection, as books from his collection in Lampeter reveal. His time there also taught him his trade. The twenty-two year old who transferred to the Honourable East India Company in 1782, qualified as a Member of the Company (later Royal College) of Surgeons, could face the future with confidence.

India brought him further adventures, and it brought him wealth. By 1794 he was a Full Surgeon (with the rank of captain) in the Bengal Presidency, based at Calcutta, and, in common with other "John

Company" officers, engaged in lucrative private trading. Two years later he was sent, as Inspector of Hospitals, on a tour which was to last more than a year and include the convict colony at Botany Bay, Canton, Macao and Penang. Whether or not records or reports of this tour survive at India House remains to be seen, but once again there is a vivid record of life in China and the Indian Ocean in books from the Phillips bequests at Lampeter, not the least volumes of navigational charts and an officer's log from HMS *Elizabeth*. This last, covering the years 1759-1761 (and therefore beginning before Phillips himself was

*The State & Condition of the Company
and of her Majesty's Ship Elizabeth
the Day of Victory*

| Days in Action | Days in Action | Wounded | Killed on Board | Number on Board at this Time | | |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------|--------|
| 22 | 21 | 100 | 6 | 31 | | |
| The State of the English Fleet of War-ships on the 10 th of September 1759. Her Majesty's Ship Elizabeth was the first in the Line to take the Mainmast in the Enemy's Sights. | | | | | | |
| Flagship | Ship | Commander | Tons | Men | Wounded | Killed |
| | Elizabeth | Capt. Rich. Boscawen | 300 | 65 | 23 | 21 |
| Royal George | Newcastle | Capt. Collin Boscawen | 300 | 58 | 33 | 70 |
| Prinze | Tiger | Capt. Thos. Boscawen | 320 | 61 | 27 | 120 |
| London | Griffin | Com. Wm. Boscawen | 320 | 60 | 10 | 75 |
| Wesport | Yamoth | Com. Wm. Boscawen | 320 | 66 | 0 | 130 |
| Portland | Comberland | Capt. Rich. Boscawen | 300 | 58 | 0 | 30 |
| St. Albans | Salisbury | Capt. Digby Dalrymple | 250 | 58 | 11 | 20 |
| St. Andrew | St. Andrew | Com. Wm. Boscawen | 250 | 57 | 7 | |
| St. James | Keymouth | Com. Wm. Boscawen | 250 | 61 | | |
| Total | | | 3000 | 596 | 101 | 125 |

The English Ships of the line, from the Log Book. Account of the battle off Fort St David on the Coromandel Coast, 1759.

A contemporary print pasted in at the back of the log book of the Elizabeth showing an engagement in India in which the Elizabeth was involved.



born) includes an eye-witness account of the battle in September 1759 between the French fleet of the Comte d'Ache and the British under Vice-Admiral Sir George Pocock. Pocock's victory off the Coromandel Coast at Fort St David secured British naval supremacy in the Bay of Bengal, and led within eighteen months to the surrender of Pondicherry and the firm foundation of British India. Phillips would have been quick to have appreciated the value of the *Elizabeth's* log.

In his fifties Phillips was still in the thick of it. In 1811 with the dashing and legendary General Robert Gillespie (like his contemporary the Duke of Wellington, an Anglo-Irishman) he served in the successful Java campaign, and in 1814, again with Gillespie, in the Nepal War. Storming the Gurkha fort of Kalunga, the general was mortally wounded, and, under fire, died in his surgeon's arms. Three years later Thomas Phillips retired to London and to the quiet life of study and munificent philanthropy that was to last for thirty-four years. Llandoverly College, a significant part of the Founders' Library at Lampeter, and generations of broadly educated and well-read students, many of whom made their own mark on history, was his legacy.