



# **The Wreckers: A Story of Killing Seas and Plundered Shipwrecks, from the 18th-Century to the Present Day**

*Bella Bathurst*

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Bella Bathurst's first book, the acclaimed *The Lighthouse Stevensons*, told the story of Scottish lighthouse construction by the ancestors of Robert Louis Stevenson. Now she returns to the sea to search out the darker side of those lights, detailing the secret history of shipwrecks and the predatory scavengers who live off the spoils. Even today, Britain's coastline remains a dangerous place. An island soaked by four separate seas, with shifting sand banks to the east, veiled reefs to the west, powerful currents above, and the world's busiest shipping channel below, the country's offshore waters are strewn with shipwrecks. For villagers scratching out an existence along Britain's shores, those wrecks have been more than simply an act of God; in many cases, they have been the difference between living well and just getting by. Though Daphne Du Maurier made Cornwall Britain's most notorious region for wrecking, many other coastal communities regarded the "sea's bounty" as an impromptu way of providing themselves with everything from grapefruits to grand pianos. Some plunderers were held to be so skilled that they could strip a ship from stem to stern before the Coast Guard had even left port, some were rumored to lure ships onto the rocks with false lights, and some simply waited for winter gales to do their work. From all around Britain, Bathurst has uncovered the hidden history of ships and shipwreck victims, from shoreline orgies so Dionysian that few participants survived the morning to humble homes fitted with silver candelabra, from coastlines rigged like stage sets to villages where everyone owns identical tennis shoes. Spanning three hundred years of history, *The Wreckers* examines the myths, the realities, and the superstitions of shipwrecks and uncovers the darker side of life on Britain's shores.

## **The Wreckers: A Story of Killing Seas and Plundered Shipwrecks, from the 18th-Century to the Present Day Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Wreckers: A Story of Killing Seas and Plundered Shipwrecks, from the 18th-Century to the Present Day for online ebook**

### **Tim C says**

This is an engaging and well-written book in which the author's own personality shines through. It ranges around the coast of Britain in a journalistic historical enquiry into shipwrecks and wrecking, pondering the definitions of each - legally, illegally, in terms of folklore and reality. In places it can be repetitious or ham up the history a little too journalistically (and one wonders what some of the author's interviewees must have made of her descriptions of them!), but overall it is a lyrical, enjoyable and entertaining read. As an overview or introduction to the subject I think it serves well, but for more in depth or technical reflections on this sort of history it may leave the reader hankering for a different kind of book. But, not to sound like I'm doing the book down, I did enjoy it immensely; I'd certainly recommend it, and, as it was the first of Bathurst's books I've read, I shall certainly be looking out for 'The Lighthouse Stevensons.'

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### **Jenny Karraker says**

From the cover and intro, I thought this would be more like the Disney movies about smuggling and people deliberately luring ships ashore to plunder them. But this was more of a historical treatment of the subject. I did enjoy how the author wrote chapters on different oceans and seas and how each has its difficult sections. I had no idea that there were shifting sandbars that often make the English Channel difficult to navigate. Also having read fictional books by Alistair McLean (many WW2 adventure books about submarines, Nazi U-boats at Scapa Flow), it was interesting to read true accounts of these North Atlantic areas and shipwrecks there. I enjoyed the maps and photographs!

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### **Bookmarks Magazine says**

It's hard to write a nonfiction book with limited sources and no way to properly authenticate what you write. But award-winning Bathurst (*The Lighthouse Stevensons*) seems up to the task, impressing critics with the thoroughness of her research (she interviewed 200 people and read travelers' journals and newspaper reports) and the spirited way she integrates surprising facts, entertaining anecdotes, and fictional accounts. They also credited her with striking the right tone between whimsy and sensitivity with respect to the tragedies she relates. She doesn't avoid the moral questions that wrecking asks, either. Although some reviewers felt the book lacks a little meat and could benefit from a stronger structure, they all agreed it makes for a captivating read.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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### **Andrew says**

Excellent book journey round Britain's coastline and investigates the reasons for wrecking cultural and geographical very enjoyable read and makes you look at the shoreline in a different way..

If you enjoy this read the earlier Lighthouse Stephenson's ...

Makes history interesting without any dumming down..

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### **Duzzlebrarian says**

I really like this book.

The author strikes the exact balance between poetic description and factual recitation. She writes more about the history of "salvaging" than actual "wrecking" as such (stealing stuff from existing wrecks, as opposed to D-I-Y disasters). Each chapter focuses on a particular hazard, such as the Goodwin Sands and the Pentland Firth. The book has plentiful interviews with people actually involved in shipwrecks, which draws the past and the present into closer conjunction than most history writers ever achieve. Her style is intimate, and occasionally funny.

What intrigues me, is that although she has restricted the scope of the book to the UK, a lot of the history she evokes is very familiar to a Capetonian!

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### **David R. says**

A bit anticlimactic. While terribly interesting from a geophysical standpoint, the book never lives up to its breathless promise. Bathurst documents some awful shipwrecks but most often just offhand accounts of "wreckers" nicking cigarettes and whiskey from doomed vessels. Even the legendary Cornish come off looking more like pub eccentrics than fearsome ship killers. A worthwhile read for aficionados of things maritime, but probably a snoozer for anyone else.

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### **Stephen Makin says**

This is an amazing Book.

I brought 'The Wreckers' from the shop at the Scottish Lighthouse Museum in Fraserburgh. I had read Bathurst's previous book - 'The Lighthouse Stevensons' a few years ago and knew she was an excellent storyteller. Her research is very good, and her prose flows smoothly and is very readable.

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### **Jane says**

I started reading this book with anticipation, having recently listened to an interview with the author. The interview was more interesting and coherent than the book.

I struggled with the bad prose and found myself having to sift fact from fiction (although this is what the author herself professed to be doing).

Bathurst does shine when it comes to interviewing her subjects. The stories these men tell are fascinating and I think that Bathurst would have done better to write a history of islanders and coasters rather than of wrecking.

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### **Kim Zinkowski says**

B. An informative history of the coast of England.

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### **Jeani says**

This sounded fun and interesting on the jacket...unfortunately, that's where the neatness ended. It was very dry and more of an editorial on wreckage law and such than an actual compilation of accounts.

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### **Robert Beveridge says**

Bella Bathurst, *The Wreckers: A Story of Killing Seas and Plundered Shipwrecks from the 18th Century to the Present Day* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

While I was coming up with my Best Reads of 2009 list, I found that I'd somehow forgotten to write a review of Bella Bathurst's *The Wreckers*, the book which clocked in at #16 on that list. It's almost two months later, and I still haven't written that review. I finished the book back in October 2009, and I'm writing this on February 15, 2010. (Note: there is no guarantee I will finish this review on February 15; I always have a few stubs lying around waiting for me to finish them.) So I'm a little fuzzy on the details, but I've got the structure firmly in my head; *The Wreckers* will be with me for much longer than this, rest you assured. Bella Bathurst has written my favorite kind of nonfiction book here, one that manages both the readability of a conversational tone and ample evidence of research. One in which the author is personally invested, but in which the author is not enough of an egoist to turn the entire book into a memoir that's related only tangentially to the purported subject. It is a book that is in balance. Given that, Bathurst could have probably written about any topic from the weather patterns of the South Atlantic to the population density of Norwegian emigrants in Tibet and I'd have liked the book. But her subject, as well, is intrinsically fascinating: wreckers and the many other sub-groups that go along with them, from those with complete legitimacy (the salvors) to those who might as well be flying the black flag (may as well call them pirates, for in the final analysis, that's what they are).

Bathurst wanders coastal Britain interviewing salvors, wreckers, and associated folks, looking at shipwrecks, and tracing the histories of some of Britain's most dangerous stretches of coastline, examining the way wreckers have been portrayed in popular culture and law before examining as much of the history as she can find. As we see different pieces of the coastline (and jet off for an epilogue in India), a picture emerges that is quite different than the one we're all used to. Granted, when much of your history is coming from those involved, it's worth taking it all with a couple of grains of salt. But whatever opinions you've formed by the end of the book, it's an absorbing journey through a lifestyle that's been slowly dying out over the past

decades, and one that's well worth your time. \*\*\*\*

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### **Andrew says**

Excellent survey of one of history's most notorious & nefarious criminal activities - and all along the coasts of the British Isles too!. Bella Bathurst investigates the truth of some of the more shocking tales of wreckers...not far from blood-thirsty pirates in some cases!...& puts them in their historical, geographical & moral contexts & 'seascapes'...with tactful understanding & historical & legal depth. The sea must have its own...but what it doesn't claim...the flotsam & jetsam of wrecked ships must have ownership too...even if that is the wind & surf-lashed homes of locals, who reflect the full spectrum of human weaknesses & dark motives. A tale well-told!

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### **Mark says**

Well, the subtitle explains a lot. Wreckers "salvage" the cargo and more valuable fittings of wrecked ships, sometimes doing so within the law but more often not, especially when they don't turn the goods over to the owners and ship insurers. Darker are the legends of causing the shipwrecks in the first place, for instance by placing false lights to misguide ships in stormy weather. Bathurst has done a great job of compiling a vast amount of research and telling the stories but she is unsuccessful at getting anyone to admit any truth to tales of deliberate wrecking, much less murdered sailors.

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### **Chris says**

I must admit I was hoping for a bit more from this book, it does attempt to cover the topic of Wrecking in Britain in some detail but I fear it is suffering (like so many of its kind) from a lack of material.

The book contains a lot of padding and some off topic issues such as Whales at the Natural History Museum which really have nothing to do with wrecking and were mentioned (I suspect) purely as a way of filling out another 30-40 pages.

Unfortunately I think the book's problem is that Wrecking in the British Isles is simply not a subject large enough to warrant an entire book on it...perhaps if it was wrecking in the world at large perhaps it would make a more gripping read.

I did like the photographs and some of the stories about real wrecking incidents; Particularly the story of a young clergyman who, during a morning stroll on a beach, stumbled upon a shipwrecked sailor's corpse. He ran to find help and came across a cornishman out for a walk, he asked the man what he should do about the body and the cornishman replied 'Search his pockets' and walked off!

All in all it was fairly interesting but it had the potential to be a lot better had it covered worldwide wrecking

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## Patrick Murtha says

The title of this grand survey of nautical true crime presents an ambiguity right up front. Are wreckers people who cause shipwrecks in order to profit from them, or only people who passively take advantage of such shipwrecks as occur? In a sense, the entire book is devoted to teasing out the implications of that question. Bella Bathurst takes us round (literally) the island of Britain in this "Story of Killing Seas and Plundered Shipwrecks, from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day," and in the process we meet not only wreckers under both definitions, but representatives of many other related "breeds": hovellers, salvors, pilots, lifesavers, lighthouse keepers, smugglers, and beachmen. (The Thames River has its own even more colorfully named types: river pirates, day and night plunderers, mudlarks, rat-catchers, and scuffle-hunters.) Many of these, no matter what skullduggery they engaged in, were (and needed to be) exceptional seamen.

Bathurst investigates, tours, and conducts interviews in seven wrecking zones:

- The Goodwin Sands off Kent in the English Channel
- The Pentland Firth in the north of Scotland
- The Scilly Isles
- The Hebrides on the West Coast of Scotland
- The Thames
- Cornwall
- The East Coast of England (specifically the Norfolk / Suffolk / Essex area)

The geographical detail is delightful. The treacherous Goodwin Sands come and go with the tides.

The island of Stroma in the Pentland Firth, once modestly populated and kind of a Wrecker Central, is now abandoned to the elements.

The "garden isles" of Scilly are guarded by the forbidding Western Rocks.

Off the Scottish island of Mull, a boating George Orwell once nearly went down in the infamous Corryvreckan Whirlpool.

Wrecking has its strongest public associations in Cornwall and in the Scillies, where several generations of photographing Gibsons made beautiful images of disaster.

The chapter on always-picturesque Cornwall in *The Wreckers* is one of Bathurst's most amusing, as the Cornish persistently try to capitalize economically and touristically on their heritage of wrecking, while simultaneously denying that most of it ever happened. Fact and fiction become hard to disentangle here, as much of Cornwall's reputation for deliberate wrecking (putting out "false lights" and such) is derived second-hand from Daphne Du Maurier's popular 1936 novel *Jamaica Inn*, and the 1939 Alfred Hitchcock film based on it.

The real *Jamaica Inn* still exists on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, and is understandably popular with visitors.

Another piece of popular culture that shaped perceptions of wrecking is Compton Mackenzie's 1947 novel *Whisky Galore*, along with Alexander Mackendrick's 1949 film adaptation. This story is based on a real incident, the grounding of the cargo ship SS Politician in the Hebrides in 1941. From the wreckers' standpoint, general cargo ships are usually the best prizes, carrying as they do all manner of useful, valuable,

and just plain interesting goods. Given that there was a whisky shortage in Scotland in 1941 owing to World War II, the fact that the Politician was carrying several hundred thousand bottles of superb whisky bound for export to the United States was one of those once-in-a-lifetime pieces of good fortune that you just don't argue with.

Wrecking may not be what it once was, but Bathurst points out that it will continue to exist as long as there are ships at sea, and Great Britain still boasts a public official with the nifty title of "Receiver of Wreck." All salvage is supposed to be reported, and this has been the case for a very long time, but the problem has always been getting people to report, and most officials have ultimately looked the other way rather than pressing the point. Although, as Bathurst points out, "There is not a single line in the laws of England or Scotland which supports the notion of 'finders keepers,'" the idea is deeply ingrained in the populace and will never disappear.

There is a continuum between casual beachcombing and the sort of actively malicious wrecking that involves false signaling, leaving wreck victims to die while retrieving their goods, and cutting fingers or biting ears off corpses in order to retrieve jewelry. At some point on that continuum, understandable high spirits give way to unforgivable criminality, but identifying the exact spot where the crossing-over takes place is not easy by the lights of law, philosophy, or even common sense. That's part of what makes wrecking a great subject. Bella Bathurst has done full justice to it.

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