

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

'As it Was'

Until the abolition of the Indian Navy in 1862 surveys of Indian and eastern waters were carried out by officers of the Bombay Marine and later by the Indian Navy. At first these surveys were published by Alexander Dalrymple on behalf of the East India Company and later by James Horsburgh, Dalrymple's successor. One of the most talented surveyors of the Bombay Marine in the eighteenth century was John McCluer.

It is thought that John McCluer was born in 1759, probably in Scotland, but no record of his birth has survived. He joined the Bombay Marine as a volunteer about 1777. He was promoted second lieutenant in 1780 and first lieutenant in 1784. His hydrographic career probably began in 1785 when he surveyed Muscat and Matruh (Matrah) Harbours at the entrance of the Gulf of Oman in the *Scorpion*, followed by a survey from Muscat to Bushire (Bā'shehr). He continued in the Persian Gulf the following year and part of 1787, enabling Alexander Dalrymple to publish from his surveys a chart extending from the entrance to the Persian Gulf to Bussora (Basra).

In the later part of 1787 he made the first comprehensive survey of Bombay (Mumbai) Harbour, after which he was employed for the next two years in the *Experiment* on a detailed survey of the west coast of India, assisted by John Procter in a pattamar, a locally built lateen rigged sailing vessel. During the early part of 1790 he carried out a number of surveys in the Laccadive Islands (Lakshadweep), assisted by Lieutenant John Wedgbrough, thus completing a comprehensive survey of the west coast of India from Diu head to Cape Cormorin. At some unknown date he also surveyed Mocha (Al Mukhāṣṣ) Road at the southern entrance to the Red Sea.

In August 1790, when he was 31 years old according to his own account, he was sent to the Pelew (Palau) Islands in the *Panther*, accompanied by the *Endeavour*, commanded by Lieutenant William Drummond, to inform the King of the death in London of his son Lee Boo, who had been brought to England by Captain Henry Wilson, whose vessel the *Antelope* had been wrecked on the Pelew Islands. One of McCluer's officers was John Wedgbrough, who was serving in the *Antelope* when she was wrecked. The Pelew Islands (known today as Palau) lie in what is known as the Caroline Group in the Western Pacific Ocean.

McCluer first called at several ports to embark seeds, plants and cattle and to rate his chronometers. His course then took him through Sallawatty Strait (Selat Sele) between Sallawatty (Salawati) and the western end of the island of New Guinea. On reaching the Pelew Islands on 21 January 1791, McCluer broke the news to the King of his son's death. He then proceeded to Macau, in southern China, for supplies leaving Procter in the *Endeavour*, following the death of Drummond, to commence a survey of the islands.

On his return McCluer sailed for New Guinea with the *Endeavour* to carry out a survey of the western end of the island in accordance with his instructions, during which he called at Amboyna (Ambon) for supplies, the first British vessel to do so for seventy years. During his survey McCluer discovered an extensive inlet at the south-western end of New Guinea, which was subsequently named McCluer Inlet (Teluk Berau) in his honour. He then followed the south coast of New Guinea to the east as far as Tanjung Vals (Ug Salah) before turning south and running a line of soundings, during December 1791 and January 1792, off the north coast of Australia, which he sighted at intervals. His soundings were later incorporated by Matthew Flinders in his small scale chart of Australia. After calling at Timor, McCluer made for Bencoolen (Bengkulu) on the southwest coast of Sumatra (Sumatera) to report his discoveries to the East India Company, which maintained a station there, called 'Fort Malboro', including the fact that the nutmeg grew near the coast of New Guinea.

He then returned to the Pelew Islands via the island of Sulu (Cagayan Sulu), where he embarked grain, seeds and cattle. On his return to the Pelew Islands McCluer sent Procter in the *Endeavour* to Macau to inform the Court of Directors that he intended to remain in the Pelew Islands to establish an English settlement there. He had married two wives and built a fine house for himself and a house for each of his wives and their families. He then handed over the command of the *Panther* to John Wedgbrough, who returned in her to Bombay.

After fifteen months in the islands McCluer, who had meanwhile been promoted to captain, decided to return to the service of the East India Company. Leaving the islands in the *Panther's* launch, which had been left behind for him, McCluer made a remarkable nineteen-day voyage to Macau. Here he bought the aptly named bark *Venus* with the intention of returning in her to Bombay, after first calling at the Pelew Islands to embark his native wives and families. However, before he could sail, Captain John Hayes, a fellow officer in the Bombay Marine, arrived in Macau from Batavia (Jakarta) with news that a settlement he had established in Dorey Harbour (Teluk Dore Hum) in Geelvink Bay (Teluk Irian or Teluk Cenderawasih) on the north coast of New Guinea was in urgent need of provisions. McCluer was persuaded to undertake its relief. He sailed from Macau in July 1794 and, after calling at the Pelew Islands to embark his wives and families, he continued on to New Guinea.

Having relieved the settlement, McCluer then sailed for Bencoolen, calling at Amboyna and Timor en route. From Bencoolen six of his women were taken to Bombay in a Bombay frigate, while he continued to Calcutta. He sailed from the latter port in August 1795 and was never heard of again, the *Venus*, having probably foundered in a storm in the Bay of Bengal.

McCluer was a talented artist and drew many coastal views as aids to navigation during his career. His surveys and views were published by Dalrymple as Hydrographer to the East India Company in some forty charts, plans and sheets of coastal views. His charts of the west

coast of India survived as Admiralty charts until the middle of the nineteenth century.

McCluer's "Plan of Radjapore River", now Murud-Janjira Harbour on the west coast of India, is an example of one of his charts. Originally published by Dalrymple in 1791, the copper plate was acquired by the Hydrographic Office in 1810 and republished as an Admiralty chart, with the addition of the Hydrographic Office seal. In 1839 the chart number 786 was added at bottom right. It was finally withdrawn c. 1864. The views of Karrack Island, illustrated above are from "Views in the Gulph of Persia by John McCluer, Pl. III", published by Dalrymple in 1795. The copper plate was also acquired by the Hydrographic Office in 1810 and also published as an Admiralty chart with the addition of the Hydrographic Office seal and chart number 758 in 1839. It also was finally withdrawn c. 1864.

Dalrymple also published three memoirs, giving details of McCluer's surveys in the Persian Gulf and the west coast of India, while Horsborough published McCluer's sailing directions for Mocha and made considerable use of his sailing directions for the west coast of India and the Laccadive Islands in his India Directory.

In his will, McCluer made provision for "a female named Elizabeth Tennel" and "a child named Margaret by a Malabar mother".

Note by the Editor

The present day place-names are shown in brackets.

The positions of the two forts "a" and "b" in the chart title may be seen on two small islands in the river.