Contact between shipwrecked mariners and Indigenous peoples often presents an enigma in Western Australia’s history. The possibility that Dutch sailors interacted with Aboriginal groups along the Mid-West coast intrigued ethnologists from the time of George Grey’s expedition through the region, with modern DNA technology adding a new dimension to the mystery. Other cases remain more elusive, as with the identity of the Swedish sailor shipwrecked as a boy in the Kimberley and integrated by the late 1880s into the local population. This book offers more than an enigma. Fascinating as an account of human survival, The Stefano Castaways presents important information on the lifestyle and customs of a poorly known Indigenous society, and provides valuable insights into the nature and impact of the early stage of culture contact in coastal North-West Australia.

In October 1875 the Dalmatian barque Stefano was wrecked in a gale in the area known today as the Ningaloo Coast. Ten sailors struggled ashore, with eight perishing from thirst, starvation and exposure over the following weeks. Two teenagers, Michael Baccich and Giovanni Jurich, were then taken in and cared for by the Yinikutira people until their rescue by the colonial mariner Charles Tuckey in April 1876. Upon returning to Croatia the pair narrated their adventure to the priest and scholar Canon Stefano Skurla (1832-1877), who produced a manuscript account in Italian. Three copies of this 1876 manuscript survive: one is held by the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka; an incomplete copy is held by the Dubrovnik Library; and a third copy is owned by descendents of Michael Baccich in the USA, and was translated by Baccich’s wife in 1924. The Rijeka manuscript was used for the translation produced for this book by the Yugoslavian-born Western Australian engineer Amedeo Sala.

This is not the first English-language account of the Stefano episode to appear in print. An article based on the Rijeka manuscript appeared in Early Days in 1978. The first major work was produced by Baccich’s grandson, Gustave Rathe, who in 2002 had an annotated version of his grandmother’s translation, The
"Wreck of the Barque Stefano," published by Hesperian Press. In 2007, Murdoch University academic Josko Petkovic published an edited version of the 1924 translation online. He also published an accompanying paper arguing that Baccich contributed substantially to the authorship of Skurla’s original manuscript. The Stefano Castaways now deals with the subject in full. The main part of the book reproduces Skurla’s entire Italian manuscript alongside Sala’s English translation, and is complemented with chapters by several Perth-based experts: an introduction by the book’s editor John Melville-Jones; chapters on ‘the Aboriginal People of the North-West Cape’ by Alan Dench, ‘Skurla’s Observations on Natural History’ by Kevin Kenneally, and ‘Finding the Stefano’ by Michael McCarthy; plus appendices listing the Aboriginal words and phrases recorded by Skurla, and presenting a collection of documents from archives and the colony’s press relating to the shipwreck and the rescue of the two castaways.

I am unable to assess the accuracy of Sala’s translation, but note that there are obvious benefits in reproducing the original Italian text alongside the English version. Skurla’s account is presented in the third-person, and written in a rich literary style that, though unusual in the wider genre of expedition or exploration journals and survival narratives, makes for entertaining reading. His treatment of the topic of cannibalism, which appears in the text both when Bacchic and Zurich are compelled by hunger to eat the flesh of a dead crewmen and when they observe the ritual consumption eating of an infant’s corpse during a Yinikutira funeral ceremony, reveals some of the biases of this mid-nineteenth century theologian and scholar: whilst for the Europeans cannibalism is a horror attributed briefly to the desperation and insanity of hunger, for the Aborigines a funeral rite feeds into a discourse on the superstitions of a savage race.

What distinguishes this book from earlier works on the Stefano are the additional chapters reproduced with the translation. Dench’s evaluation of the ethnographical detail contained within Skurla’s account is the highlight. The only extant record of the physical appearance, culture and daily life of the Yinikutira, Dench draws on the linguistic record available through the castaway’s testimonies to show how the growth of coastal shipping through pearling and pastoral expansion had already begun to impact upon the North-West Cape people, before suggesting that this contact provides the best clues as to why, barely ten years later, the Yinikutira had either departed their homeland or died out altogether. Kenneally examines the natural history content, concluding that Skurla drew upon contemporary works on Australia for his botanical descriptions and that other observations attributed to the castaways are similarly unreliable, and that this aspect of the manuscript should therefore be treated with caution.

This inconsistency raises the question—why does one chapter suggest that the information on natural history is riddled with misidentifications and errors, when another points to the reliability and utility of the ethnographical information? Both Kenneally and Dench are experts in their fields and I find no reason to question the specifics of their evaluations, but the contradiction seemingly inherent in their conclusions might have been explored further by
Reviews

Melville-Jones in his introduction, given that it bears on the historical validity of the manuscript. Likewise, I also thought that the introduction could have engaged more directly with Petkovic’s argument that Baccich was effectively a co-author of Skurla’s manuscript, rather than merely commenting that Baccich was unlikely to have been sufficiently literate to write ‘at the level at which this text is composed’. In general, however, the introduction outlines a good context for the volume, covering the backgrounds to the voyage itself and the production of the manuscript, and containing biographical details on Skurla, Baccich, and Jurich.

Although some questions still remain, The Stefano Castaways gives a comprehensive treatment to the subject at hand, and draws out valuable new insights into the culture and fate of an Indigenous society otherwise largely lost to history. Perhaps, in the reception and goodwill shown by the Yinikutira to the two Croatian castaways, lay new clues to aid understanding of other, more enigmatic contacts between shipwrecked Europeans and Indigenous peoples in Western Australia’s past.

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