2-2017

Berth of the Abergavenny

Richard Matlak
College of the Holy Cross, rmatlak@holycross.edu

BERTH OF THE ABERGAVENNY

This site is devoted to the impressive scale model of the *Earl of Abergavenny, East Indiaman*, built by the renowned model ship builder Peter Coughlin, Darwen, England, and gifted to the College of the Holy Cross by Richard Matlak, Professor Emeritus, English. The 6' x 6' model (scale 1:40) built by Mr. Coughlin from scratch over a period of seven years, is now housed in the main reading room of the College's Dinand Library.

The actual *Earl of Abergavenny* was a 1200 ton merchant vessel that sailed for the East India Company in its trade with India and China in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. *The Abergavenny* became a part of literary and British maritime history when she sank in February 1805 two miles off the coast of Portland in a tremendous night storm. Its captain was John Wordsworth, the younger brother of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Besides Captain Wordsworth, 246 others out of 402 onboard perished by drowning. Survivors clung to the masts or made it to the ship's long boat. The First Mate reported that John drowned without attempting to save his life as his vessel sank. His final words were, "God's will be done."

Being one of the worst catastrophes in British maritime history, the public was interested in the tragedy. *The Abergavenny* was in a convoy of seven vessels enroute to India, where the East India Company had its textile and opium factories. When a night storm made the seas too rough to control a convoy, the convoy commander signaled the vessels to seek safe harbor. The captains had to await local pilots, however, to lead them through unfamiliar and hazardous waters. It was then that a pilot steered *The Abergavenny* onto a treacherous reef called the Shambles that smashed her hull. At that moment of impact, Captain Wordsworth shouted, "O Pilot, you have ruined me!" Crew members and soldiers onboard attempted to bail water out of the hull, but as the night wore on, the mission got hopeless. After eleven hours, *The Abergavenny* sank in 65 feet of water.

Written accounts of the sinking with sketches of imagined, lurid chaos sensationalized the tragedy. The East India Company held public hearings to clear

itself of responsibility for the accident, although it left open the charge that its captain had not done everything possible to save lives. The Company also published an "authorized" narrative of the sinking with an image that reflects an orderly rescue operation to distract the public from the onboard horror of that night.

The poet Wordsworth, renowned for poetry that celebrates his relationship with a loving nature, interpreted his brother's death at sea as a rebuke. A loving, even maternal nature, that inspired his poetic vision now seemed a beautiful illusion, and not a useful one at all. When his friend and patron, Sir George Beaumont, painted a dark oil of a vessel in stormy seas and a ruined castle buffeting the wild winds overlooking the imminent tragedy, the poet had an epiphany that famously acknowledges a new understanding of art and a stoicism that he would attempt to purvey: "Not without hope, we suffer and we mourn."

For a scholarly account of the sinking of *The Abergavenny* see "Captain John Wordsworth's Death at Sea" and for a fictional representation of the event in the form of a screenplay see "The Sinking."