

A Camel for the Shogun:
William Robert Stewart and the Deshima Connection
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It was August 24, 1803, a full half century between the epic voyage of Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan. A ship flying the Stars and Stripes sailed boldly into the forbidden harbor of Nagasaki, fired several salutes, and splashed her anchor near the tiny Dutch outpost on the artificial island of Deshima.

Her name, painted flamboyantly in Chinese characters, was Nagasaki Maru. Her skipper, William R. Stewart of New York, had brought gifts – a camel, a water buffalo, and a donkey – for the shogun. Stewart announced he was there to open up trade between the United States and Japan.

Had he succeeded, Stewart could have substantially altered the history of the nineteenth century – and therefore the twentieth. But this fascinating and forgotten person has been almost entirely lost in the mists of history. He seems to have appeared from nowhere and then disappeared. Who was he? Where did he come from? What happened to him after 1803? Most of the few sources that mention him¹ agree that he was an American, but he has also been described as a British agent pretending to be an American, who posed as a Dutchman.²

The object of this paper is to rescue Stewart from undeserved anonymity, to answer the question of his nationality, reveal a bit of his colorful background, and describe his tangled relationship with the VOC, the Dutch East India Company.

Who was he? Stewart first appeared to the Dutch in Java as master of the brig Eliza, but the key to his identity is found in the records of an earlier, more famous voyage to the Orient, that of the sloop Experiment to Canton in 1785.

In that year a group of eighteen New York merchants got together in order to compete with Boston, Baltimore and Philadelphia in the lucrative trade with China, now that they were no longer restricted by the British Navigation Acts. It seemed a dismal prospect. The shipyards of New York, the only major seaport controlled by the British during the course of the War for Independence, had been almost entirely destroyed, deliberately or not, during the long British occupation. For want of a suitably large vessel, and grievously short of funds, they bought a single-masted, eighty-five ton Hudson River sloop, the Experiment, which had been built for short voyages to South Carolina. They loaded it for a voyage to Canton. To command the vessel they hired Stewart Dean, who had commanded a privateer, the Beaver, during the Revolution, and chose John Whetten as first mate. It became only the second American vessel to sail to China.

Documents relevant to this voyage, until now overlooked by historians, lead us to Stewart's identity. They reveal that major investors in the enterprise were the firm of Stewart and Jones, wine merchants and ship's chandlers. A "William Stewart" is listed as supercargo for the voyage. That is not an unusual name. But his signature appears as "WR Stewart" as he acknowledged his instructions.³ Other papers of the Stewart and Jones firm reveal that William Robert Stewart was the youngest brother in this merchant family of New York. And by a happy chance, one document, a tattered invoice for repairs, shows that the firm owned the brig Eliza, the very vessel whose papers Stewart would use in his earliest contact with the Dutch East India Company.⁴

That he was entrusted with the job of supercargo, especially at such a young age, speaks well of his abilities. A supercargo was a critically important person. As agent for the owners of the cargo, he had to familiarize himself with the markets in each port, act as business manager, collect money and pay charges, oversee the accounts and handle all commercial transactions. He frequently was skilled at seamanship, so as to relieve the skipper when needed. The job required not only intelligence, but versatility, adaptability, and diplomatic skills, all qualities, we shall see, that he would evidence in future adventures.

Although we can identify him from the Stewart and Jones documents, but there are still many unknowns surrounding his life and career. One minor puzzlement is that, although we can trace the genealogy of his siblings,⁵ who refer to him in the firm's papers as their brother, there seems to be no record of his birth.

At the time of his second marriage in 1816 his age was given as forty-eight.⁶ This would indicate that he was born about 1768 and was only seventeen when he sailed as supercargo on the Experiment.

The sloop left Murray's Wharf, near Stewart and Jones' place of business, on December 18, 1785. Aboard were three officers besides Stewart, a crew of five men and two boys, and a cargo consisting of ginseng, an amazing variety of furs, and 18,000 Spanish milled silver dollars. Sailing by way of the Cape Verde Islands and the Cape of Good Hope, the little eighty-five ton vessel arrived at Canton on June 13 1786, astonishing the residents of the city, who were used to seeing East Indiamen of 10,000 tons or more. Flying the American flag,, the sloop was greeted by a salute by a Dutch vessel, in honor of Holland's alliance with the United States during the War for Independence.

After a successful voyage, during which Stewart became acquainted with the devious ways of doing business in China, on April 22 1787 the Experiment was welcomed back to New York amid widespread excitement.⁷

In May 1787 the valiant little vessel was sold at auction. The following year it sailed again, to a destination unknown to us. . John Whetten, who had

been first mate on the voyage to Canton, was skipper. Stewart, obviously enjoying a life of adventure, again was supercargo.⁸

He made another voyage to China in January 1789, probably as supercargo, although the name of the vessel is unknown. His brothers entrusted him with a load of ginseng and a thousand Spanish dollars, and instructed him to return with a variety of various China teas, "Nankeens" and porcelain.⁹ He also did business on his own account., On October 1790 a New York paper advertised that "William R. Stewart, Lately from Canton Has For Sale at No. 4 Duke Street a Parcel of Fresh Teas."¹⁰

At the time, he was preparing to sail on the voyage that would eventually lead him to Japan and the tangled, bizarre adventures involving the ill-fated brig Eliza. Sent by Stewart and Jones to Canton, the tiny vessel was commanded by Captain John Palmer Jr., with Stewart as supercargo. . The Eliza cleared New York on February 21 1791, with its destination given as the Falkland Islands, recently discovered to be a source for sealskins for the Canton market.¹¹

There is some mystery about this voyage. When the vessel reached Macao in March 1793, Stewart was no longer supercargo, but its skipper. Amasa Delano, who met him there, commented that the brig "had been a long time on her voyage. Captain Palmer, who had started from the United States with her, has left her previous to her arrival in China." He observed that Stewart "was not a regularly bred seaman."¹² We don't know what had happened to Captain Palmer, nor do we know when Stewart had taken command. The brig sailed around around Cape Horn to the Pacific, instead of taking the normal, safer route from New York to Canton by way of the Cape of Good Hope. It headed for the island of Mas Afuera off the coast of Chile, until now unvisited by sealers. Apparently someone, possibly on the Falklands, had heard of the abundance of seals on the island. The Eliza thus became the first vessel ever to hunt on what became a major sealing place for the China trade, and Stewart had made his first mark on history.¹³

After the vessel was loaded with 18,000 sealskins, Stewart brought the vessel to Macao. There he made the acquaintance of Amasa Delano, who had served with a British exploring expedition to the South Seas, and was looking for a way back to America.¹⁴ Stewart offered him passage, and the two became partners. But it turned out that Stewart had violated Chinese law by leaving his brig in Dirty Butter Bay in Macao and coming ashore in Canton to arrange the sale of his cargo without first clearing customs. He was accused of smuggling, was surrounded by soldiers, and thrown into jail in Canton. Fortunately, the Dutch consul, Andreas Van Braam, was an

American citizen.^a He succeeded in getting Stewart free after payment of a \$500 bribe, a hefty sum in those days.

Stewart found the market was depressed, and the skins brought much less than their anticipated price. Lacking funds to buy a cargo, he agreed to freight sugar to Ostend for Van Braam. The latter stipulated that Delano act as master of the vessel.

The voyage was a series of misfortunes. The Eliza, badly damaged by worms, leaked badly, and pumps worked around the clock. Much of Van Braam's sugar dissolved. In July they reached the Isle of France (now Mauritius) to find that Louis XVI had been beheaded, and France was a republic at war with Great Britain, Holland and Spain, and therefore what was left of Van Braam's sugar was subject to confiscation.

American relations with France were also at low ebb, so despite their neutral status, they were detained on the island. To prevent confiscation of the sugar, they sold what little was left of it. Deciding the Eliza was not worth repairing, Stewart sold the brig for a pittance, retaining its papers.

Each of the partners had between twelve and fifteen thousand dollars plus the money from the sale of the sugar. They decided to buy a large prize ship captured from the British, the 1400-ton Hector. They figured they could use the Eliza's papers, and as neutrals, buy cotton in Bombay for the American market. It turned out to be a disastrous venture. The French detained them until February 1794. They had gone heavily into debt in order to pay their crew. When they finally were able to go to sea, a hurricane cost them three sails and they almost lost the ship.

By the time they reached Bombay, their capital was gone. Unable to find a cargo, they borrowed money at exorbitant interest from a certain Mr. Dunlap, who insisted on a lien on the Hector. Bravely, with Dunlap aboard, they then sailed to Calcutta. But as they approached the city, a sudden storm struck the vessel and caused ten thousand dollars worth of damage. By now their debt to Dunlap amounted to the staggering sum of nearly twenty thousand dollars.

Then, to make matters even worse, it was rumored that the United States and Great Britain were at war, so Dunlap demanded immediate repayment.. Facing the grim prospect of debtor's prison, the pair fled to the

^a Andreas Everardus van Braam was born in Holland, and was employed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Inspired by the American Revolution, he emigrated to America and became an American citizen, a rice planter in Charleston, and a friend of George Washington. He later went to China and became head of the Dutch factory in Canton, where he met Stewart. He is mostly famous for having participated in the Macartney Mission to the Qing emperor in Peking, in 1795

Danish settlement of Serampore, “the usual place of resort from Calcutta for men in our situation”.¹⁵

Salvation came in the person of the American consul, Benjamin Joy, who persuaded Dunlap to accept the Hector in lieu of a cash settlement. The partners were now penniless, lacking even a ship. Delano had had enough. He found passage home,¹⁶ “leaving the country with but one gold moore.”^b

Stewart was more resilient, and remained in India. He must have received funds from his brothers in New York or used his powers of persuasion to borrow money, because in the spring of 1797 he appeared at Batavia, in command of another brig called Eliza, using papers he’d saved from the original New York vessel.¹⁷ He had reached Batavia at a critical juncture in world history.

The city was the fulcrum of the venerable Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, the Dutch East India Company, or VOC. The largest and most powerful of the European trading companies, with its own navy and fortifications, and its own mint and coinage, for almost two centuries it had dominated trade in spices, coffee, and sugar between Europe, South Africa, and most of East and Southeast Asia. But for the past few decades it had been in decline, both financially and militarily. Corruption and a general decline in revenues had weakened it financially, while as a result of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) in which the Netherlands had been allied with the United States, the VOC had lost many of its bases. “Jan Compagnie”, as it was familiarly known, had resorted to borrowing heavily so it could pay generous dividends to its shareholders and maintain the value of its shares. At the same time, the VOC was facing political threats in Amsterdam, where liberal forces wanted to revoke its charter and put it directly under government control.¹⁸ But as in so much of the world of the time, the catalyst for change was the French Revolution, itself partly inspired by the American Revolution.

Napoleon’s forces had invaded the Netherlands, with widespread support from those sympathetic to the goals of the French Revolution. A Batavian Republic had been proclaimed, as an ally of France, and at war with Britain. As a result, Dutch ships had been seized by the British navy. The Prince of Orange had fled to London where he ordered Dutch possessions to surrender to Britain. The VOC in Batavia refused to surrender, but the British ruled the eastern seas. Bereft of ships and in limbo between the two warring powers, the Compagnie sought desperately for a solution.

Of immediate concern to the Company was Deshima, its outpost, or “factory”, on a tiny artificial island in Nagasaki harbor, where for almost two centuries the Dutch had had a monopoly on Japan’s commerce with the

^b A “moore” more commonly, “mohur” was a gold coin minted in India and Afghanistan, worth fifteen silver rupees.

European world. By transporting sugar, woollens, ivory, spices, rayskins^c and other items to Japan, and returning with copper¹⁹ and camphor, both highly desired in the European markets, the Company was able to show a modest profit. More important, at least for the Dutch in Deshima and the ships' captains, was the privilege of selling private goods in the kambang, or private market, not to mention the opportunity to smuggle. All this was now threatened.

By the terms of its agreement with the Shogunate in Edo (Tokyo), the VOC had to send a vessel each year or face the possible loss of its trading privileges. Because of the war, no ship had been sent in 1796, and the Company had no vessel available for the current year.

Stewart's arrival was timely. Apparently he was proficient in the Dutch language,²⁰ which he had probably picked up in New York, where the language was still relatively common. He and the Company agreed on a scheme. The authorities in Batavia chartered the Eliza for the annual voyage to Japan. Since it was a neutral vessel flying the Stars and Stripes, they figured it'd be immune to seizure by the British. On arrival at Nagasaki Stewart was to raise the Dutch flag and pretend to be a Dutchman. On the return voyage the procedure would be reversed. Thus a neutral American would do for the Dutch "what the Dutch had done for [the U.S.] at the beginning of the American War of Independence."²¹

The Company explained that strict etiquette would be required in Japan. The Eliza had to be gaily decorated with banners, and a table set under an awning on the quarterdeck, with cushions for officials. He would fire a certain number of salutes at certain specified times. He would need to present a list of all people on board, their ages and stations. No religious symbols or books would be allowed. The Japanese would take custody of all books, arms, ammunition and sails until his departure. They would search his ship, and seal all hatches. Until a special messenger brought permission from the Shogun at Edo no one could go ashore, nor could any Japanese except officials board his ship. He and his crew would have to sleep aboard the brig at night. Other rules and ceremonies, he was told, would be explained by Gjisbert Hemmij, the Opperhoofd (Chief) of the outpost on Deshima.²²

His major cargo to Japan would be Java brown sugar, and on the return trip camphor and copper, especially the latter, which was in high demand to protect ships' bottoms. The Company had a monopoly on those two items, but its employees, as well as Stewart, were free to trade in other goods.²³

^c Rayskins, the tough durable skins of rays, were highly prized by the Japanese for sword handles, armor, and casings, among other uses..

On July 22 1796, flying Dutch colors and firing numerous salutes, the Eliza dropped anchor in the magnificent hill-framed harbor of Nagasaki. It was immediately surrounded by a myriad of Japanese vessels. Hemmij came aboard, accompanied by interpreters, who demanded an explanation from him about this “small and strange ship, manned by an unfamiliar kind of black people and with officers who do not speak Dutch but a strange language” and wasn’t even carrying the goods that had been expected. After examining Stewart’s papers, Hemmij explained to the Japanese that the war with England had forced the Company to hire a neutral ship²⁴.

Stewart was permitted to land. He soon learned the facts of life on the tiny island about one third acre in size,²⁵ with about twenty Dutchmen in residence.

All affairs on Deshima were under the watchful supervision of the Tolken College, or Board of Interpreters, who spoke Dutch and served as the intermediaries between the Dutch and the Japanese. They were tiered according to rank, sixty or seventy in all. Smuggling and cheating the Company were facts of life on the island, practices in which the Dutch, the interpreters, and local merchants connived.

Stewart seems to have gotten along well with Hemmij, and all accounts agree that he was well-liked by the interpreters. “The Captain had a stern attitude but spoke with a little mouth like a woman [i.e. ‘softly’] wrote one Japanese.²⁶

In due course, the Eliza’s cargo was discharged. By late November after the brig had been reloaded, mostly with copper, camphor and wheat, plus some private goods, it was dispatched to Batavia. “I hope she may arrive safely in the capital,” Hemmij wrote. ²⁷

Unknown to the Company at the time, Hemmij had a lot riding on this voyage. Later it would be discovered that , heavily in debt both to the Company and to Japanese merchants, he’d made a secret pact with the Daimyo (Lord) of Satsuma, promising to send him an extra, illegal cargo for his private use.²⁸ In this he was treading on very thin ice. Not only was this a violation of the Company’s agreement with the Shogunate, but Satsuma, the furthest south of the fiefdoms, whose domain stretched into the Ryukyu Islands, had been one of the last to swear fealty to the Tokugawa Shogunate, which distrusted its loyalty.

The interpreters were in on Hemmij’s scheme ²⁹ as perhaps were some officials on Java as well. Violating all precedent, the interpreters, gave Stewart a written authorization to return with a private cargo. Hemmij wrote a sealed letter to Batavia, urging that the Company charter Stewart again. ³⁰

Hemmij’s letter had the desired effect in Java. In 1798 the Eliza was again chartered, and departed Batavia carrying its well-worn papers from New York. In addition to the goods belonging to the VOC, Stewart loaded a

private cargo bought with funds borrowed from the Company.³¹ Whether or not he'd stopped at Satsuma en route we have no way of knowing.

On Deshima, he found everything topsy-turvy. Hemmij had died, most likely of illness,³² while returning from his obligatory visit to the Shogun at Edo.^d Rumor had it that he'd been murdered.³³ Almost simultaneously a seemingly mysterious fire had destroyed half of the tiny outpost.³⁴

The acting Opperhoofd, the "Scribe" or secretary Leonard Ras, helped Stewart sell his cargo and reload. By November 25 1798, the Eliza was ready to sail. Then disaster struck. "Captain Stewart informed me that he was drove on shore by a gale of wind, on a large rocky ledge ... in a ship of between seven and eight tons burthen,"^e Amasa Delano recounted later. "[She] slid off and sunk in twelve or fifteen fathoms of water, with more than six hundred tons of Japan copper on board, besides other heavy articles."³⁵ "She hit a reef we had not been aware of," according to Ras.³⁶ Initial attempts to raise the vessel were abandoned, after camphor fumes killed two Japanese divers. Stewart and his crew were forbidden to stay on Deshima but were put in specially built barracks, there to await passage on next year's ship from Java. Twenty interpreters from Deshima were their warders, who demonstrated their friendship to Stewart by bringing him gifts of rice and clothing. He used his enforced idleness to learn as much as possible about Japanese customs, and presumably to try to learn the language.³⁷

While Stewart was thus immobilized, the Bugyo, or Governor of Nagasaki, suddenly launched a major investigation among the interpreters and former friends of Hemmi. Probably the object was to unearth the details, or to find scapegoats for the plot with the Daimyo of Satsuma, who was now at home surrounded by his supporters.³⁸

In January 1799 a former interpreter, and a minor servant of Hemmij were executed, the former by impalement, then latter by decapitation. "The reasons," wrote Ras, "cannot be learned, for it is being kept very secret." But Ras learned "on the side" that it was because Hemmi/ had plotted to send a fully loaded ship to Satsuma. "If this became public knowledge . . . it would probably lead to war, of which they have great fear." Interpreters told Ras "that it was very fortunate that Hemmij had died, for otherwise he would have been banned from the country."³⁹

Just then, to Stewart's relief, the Eliza was raised by an ingenious fishing merchant named Kiemon. A woodprint in the library at Nagasaki depicts his method. At low tide he put cables around the hull and fastened

^d Hemmij's grave is near Kanegawa, with a commemorative plaque placed there by the Japanese authorities.

^e An oil painting by an unknown artist depicting this shipwreck is in the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

them to fifteen junks on each side, and to larger ships at reach end. When the tide was full the junks raised their sails and towed the brig off the reef and to a beach. Kiemon's feat was praised throughout Japan, and his lord, the Daimyo of Choshu, authorized him to wear the two swords of a samurai, a very rare privilege for a commoner, and gave him a special crest showing a Dutch hat with two crossed Dutch pipes.⁴⁰

Stewart tried desperately to find timber suitable for replacing his masts. Logs submitted to him were rotten or otherwise unsuitable. So poor were they that he was forced to construct one mast out of two. Before the brig was deemed fit to sail, Ras advanced money to Stewart for further repairs.⁴¹ Finally, by June 1799 the Eliza was ready to go, but the southeast monsoon was blowing. Impatiently disregarding all advice, Stewart put out into it.

But a month later the vessel limped back into port, once more minus its masts.⁴² Stewart reported he'd met a three-day storm near Taiwan, a storm that Hendrik Doeff, who had in the meantime returned from Batavia, called "the worst storm I'd ever experienced."⁴³ Rumors said the American had been seen in forbidden ports belonging to the daimyo of Satsuma, and the broken masts were only a camouflage. To make matters worse, Stewart no longer had any papers for the Eliza. Nearing Nagasaki, he said, he'd seen a large vessel that he thought was a British warship, and had thrown the papers overboard.⁴⁴

The vessel Stewart had seen was the Franklin of Salem captained by James Devereaux, who landed at Deshima while Stewart's disabled vessel was being towed in.⁴⁵

The Franklin had been chartered by the Company in Batavia after they had had no news from the Eliza for more than a year. They knew nothing of Hemmij's death, and had simply assumed that Stewart's vessel had been lost. Aboard Devereaux's vessel was the energetic Hendrik Doeff, then twenty-one, a minor official of the Company, Doeff found affairs on Deshima in such a mess because of the death of Hemmij and the incompetent bookkeeping of Ras that he resolved to return to Java and make a full report to the authorities there.⁴⁶

In the meantime, Stewart once again had to find wood for his masts. And once again the task frustrated him. Almost all the trees presented to him were deformed or rotten. So poor was the quality of timber provided that by the time he had replaced his masts, he had consumed twenty trees.⁴⁷

By November 12 he was ready to leave, and he set sail, ignoring Doeff's request that the two ships return together.⁴⁸ As Doeff probably anticipated, the Eliza never made it back to Batavia.

The following year, 1800, the Company chartered another American vessel, the Massachusetts, under Captain H.V. Hutchings, assisted by Captain Ditmar Smit, who had skippered the last VOC vessel to Deshima in

1795. Aboard was Inspector Walther Wardenaar, sent to replace Ras and set affairs in order. Hendrik Doeff was his assistant.

Also aboard the vessel, as captain's clerk, was a young man from Salem, George Cleveland, whose chatty diary affords us an informal glimpse of daily life on Deshima that the formal entries of the Dagregister don't provide.⁴⁹

As the Massachusetts sailed into Nagasaki harbor on July 16, those aboard were astounded to learn that another vessel "Dutch ship" had arrived on May 27 and was lying at anchor. Its name: Emperor of Japan. Its master: none other than the seemingly ubiquitous William Robert Stewart. For several weeks, the two vessels lay outside Deshima while their respective crews and skippers got to know each other.

For our purposes, most interesting are Cleveland's frequent references to William Robert Stewart, who is seen as a gregarious sociable person, having an easy relationship with his fellow countrymen and the Dutch.

But Wardenaar, as we shall see, felt differently and had a more sour perspective, perhaps inspired by a dislike of foreigners in Deshima, or perhaps because of Stewart's previous association with Hemmij.

Stewart had told Ras that he had lost both his brig and cargo the previous November in a tremendous typhoon near Borneo. The Eliza had sprung a leak, and after pumping for three days and two nights, they had abandoned ship. He and two officers and fourteen sailors got into the shallop and made their way to Luzon. The other sixty-three crew members had taken the longboat, and had not been heard of again. In Manila "some American acquaintances" had furnished him with a small brig and some private trade goods with which he left on April 19. After a journey of thirty-eight days he had arrived at Deshima. He was going to sell his cargo, he said, and repay his debts to the Company. Not knowing how to cope with the situation, Acting Opperhoofd Ras had reported to the Japanese that the "Dutch ship" had arrived and so informed the Governor of Nagasaki.⁵⁰

Wardenaar and Doeff put up objections. They alleged that certain fittings in the galley of Stewart's ship had come off the Eliza, although Stewart had claimed he'd salvaged nothing. "In case of shipwreck," wrote Doeff, "a galley fitting is the last thing one thinks of salvaging,"⁵¹ But this allegation is open to question. It seems unlikely that either Wardenaar (who had never been aboard the Eliza), or Doeff, would have been very familiar with the fittings in Stewart's galley. Furthermore, Wardenaar argued, Stewart had violated his charter by not returning to Java. According to Doeff, they believed that Stewart was trying to hoodwink Ras into giving him a load of copper, "with which he most certainly would not have returned to Batavia."⁵² In other words, Stewart was trying to recoup his financial losses by absconding with the Company's copper.

Wardenaar seems to have had a strong personal bias against Stewart, perhaps because of the latter's previous association with the unscrupulous Hemmij. He went so far as to quiz the interpreters about the disaster of the Eliza during Stewart's first trip in 1798, questioning why the vessel had been moored with only one anchor, as though Stewart had had a motive for deliberately sinking his own ship with its cargo.⁵³ Surprisingly, he seems never to have questioned Stewart's officers and crew about the recent shipwreck. Nor have we seen any account from any one of them challenging Stewart's explanation.

But Wardenaar's hands were tied. Technically, he decided, Stewart was still under contract with the VOC, and in any case, the Company had no police powers in Japan. The interpreters refused to intervene. Wardenaar informed Stewart that he would be permitted to sell his cargo, provided he return to Java on the Massachusetts, while Captain Smit would take Stewart's vessel to Batavia. Under protest, the American agreed and stated that at Batavia he'd prove his innocence. Although his cargo was put up for sale, it proved to be of such poor quality that it barely brought enough to partly cover his debts.⁵⁴

Before leaving on the Massachusetts, Stewart informed Wardenaar that he would deliver to the authorities in Java a written protest at being sent to Batavia under duress. "I told him . . . that I would not let any threat scare me off carrying out my duty," Wardenaar wrote in his diary.⁵⁵

On November 6 1800 the Massachusetts sailed for Batavia, a reluctant Stewart aboard. The Emperor of Japan, commanded by Captain Smit, had left a day earlier.⁵⁶

Ever resourceful, Stewart, who had become friends with Hutchings on Deshima, seems to have made a deal with him, for enroute to Batavia the Massachusetts stopped at Manila. There they visited the Spanish governor (who was probably Stewart's "friend"). The governor asked if they could get permission for the Spanish to trade with Japan at Deshima.⁵⁷

When Stewart was finally brought to Java at the end of 1800 the political atmosphere had changed. The officials at Batavia were under fire in Amsterdam. Dirk van Hogendorp, a pro-French "reformer" and political enemy of the Company, had just published a book alleging, among other things, that Stewart was an Englishman pretending to be an American, and accused the Company of knowingly sending an enemy vessel to Japan.⁵⁸ (It was probably this book by Hogendorp that a little later convinced Stamford Raffles to call Stewart an "Englishman" in his History of Java.)⁵⁹ To make matters worse, Hogendorp was being spoken of as the new Governor of Java once the Company lost its franchise, which seemed increasingly likely.

Stewart's vessel was impounded and he was forbidden to leave Batavia while officials began a detailed investigation of his tangled affairs. It

took a long time. Jan Compagnie did not move quickly. Meanwhile, Stewart saw his prospects for profit ebbing away. By 1802 he decided to escape.

Like so much of his history, how he did it is unclear. A Dutch historian says that he pretended to go to Semarang, and embarked on the American vessel Portland headed for Mauritius. A Japanese source reports that one night Stewart seized control of an American ship at anchor in the harbor of Batavia and sailed off with it. Another Japanese source claimed that he stole a ship containing rice that belonged to the Company, and later sold both rice and cargo.⁶⁰ Doeff says only that "he fled to Bengal."⁶¹ The first version is the most believable. Stewart operated by guile and persuasion, and was not so highly desperate as to commit piracy, which was a capital crime. In any case, the authorities in Batavia were probably relieved to know that the VOC was rid of the resourceful and obstreperous American, and it's likely that those who'd been involved with Hemmij were glad to have the investigation brought to a close.

In 1801, while Stewart was languishing under house arrest in Batavia, another American vessel, the Margaret of Salem was sent to Deshima. In 1803 went the American Sa9muel Smith, as well as a Dutch Company ship, the Matilda Maria, (now free to sail the seas because of the Peace of Amiens.) Then, in 1803, the Rebecca, of Baltimore, captained by James Deale, was chartered. Deale arrived at Deshima on August 22, bringing Hendrik Doeff, newly appointed as Opperhoofd in place of Wardenaar, who was retiring.⁶²

Two days later, before the two friends had hardly had a chance to get organized, Stewart suddenly made a dramatic reappearance, now in command of a ship boldly flying the Stars and Stripes, with the name Nagasaki Maru, freshly painted on its bow in Chinese characters. Completely bewildered, the Japanese sent nineteen boats and 156 soldiers to the scene, and ordered Stewart to turn over all his guns and ammunition.⁶³ At the request of the Bugyo [Governor] of Nagasaki, Wardenaar and Doeff went aboard, accompanied by the interpreters and Japanese officials. They were greeted by Stewart, who was elegantly dressed in a blue suit with gold buttons and gold embroidered buttonholes. The buttons, Wardenaar noticed, depicted a lion, which he recognized as the insignia of the English East India Company.

Wardenaar immediately demanded whether Stewart had credentials from the Company, but Stewart replied blandly that he had none. He had come, he said, on his own account to obtain an American outpost in Japan similar to that of the Dutch on Deshima. "Who is the king of your country?" asked the Japanese interpreters. "Jefferson is king of America" was his reply. He claimed that he had sailed directly from New York via Canton, with an entirely American cargo.

Familiar with the customs of the country, Stewart had brought a camel, a water buffalo and two donkeys as gifts for the Shogun. None of

these animals had ever before been seen in Japan, and they were greeted with amazement.⁶⁴

On deck were also two officers, and a "Doctor", who wore an outfit similar to Stewart's. The "Doctor", it appeared, also owned an interest in the ship. In all, there were 104 persons aboard, of whom twelve were Europeans and all the rest, Wardenaar believed, were Bengali, whom Stewart described as "Javanese", probably to conceal the fact that he had sailed from India.

He presented sealed letters addressed to the Governor and the Shogun, seeking permission to establish a trading post for Americans, similar to the one set aside for the Dutch. Stewart made it clear that he didn't want any copper for export - perfectly aware that increased Dutch demands for the metal had been meeting resistance from the Japanese. All he wanted, he said, was to bring Western trade goods into Japan and to take out dried fish and drugs, presumably for the Cantonese market. Stewart was, indeed, "speaking softly, like a woman."

Wardenaar and Doeff were convinced that both cargo and ship were British. Perhaps influenced by Hogendorp's criticisms in Amsterdam, they decided that Stewart was no doubt a British agent. Wardenaar suspected the cargo wasn't Stewart's at all, but belonged to the "Doctor".⁶⁵ His suspicions were strengthened by Captain Deale, who declined to back up his countryman. Deale reported to the Dutchman that the equipment aboard had been manufactured in England, and that he had been informed before arriving at Batavia that Stewart had been planning to sail to Japan from Calcutta.⁶⁶

Once more, the facts are murky. It is entirely possible, even likely, that this latest venture of the ever creative Stewart had been backed by British merchants in Bengal, who supported Stewart's objective, as a wedge for the British to slip in. It's probable that Stewart had flown the British flag on his voyage to Nagasaki. This is suggested by a comment by Amasa Delano, to whom Stewart recounted his Japanese adventures some years later. Delano wrote that Stewart "went four times to Japan in command of a ship, after he and I were together, and sailed three times from Batavia in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, and once from Bengal, but he did not succeed in opening a trade while he was under the English flag."⁶⁷

The Dutch on Deshima at this time were especially sensitive to any dealings with the British. A resumption of the war between Britain and France seemed imminent, and the holdings of the VOC were extremely vulnerable to attacks by either country. As a Dutch historian reminds us, "to maintain the factory thus became the chief purpose of Holland in Japan."⁶⁸

Of course, Wardenaar refused to allow Stewart to use the facilities on Deshima, and reported to the Governor that the American had no credentials from Batavia, and the Company had forbidden him to return to the island. But the Opperhoofd had to funnel everything through the

interpreters in his dealings with the Governor, and this was a major hurdle. They seemed partial to Stewart, and balked at transmitting Wardenaar's denunciations of the American, in order to avoid "ensuing complications, they said." ⁶⁹ The "complications" they feared were probably related to the still smoldering investigation of Hemmij's deal with Satsuma, and their interpreter's role in it. Stewart may also have promised them gifts if they supported him.

"All of Nagasaki," one interpreter reported, "wished the ship would be allowed to trade because she carried so many beautiful goods." ⁷⁰ In "midnightly attempts" they tried to persuade Wardenaar to make a private deal with Stewart. ⁷¹

But Wardenaar was tough, and resorted to what amounted to blackmail. He wrote a report, asserting Stewart's British connections, and compelled the interpreters to sign a copy indicating they had seen it. If they didn't transmit the letter to the Governor, and Stewart was given trading privileges, he told them, "I would then present this paper signed by the interpreters and this would probably cost them their lives due to their keeping the Governor in the dark regarding this ship." ⁷²

The Dutch had some reason to feel apprehensive. The Tokugawa grip on Japan was gradually slipping as the feudal system was slowly disintegrating under the pressure of urbanization and a rising middle class. Voices for modernization, or at least more openness to Western ideas, were being heard. There had been recent developments at Edo that could favor Stewart's cause. The "isolationists" had fallen from favor in 1801, and the Daimyo of Satsuma, at least temporarily, had influence at the court. And he was an advocate of freer trade.

At the same time, the Japanese were increasingly alarmed by the expansion of the Russians into Siberia and more especially by British expansion into India. At Edo, a case could be made for the importation of Western arms. If ever the Tokugawa policy of exclusion were to be loosened, this would seem to be the time.

Furthermore, the Japanese, through their Dutch window on the world, were well aware that the United States, in alliance with the Dutch, had defeated the mighty British in war. Would they see in the Americans a possible counterweight to the British in East Asia? The outcome might depend on whether the Japanese accepted Stewart's claim to be an American, or the Dutch allegations that he was a British agent.

The Governor's reply came much sooner than expected. Contrary to his orders from the bakufu ^f he had opted to settle the issue himself without involving the Shogun. Possibly he accepted the Dutch accusations that Stewart was actually an Englishman. Possibly he wanted to sweep the

^f The bakufu was the Shogun's government at Edo [Tokyo]...

matter under the rug because his own interpreters had been involved in Hemmij's plot with Satsuma, and he didn't want to bring the matter to the Shogun's attention.⁷³

Accordingly, on August 29 Stewart was duly summoned to a large Japanese boat, where he was confronted by a delegation of officials in the company of Wardenaar and Doeff. Obedient to Japanese protocol, he had to assume a prone position, resting on his hands and feet, while an interpreter read him the "exclusion laws" of Japan, and the Governor's order: leave Japan "with the first possible wind," and never return to Japan.⁷⁴

But to Stewart, "the first possible wind" was open to interpretation. In a final ploy, he asked Wardenaar and Doeff to obtain for him water, lamp oil, dry fish and chili, and to permit him to exchange his cargo for an equal cargo of Japanese goods "since the winds had not yet changed."⁷⁵ He was sternly told by Wardenaar not to contact him again. "We . . . recommend you sail as soon as possible to prevent any unpleasantness incurred by Japanese laws."⁷⁶ Two days later, on September 2, after getting supplies of water and oil, Stewart left Nagasaki,⁷⁷ arguably after having come close to changing world history.

On September 8, another ship the Frederick, appeared at Deshima, seeking to trade. This ship was flying British colors. Although he denied it, the ship's master, James Torry, appeared to know Stewart, and the Dutch suspected, with reason, that the two men had been connected. Torry, of course, was also turned away, but Wardenaar's letter to him of September 10 is especially interesting in light of Stewart's experiences.

After warning Torry against the strict Japanese exclusionist laws, Wardenaar observes that

"For some nations, the Japanese laws are less strict. . . . If an American or French ship were to be in distress they would still not be allowed to enter the harbor, but the Japanese would help them to the point where they would be able to part again. . . . But for other nations, such as the English, the Spanish and the Portuguese, they are under no circumstances allowed into the harbor . . . not even in case of shipwreck. Their laws are so strict that were this to happen their ship and cargo would be burned and the crew killed or imprisoned. . . . Had we informed the Governor that you were English you would have incurred great misfortune."⁷⁸

Wardenaar may have been exaggerating for the sake of intimidating the British, but it seems that Stewart and other Americans had made a favorable impression on the Japanese. In 1812 Mr. Jacob Andreas Van

Braam[§], acting as advisor to the British after they took over Java, advised Stamford Raffles that “the English should in the first instance pass for Americans . . . until circumstances may admit the avowal of their real nation.”⁷⁹

Stewart was later reported to be in India. In 1807 a Boston adventurer, Joseph O’Kean to O’Cain, as colorful and spectacular as Stewart himself, appeared at Deshima commanding the Eclipse, a vessel chartered by the Russian American Company. Questioned by Doeff, he stated that he knew Stewart, who was reported to be in Bengal.⁸⁰

At this point published histories have lost track of Stewart, but he continued to live a flesh and blood existence. Although O’Kean placed him in India in 1807, that is highly unlikely, for in March of that year he appeared personally at a legal hearing in New York involving property belonging to his family.⁸¹ Later that year his brother Alexander Stewart died, two days after having named him executor of his estate.⁸²

On February 13 1809, William Robert married Catherine Hopkins, the widow of a New York merchant.⁸³ He probably was still voyaging, for a city directory listed his occupation as “Shipmaster.”⁸⁴ They lived in Bloomingdale, a New York neighborhood near what is now Sixth Avenue and 31st Street. Catherine died in June 1815, “after a short and severe illness.”⁸⁵

Stewart married again in on September 26, 1816, at he Dutch Reformed church in the Bloomingdale section of the city. The bride was Maria Louisa de Labigarre.⁸⁶ She was the daughter of Pierre de Labigarre, a real estate speculator and business associate of the noted jurist and future U.S. Senator Edward Livingston, which gave him high status in the social and business circles of New York. De Labigarre had died in New Orleans in 1807, and had left property in that city to his daughter.⁸⁷

Maria Louisa’s mother, still living, was Margaret Beekman, a member of a wealthy and influential family. An aunt was married to a Livingston. Thus Stewart, after his pursuit of wealth in the Orient, was now surrounded by it by virtue of his marriage. Maria Louisa was eighteen, and Stewart was thirty years her senior. Perhaps she had been captivated by his tales of adventure in the Orient.

But Stewart was not to enjoy his marriage long. By April 1817 he was in New Orleans accompanied by his wife and mother-in-law, in connection with the famous lawsuit known as the “Batture” case, pertaining to valuable riparian property his wife had inherited from her father. The suit involved a conflict between English common law and the Napoleonic Code, which had

[§] Jacob Andreas Van Braam was the nephew of Andreas Van Braam Houckgeest, who had been acquainted with Stewart and Amasa Delano in Canton. I am indebted to Ms. Isabel Tanaka van Daalen for this information.

governed Louisiana until the United States acquired it with the Louisiana Purchase. Former president Thomas Jefferson was the prime counsel on the other side. The “Batture” Case, which is beyond the scope of this study, dragged on for many years, and pitted two legal giants and bitter personal and political rivals, Jefferson and Edward Livingston, against each other. Maria Louisa and her co-plaintiffs lost their case, and Jefferson won, establishing a legal precedent that remains part of American constitutional law.⁸⁸

While in New Orleans, Stewart contracted yellow fever and died on September 20, 1818. His will was probated four days later. He left everything to his wife, and requested that he be “interred in the vault of my venerable ancestors.”⁸⁹

His body was shipped to Staten Island and buried under quarantine. The following spring it was disinterred and put in the Stewart family vault in the cemetery of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York. Forty years later, when Beekman Street was widened, the occupants of the vault were moved to a cemetery in Brooklyn where, presumably, Stewart rests in peace.⁹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Conrad Totten aptly calls Stewart “this shadowy captain.” Totten, Conrad, Early Modern Japan. California, 1995, p. 498. Peter J. Fetchko uses deductive reasoning and concludes correctly that he was an American. Fetchko, Peter J. “Salem Trading Voyages to Japan During the Early Nineteenth Century,” The American Neptune, Volume XLVI, No. 1, Winter 1986, Peabody Institute, Salem, Massachusetts, pp. 50-54.

² See Raffles, Sir Stamford, Report on Japan: To the Secret Committee of the English East India Company. Preface and Edited by M. Paske-Smith. New Edition, London, p. 8n. See also Hildreth, Eichard, Japan As it Was and Is. Boston, 1855, p. 448 Hildreth based his statement on Raffles.

³ The “Experiment Papers”. Manuscripts in the collection of the Historical Society.

⁴ “Stewart and Jones, Letters, Letter Book, Account Book. Bills and Receipts, Miscellaneous Papers” in manuscript collections of the New York Historical Society and the New York Public Library. (Hereafter referred to as “S&J.”)

⁵ St. Andrews Society of New York. Biographical Register. Vol. I. New York, 1922.

⁶ Register of Marriages. Bloomingdale Dutch Reformed Church. Gardner A. Sage Library, .New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Rutgers University.

⁷ New-York Journal and Daily Register, April 26 1787; New York Independent Journal, April 25 1787.

⁸ S&J, "Letter Book". New York Historical Society. p. 250..

⁹ S&J "Letter Book", Letter to William Stewart. January 3 1798.

¹⁰ New York Daily Advertiser, Oct.15 1790 through January 9 1791

¹¹ New York Journal and Patriotic Reporter, February 21 1791.

¹² Delano, Amasa. Narrative of Voyages and Travels. Boston, 1817, pp.196-7

¹³ . For a vivid description of sealing on the island, see James Kirker, Adventures to China: Americans in the Southern Oceans 1792-1812. New York, 1970, pp.45-81. _ Joan Duett, an historian familiar with this period, has pointed out that members of the crew of the Eliza spread the word about the abundance of seals on the island, leading to its fame as a sealing place in the early 19th century. (Joan Druett, private correspondence,)

¹⁴ The following account of the misfortunes of Stewart and Delano is from Delano, pp. 196-251.

¹⁵ Delano, p. 238.

¹⁶ Delano, p. 250

¹⁷ Kuiper, J. F. "Some Notes on the Early Foreign Relations of Japan During the Napoleonic Period," Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan. 2ND Ser. , X,Tokyo, 1924, p.58

¹⁸ See Boxer, C.R., Jan Compagnie in War and Peace 1602-1799. Hong Kong, 1979.

¹⁹ Delano, p. 250

²⁰ Kuiper, p. 64., citing a Japanese source

²¹ Kuiper, p. 57.

²² For a description of the prescribed formalities, see Malloy, Mary, Devil on the Deep Blue Sea, Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania, 2008, pp. 103-105. The author has used the logbook of Captain James Devereaux, in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. See also Madoka Kanai, A Diary of William `Cleveland, Captain's Clerk on board the Massachusetts. Monograph Series 1. Institute of Asian Studies, University of the Philippines. Quezon City, 1965.

²³ Raffles, Sir Stamford, Report on Japan, p. 24.

²⁴ Hemmij, July 22 1796, DD, p. 94.

²⁵ Madoka Kanai, A Diary of William Cleveland, p. 15, fn53.

²⁶ Kuiper, p. 64

²⁷ Hemmij, November 9 1797. DD, p. 98.

²⁸ Diary of Willem Wardenaar, August 18 1800, DD, p. 148.

²⁸ Wardenaar, "Secret Diary", October 23 1800, DD Appendix 3, p.185

³⁰ Kuiper,, pp. 4-5

³¹ Wardenaar, "Secret Diary", October 19 1800, DD, p. 184

³² Leopold Willem Ras, Diary, June 7 1798, DD, p. 100

³³ Kuiper, . p. 63.

³⁴ Ras, Diary, April 24,1798, DD p. 103 The fire apparently had been caused accidentally by a female servant.

³⁵ Delano, 412., recounting a later conversation with Stewart.

³⁶ Ras, Diary, November 25 1798, DD, 115.

³⁷ Kuiper, p. 64

³⁸ Kuiper, p.65

³⁹ Ras, Diary, January 29 1799 DD, p.119.

⁴⁰ Kuiper, p.66

⁴¹ Ras, Diary, April 24, May 12, June 2 1799, DD, pp. 122-124.

⁴² Ras, Diary, July 16, 1799, D0D, p. 126.

⁴³ Doeff, Hendrik, Recollections of Japan. Translated and Annotated by Annik M. Doeff., Victoria,B.C., 2003, p.47

44. Kuiper, p. 66.

45. For Devereaux and his visit to Deshima, pp.102-117.

⁴⁶ Doeff, Hendrik, Recollections of Japan. Translated and Annotated by Annik M. Doeff, Victoria, 2003, p.35.

⁴⁷ Ras, Diary, July 27, September 20, October 20 1799, DD. pp. 127-131.

⁴⁸ Ras, Diary, November 27 1799, DD, p. 132

⁴⁹ Madoka Kanai, A Diary of William Cleveland, Captain's Mate on Board the Massachusetts, Monograph Series No. 1, Instiutute of Asian Studies, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, 1965.

⁵⁰ Ras, Diary, May 27 1800, DD, p.139

⁵¹ Doeff, p.48

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Wardenaar, "Secret Diary", August 9 1800, Appendix 3, DD, p.182

⁵⁴ Wardenaar, "Secret Diary", September 24 1800, DD, p.183

⁵⁵ Wardenaar, "Secret Diary", November 4 1800, DD, 185.

⁵⁶ Wardenaar, "Diary", November 6 2800, DD, p.156

⁵⁷ Kuiper, p. 68

⁵⁸ Kuiper, citing Dirk Van Hogendorp, p. 62.

⁵⁹ Raffles, History of Java. p.8.

⁶⁰ Shunzo Sakamaki, "Japan and the United States, 1790-1853." Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan. Second Series. Vol XVIII. Tokyo, 1939, Footnote, p. 7.

⁶¹ Doeff, p. 48.

⁶² Doeff, p. 45

⁶³ Wardenaar, Willem Secreete verslag off dagregister , betreffende de aankomst va twee Europese scheepen Nagasaki en Frederick of Bengal, door Willem Wardenaar, 24 aug. – 12 Sept. 1803. [Secret Diary of William Wardenaar,] Nichiran Koshoshi Kenkyukai, Vol. 31, Aanh. Nr. 6 [Made available to me courtesy of Isabel Tanaka-van Daalen]. Entry of August 24 1803. (Hereafter cited as Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag.")

- ⁶⁴ Ibid. See also Kuiper, p. 71, who says that Deale was mistaken; Stewart actually sailed from Madras.
- ⁶⁵ Doeff, p. 45.
- ⁶⁶ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag," August 24 1803.
- ⁶⁷ Delano, p.411.
- ⁶⁸ Kuiper, p 71.
- ⁶⁹ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 25 1803.
- ⁷⁰ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag," August 27 1803
- ⁷¹ Kuiper, p 71..
- ⁷² Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 25, 1803.
- ⁷³ Kuiper, p. 72.
- ⁷⁴ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 29 1803..
- ⁷⁴ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 29 1803..
- ⁷⁵ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 30 1803.
- ⁷⁶ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag", August 31 1803.
- ⁷⁷ Doeff, pp. 45-46.
- ⁷⁸ Wardenaar, "Secreete verslag" September 10 1803.
- ⁷⁹ Raffles, Sir Stamford, Report on Japan, p. 22.
- ⁸⁰ Shunzo Sakamaki, pp. 9-10.
- ⁸¹ "Wills and Conveyances", Hall of Records, New York City.
- ⁸² "Wills and Conveyances", Liber 47, 230. Hall of Records, New York City..
- ⁸³ The New York Evening Post, February 14 1809; The New York Weekly Museum, Feb. 18 1809...
- ⁸⁴ The New York City Directory, 1809.
- ⁸⁵ The New York Evening Post, June 19 1815.
- ⁸⁶ New York Evening Post. September 27 1816.
- ⁸⁷ "Peter de Labigarre and the Founding of Tivoli," Yearbook of the Dutchess County Historical Society, Vol. 14, 1929, . pp. 45-60.
- ⁸⁸ The literature on this case is voluminous. See, for example, Dargo, George, Jefferson's Louisiana: Politics and the Clash of Legal Traditions. Harvard, 1975. and the various pamphlets levied against each other by both Jefferson and Livingston.
- ⁸⁹ Will of William Robert Stewart. New York Hall of Records, Wills. Liber 54, 448.
- ⁹⁰ Knapp. Shepherd. A History of the Brick Presbyterian Church. New York, 1909. p.262.

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