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EDWARD ROBARTS

Memoir and Marquesan vocabulary, 1824

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Edward Robarts (b. c. 1770) was born in Barmouth, Wales. He became a seaman and as a young man took part in the slave trade between Africa and Jamaica and Santa Domingo. He also sailed to Rio de Janeiro and Saint Petersburg. In 1797 in London he joined the crew of the *New Euphrates* as a cook and steward and, as far as is known, he never returned to England again. Deserting the ship in the Marquesas Islands, he became one of the earliest beachcombers and one of the first Europeans to write about the people, language and culture of the islands. Robarts married a Marquesan, Enaoata, and remained in the islands until 1806. He and his family then lived an itinerant life, travelling to Tahiti, New Zealand, Fiji and Penang, before settling in Calcutta in 1810. In Penang he was connected with Thomas Stamford Raffles and in Calcutta he initially found a patron in John Leyden. However, in the years that followed he was only able to obtain temporary employment, an attempt to obtain land in New South Wales was unsuccessful, he experienced poverty and witnessed the deaths of two wives and six of his seven children.

Robarts completed his memoir and Marquesan vocabulary in 1824. Almost nothing is known of his later life. From 1822 to 1831 his name appears in the *East India Register* as a police constable. He possibly died in 1832, but there is no definite information.

The manuscript is reproduced in Greg Denning, ed. *The Marquesan journal of Edward Robarts 1797-1824*, (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1974). Denning also wrote about Robarts in some detail in *Beach crossings: voyaging across times, cultures, and self* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2004), especially chapters 3 and 7.

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Edward Robarts began writing his memoir in Calcutta in 1811 at the request of Dr John C. Leyden, the Scottish-born authority on Asian languages. Robarts had been introduced to Leyden by his former employer Thomas Stamford Raffles. Leyden left Calcutta soon afterwards and died in Java in the same year. Robarts continued writing the narrative and at some time after 1814 he made a fair copy in a notebook. The narrative was completed in 1824 and Robarts sent the manuscript to James Hare, a Scottish surgeon who worked in Calcutta for many years.

The memoir begins with Robarts's departure from London on the whaling ship *New Euphrates* (Capt. Henry Glasspoole) in November 1797. The ship called at St Jago (Santiago) in the Cape Verde Islands and then sailed to Cape Horn, the coast of Chile, the Galapagos Islands and the coast of California. It joined forces with another whaler, *Buttersworth*, and they sailed west to the Marquesan Islands, reaching St Cristiana (Tahuata) in December 1798. (folios 1-9)

Assisted by Tama, a Hawaiian seaman, Robarts deserted the ship. He spent some time at Vaitahu and Hapatoni, valleys in Tahuata, before sailing to the island of Hiva Oa. He describes his relations and negotiations with the Marquesans (Enata), feasts, funeral rites, dances, clothes and wars. He refers to his discovery of a chest belonging to the missionary William P. Crook, who had left Vaitahu in 1798, offers of marriage, prophecies, his involvement in a skirmish in which he was wounded, visitors from other valleys, and his study of the language of the Marquesans. (folios 10-45).

In 1800 Robarts sailed to the island of Nukahiva, landing at Taipivai. He refers to early British and American visits to the island (1794-99) and describes his journeys over the mountains, relations with 'the French boy' Jean Joseph Kabris (Cabri) and an Englishman Walker, war dances, food, the visit of an American ship, the *Minerva*, cannibalism and famine. He walked to the valleys of Taiohae and became known to the 'king' Kiatonui, his mother Putahaii and their family. He stayed there nearly six years and married Enaoata (Ena), the sister of Kiatonui. During this time he had dealings with the American ships *One Idea* and *Concord* and the Russian ships *Nadezhda* and *Neva*, commanded by Ivan Kruzenshtein and Yurii Lisanski, which visited Nukahiva briefly in 1804. (folios 45-83)

Robarts and his wife and daughter left the Marquesas in 1806 on the *Lucy* (Capt. Abe Ferguson) and sailed to Tahiti. He writes of his meetings with John Youl and William Henry, London Missionary Society missionaries, the birth of his second daughter, the war between Pomare II and the people of Atehuru, stories of cannibalism, his departure from Tahiti on the *General Wellesley* (Capt. David Dalrymple) in 1807, the voyage to the Bay of Islands, trading with the Maori, encounters with

George Bruce and Thomas Randall, the search for gold at North Cape, and the voyage to Fiji, New Britain, the Pellew Islands and Malacca. (folios 83-103)

Robarts and his family reached Penang in February 1808. For a short time they led a settled life, as Robarts became the butler, storekeeper and occasional cook in the household of Quinton Thompson and his wife Mary Anne, the sister of Thomas Stamford Raffles. He writes of meetings with James Hobson and William Robinson, the birth of his third daughter, and his relations with Raffles. In March 1810 they moved on to Calcutta, where Robarts met the linguist John Leyden and began the narrative of his life in the Pacific. His two sons were born in Calcutta. He worked for a time at the Lower Orphan School at Howrah. His wife Enaoata died in June 1813 and two of his daughters in 1814. He found work in the Botanic Gardens and in 1816 sailed to Australia, hoping to obtain a land grant. He describes the voyage on the *Frederick* (Capt. Jonathan Williams) to Hobart and Sydney, his meeting with Governor Lachlan Macquarie and Macquarie's refusal to give him a grant, and the perilous voyage along the eastern coast of Australia to Timor and back to Calcutta. The following years are touched on briefly, as he records his search for employment, the deaths of both of his sons, his move in 1819 to Murshidebad, north of Calcutta, and his illness. (folios 103-23)

The next section of the narrative is a general description of the Marquesas Islands. It touches on many subjects: the position of the islands and their climate, tides, topography, soils, minerals, rivers, trees including the breadfruit and sandalwood, animals and insects, physical features of the Islanders, food, agriculture, human sacrifices, employment, trade, harbours, government, customs, marriages, harvests, famines, domestic furniture and religion. (folios 123-51)

Robarts concludes his narrative by referring to the death of his second wife in 1823, the survival of only one daughter (Ellen) of his seven children, the writing of his memoir and his plan to return to Calcutta in 1824. (folios 153-71)

The final section of the work is a vocabulary of the Marquesan language. It is not in alphabetical order and many of the words or phrases appear randomly, but some related words, such as numbers or illnesses, are grouped together. (folios 153-71)