

Missing Monuments

JAMES CHOYCE

At the age of 16, Choyce left his widowed mother and five brothers and sisters on a farm at Finchley, London. He signed on as an apprentice on the whaling ship LONDON. After years at sea, a captive of both the Spanish and the French, he was made Master of his own ship, the SARAH ANN, in 1804. James retired from the sea in 1822 because of physical disabilities and settled in Brighton where he died in 1836 and was buried at St Nicholas, although the exact location is not known. Many years after his death – a manuscript was found hidden in a Brighton lodging house which was subsequently published as 'The Log of a Jack Tar'.

The book offers a remarkable personal account of the excruciating nature of campaigning in the Napoleonic era: Choyce was captured by the Spanish off Chile, escaped five times and recaptured four, managed to join an English frigate, was captured by a French privateer while on a whaling voyage, escaped, was recaptured, and imprisoned at Verdun, "tired of loyalty" and put himself at the service of the French, deserted and joined an English warship, deserted again, and lived to encounter pirates at Juan Fernandez. Choyce's narrative covering 26 years of seafaring life is one of the earliest works of an Englishman's experiences in South America.