

## A Fall From Aloft

**Robert Masters**

Brian Berkeley Burland was born in Bermuda in 1931 and became Bermuda's most famous and prolific novelist. He published eight novels and a much-acclaimed children's book, *St. Nicholas and the Tub*.

*A Fall from Aloft* is Brian Burland's first critically acclaimed novel and one of his most popular. This term, 'A fall from aloft', used to describe a fall from a great height, usually from a masthead or high rigging on a sailing ship figures significantly in Burland's novel. 'Aloft' can also mean 'overhead' or 'in the air' as demonstrated by trainees on modern-day sail-training vessels who are taught to climb aloft from the main mast in order to release the main topsails.

Like many first novels, *A Fall from Aloft* is 'quasi-autobiographical' and, as such, exhibits many of the hallmarks of such novels, including the coming-of-age story and the evocation of a particular time and place. Burland tells the tale of 13-year-old James Berkeley's 'voyage out' and is grounded in Burland's evocative rendering of his own birthplace and childhood home, the island of Bermuda.

Although *A Fall from Aloft* is not set in Bermuda, and there are no Bermudian characters, as such, the island is evoked through the reveries of the main character, the 13-year old James Berkeley, who is sent on a wartime convoy ship across the U-boat infested North Atlantic in January 1942 to his English boarding school during World War II. This dramatic story is based on Burland's own experience as a young teenage boy being sent from Bermuda to England during this war.

On board the *Empire United*, the officer in charge disregards James' stateroom ticket and billets him in the seamen's quarters. James pretends he is at least 16-years-old and is expected to sleep and work with the all adult crewmen. The merchant seamen regard this unexpected and, for the most part, unwelcome addition to their company with a mixture of amusement and contempt. He is called 'Little Lord Fauntelroy' by some of the crew members.

For his part, James, shy and self-conscious, is repelled by the casual vulgarity and raucous behavior of the merchant men, from whom he has no privacy below decks, not even to move his bowels. Thus begins James' wartime passage across the North Atlantic, a passage which, with its initiation into an adult world, is very different from the one he has left behind. This will precipitate his personal passage out of the narrowness of his privileged childhood and into a much wider world.

However, James is desperately homesick and often wonders why he has been abandoned by his parents? Secretly, he know the reasons: he is guilty of lying, stealing, Jew-baiting, not working in school, being over-sexed and a juvenile delinquent! He feels guilt and remorse for these acts.

James has vivid recollections and images of enjoyable times in Bermuda, including sailing on the 'Longtail', a boat loaned to him during summers. "He sailed every bright summer inch of Bermuda's azure harbors and inlets; he sailed out and around the Great Sound and sometimes all the way to Somerset...He stopped and lunched on deserted islands where no man's foot had set before" (p. 83). All these happy memories are overshadowed by the reality of war into which he has been thrust. James also has an obsession with dying on the ship, either by torpedo from a German submarine or by falling into the angry seas surrounding the ship.

There are, however, two particular recurring images in *A Fall from Aloft*. The first, and central image, is that of 'the fall' indicated in the novel's title. Burland's title is taken from a tombstone in the Royal Naval Cemetery at Ireland Island in Bermuda. The grave is that of thirteen-year-old midshipman, James Cumberland, killed by a fall from aloft on May 23, 1777, while serving aboard H.M.S. *Immortalite*. The image of 'the fall' is suggested initially in James'

desperation to escape the ship, since to do so he must jump (fall) “awfully far down” into the water (26). Once at sea, his fear of perishing on the voyage expresses itself in his fear of falling overboard. After an actual fall on the deck which very nearly puts him over the side, he is haunted by the idea of falling silently to his death into “a chasm of darkness” below -- and below that, the ocean (p.84). The second image is that of the ocean itself, the vast rolling “unfathomably deep” sea of which James is so afraid. To drown in the sea, he thinks, “would be a horrible death: down down down . . . to suffocate in that ghastly, cold vastness” (p.32).

Burland’s compelling tale of a boy who has to cope in a difficult adult world is written in a style of realism, capturing various sounds on the ship (klah-klah-klah-klah-klah: the ship shuddering) (p. 58) and the accents of the crew (“Cor love a duck, what uv we got here?”)(p. 19). These vocal utterances make the atmosphere more authentic and real. Burland writes so descriptively about the ship and elsewhere that the reader can distinctly imagine the scene. His descriptions of Bermuda are also vividly appealing. Burland has a special talent for writing in the vernacular which, at times, causes the reader to struggle with dialectical, regional slang and vulgar swearwords.

Despite the popularity of his books around the world, Burland was unsuccessful in his home country of Bermuda, mainly because he discussed unpopular topics regarding race, culture, and class that impacted close to home. Many readers found offence with the swearwords and the open discussions of sex. Remembering that Burland was writing in the 1960’s and 1970’s during the Woodstock, hippie generation, one can perhaps understand the influence it most likely had on his writing.

Aspects of class and race appear frequently in this novel, whether it is the black nanny, Ruth, or the other references to ‘coloured’ Bermudians. Being from a white and privileged background, James looks down on the seamen, describing them as “. . .lower-class, rotten, filthy, stinking oiks” (p. 77). He talks about coloured people, Portuguese and white trash, people with which white family members should not associate.

Burland writes about a subject that made a great impression upon him as a young teenager. He explores the physical trials of crossing the ocean, as well as the psychological aspects of a child who is conflicted by the fears and fantasies of self-doubt. James tries to live up to his father’s ideal of bravery but is often faced with the reality of being torpedoed or of falling into the sea. At the end of the novel, James is no longer the child his father had put aboard the tender in Hamilton Harbour; he is now a young man with a mind of his own. With the world “still rolling and pitching” and the sea washing over everything, he turns his face to the window to hide his tears as the rails echo the fear that has dogged him for so long: “Lost-at-sea, lost-at-sea . . .” (p.179).

Burland develops the novel by making it immediate and vivid, forcing the reader to confront the realities of the moment. He grounds the narrative in a realism in which colloquial language is the norm. He is a master at writing descriptive passages that keep the reader riveted and wanting more. I can confidently recommend reading Burland’s *A Fall from Aloft* because it relates to and captures the phobias of teenage-hood, as well as the fears, fantasies and self-doubts that exist in males as they grow and mature.

As a Bermudian, I am excited by the descriptions and tales of Bermuda from an era long past. These give the reader significant insights into what Bermuda was like in the 1940s. For students of Bermuda history and anyone delving into Bermuda’s past, this book is an invaluable resource into the culture of Bermuda during this period.

## References

Burland, B. (1987). *A Fall from Aloft*. London: Paladin.