

The *Abeona*

In October 1820, a party of emigrants left Scotland on a merchant ship, the *Abeona*, to sail for South Africa. Most of the 141 emigrants from Glasgow, Greenock and surrounding areas, had signed up to a British Government-sponsored scheme to make a new life for themselves and their families in the Cape Colony.

Just after noon on Saturday the 25th November 1820, the *Abeona* caught fire when a crew member went into the rum store with an uncovered candle. After an intense blaze, the ship finally sank around midnight near the equator, just off the west coast of Africa.

Only 49 people survived.

The survivors were picked up the following day by a Portuguese merchant ship, and some of the survivors, including 10 orphans, remained in Lisbon where the rescue ship landed, while 21 survivors returned to Greenock.

In 1821 a group of survivors wrote an account of the fire. All the text in the poems that follow is taken from the survivors' own words. I have taken some liberties in the choosing, arranging, and ordering of their words for maximum effect, to break the narrative from the linguistic constraints and social responsibilities of an official account. I occasionally altered tenses for coherence and impact.

I tried with every choice I made to stay true to the spirit of the original text and respect the memory of those who remained and those who perished; to bear witness to their loss.

These poems are fragments from a longer work and are published here to mark the bicentenary of the disaster on the 25th November 1820.

The survivors' account can be found here <https://bit.ly/2Su2WXg>

More information on the *Abeona* Facebook Forum <https://www.facebook.com/Abeonaship> and Twitter: @Abeonaship

These poems are dedicated to the survivors of the *Abeona* and their descendants, and survivors of disasters at sea through the ages. There is no marker for those who drown at sea, no official plaque to commemorate their burial place. M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and her excavation of slave voices from a legal document is the inspiration for my own efforts to tell the story of the loss of the *Abeona*.

alarm

quarter past twelve

alarm bell of fire

catastrophe by candle

by accident

by spirits of combustible matter

by candle instantly caught

instantly

a blaze

allaround flames allround flames allaround flames allaround flames

instantly

extreme alarm

thick volumes of smoke ascended

alarm ascended

thick volumes of smoke ascended

fearful rapidity

of flames

flames spread

to atoms

flames rose

flames flamed

the dread ship

flames caught

flames issued

powder magazine

flames ascended

flames communicated

powder overboard

flames perforated

flames caught flames

flames issued above

allaround flames

in flames upward

through hatchway fire raged
flames rose above escape they
who found themselves they they
who found their
feet
below water they
who who found their
heads devoured they they
who found them themselves
their their their vessel their selves
their souls terror
their their feet hands their
in all drowning
upward flames or drowning
in the billows
they their themselves in extreme
dread
devoured
to
a
to m

they

clung to chains

clung to rigging

clung to boltsprit

burning hands

clung to no safety

drop

fall

leap

throw

drown

not with standing

Lieutenant Mudge
the Surgeon
the crew

exertions of
directed to
only alternative but

acted conspicuously
acted prudently

released the boats

boats descended but

notwithstanding

that the officers and the chief part of the crew had thus withdrawn those left on board continued their exertions to launch the long boat

notwithstanding

that the officers and the chief part of the crew had thus withdrawn those left on board continued their exertion to save lives

notwithstanding

that the officers and the chief part of the crew had thus withdrawn those left on board ascended to no safety

notwithstanding

that the officers and the chief part of the crew had thus withdrawn

but

acted conspicuously

acted prudently

not with standing

those
left
on
board

for safety

three small boats

abandon ship for safety

three small boats

endeavouring to save to pick up to swim to rescue to

assist to tremble to reach

to put distance between (for fear)

to abandon (for fear)

to abandon to save

for safety they had withdrawn a short distance

lest they be upset by falling masts

for safety boats proceeded a mile too far to swim for safety

for safety watched fire fast seizing

consuming their dearest hands feet clothes

by flames

watch flames issuing

watch hope descending

watch rigging ablaze

watch sails falling

watch conflagration

watch children cling

watch helpless leap

watch bitterest ruin

watch below their feet around their heads unfathomable Atlantic

the tomb containing their dearest relatives

awful ocean anguish

cannot be described

boats filled for safety

clung to a common calamity withdrawn

for safety watched

from three small boats

to mark

those who remained
they witnessed this
destruction
complete

by midnight
all silent

vanished
ship

112 human beings

irresistible
water

by midnight
destruction complete

anguish cannot be described

for those who perished
their feet around their heads
into the ocean awful ocean anguish

devoured to
atoms

only silent
water
to bear
their
ashes

no

movement

to

mark

no

move

ment

to

mark

a

t

o

m

s

no

mark

for

at

o

o

o

o

o

mmm

s

no

movement

to

mark

a

tomb

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Bio: Lynnda is interested in personal stories and how we make sense of our identities in the places we come to call home. Her work has appeared in various publications including *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *thi wurd*, *New Orleans Review*, *Glasgow Review of Books* and *PENning* magazine. She is currently completing a Creative Writing MFA at the University of Glasgow.

Favourite poem: Pigment by Sasha Dugdale