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For people who love maps

International Map Collectors’ Society

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INTERNATIONAL MAP COLLECTORS’ SOCIETY

FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE MAPS
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Front cover: Matthäus Seutter,
Planisphærium Cœleste. By permission of Charles Edwin Puckett,
THE ENGLISH PILOT
THE FIFTH BOOK, AFRICA, 1701–1792
A census
Ljiljana Ortolja-Baird

The International Map Collectors’ Society was gifted a 1780 copy of The English Pilot, The Fifth Book Describing... the West-Coast of AFRICA. This article is the result of research undertaken in order to better understand its publishing history and its value in the light of recorded surviving examples.

The fifth title of The English Pilot charts the west coast of Africa from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Cape of Good Hope. It was first published in 1701 by Jeremiah Seller (fl.1698–1705), son of John Seller, in partnership with Charles Price (1679–1733), who described it as ‘a Work never before attempted in our Language’. Like other titles in the series, ‘Africa’ had a long shelf life with multiple editions, reaching into 1792, the year of its last known printing. Yet, despite its longevity there are few surviving copies. In 1949 R.V. Tooley, in what may be viewed as the first census of the fifth book, listed ten; in 1973 Coolie Verner in the introduction to a facsimile publication of the first edition identified another three; and in 1995 Adams and Waters noted a further six, all in US libraries. This research has subsequently located an additional nine examples (see Table on pages 54–56).

The English Pilot
In the postscript of Practical Navigation, published in 1669 by John Seller (bap. 1632–1697), he announced that he was preparing a ‘Sea-Waggoner for the whole World, with Charts and Draughts’. His Sea-Waggoner would, he claimed, ‘be a work [as] was never yet performed by any’ and he called on all men of the sea to supply him with their knowledge and experience. Their participation would demonstrate the up-to-date geographical knowledge of his books, unlike Joseph Moxon’s modest atlas A Book of Sea-Platts (1657) which, though boasting, ‘newly Corrected’ charts, clearly relied on Dutch sources. Printed navigational knowledge available to English seamen was largely by way of Dutch waggoners, some translated into English. At the time of Seller’s announcement, according to Sarah Tyacke, there were nineteen English text editions of Dutch atlases.6 Publisher Richard Mount’s advertisement in Nathaniel Colson’s The Mariners New Kalendar (1701) announcing that he sold ‘all sorts of Mathematical and Sea-books in English’ confirms the persistent presence of untranslated Dutch books on navigation in the English market.7 Seller’s endeavour was intended to break the monopoly held by the Dutch in the production of sea charts which, he argued, was an ‘impoverishment’ of the English economy and reputation as a seafaring nation. In light of the continued tensions between the Dutch and the English the promise of a new set of charts of the English coastline, and beyond, not dependent on Dutch sources, was probably welcome news. In France, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Minister of Finance to Louis XIV, also frustrated by the domination of Dutch maritime publishers, agitated for superior French charts of the European coastline. His efforts culminated in 1693 with the publication of Le Neptune François (1693), a collection of charts of the European Atlantic coast from Norway to Gibraltar.

Seller fleshed out his ambitious project in the preface to The English Pilot, Part I, Northern Navigation. He explained: ‘the whole Work’ would be divided into ‘four Books’. The first would contain ‘the whole Northern Navigation’; the second the passage from the Channel to the Cape of Good Hope and include the Mediterranean Sea and its islands; the third book ‘the whole of Oriental Navigation’; and the fourth book ‘the Coast of America’.8

Seller’s project did not go exactly to plan. The first book was published in 1671, the same year he was conferred the title of ‘King’s Hydrographer’, and despite being granted royal protection – ‘forbidding any person to print any work, under any title, reprinting... The English Pilot... A Book of Sea-Platts (1657)... A Book of Sea-Platts (1657) which had been published originally in 1689 by Fisher and Thoroton. 46 x 37.5cm. Reproduced with the permission of the President and Fellows of Trinity College, Oxford.
or counterfeiting, for thirty years, the works of John Seller, the English Pilot and the Sea Atlas...: also forbidding the import from beyond seas of any such books or maps, under names of the Dutch Waggoner or Lightning Column, or any other name— it is popularly claimed that he had financially over-extended himself. Samuel Pepys as Secretary to the Navy Board, recognising the immense difficulty for a sole trader to underwrite the financial outlay for such a large project, argued for a state body to undertake large-scale surveying and chartmaking: ‘Tis fit to consider the unreasonableness that any but a Prince should ever bear the charge which is necessary for the taking good description of Places, and making true Sea Charts. Whether to avoid insolvency, or otherwise, Seller embarked on restructuring his business. Thus, in 1677, he announced to readers of The English Pilot, The Second Book, Mediterranean Sea:

that for better Management of my so Chargeable and Difficult an Undertaking, I have accepted the Assistance of my worthy Friends, Mr. William Fisher, Mr. John Thornton, Mr. John Colson, and Mr. James Atkinson, as my Copartners in the English Pilot, Sea Atlas, and in all Sea-Charts.

Although his name remains prominently placed on the title page of this new venture, the cartouches in this, and subsequent joint publications, reflect Seller’s new business arrangement. The consortium, largely comprising his competitors, was made up of printer/bookseller (Fisher), chartmakers (Seller and Thornton) and teachers of mathematics and navigation (Colson and Atkinson). The group disbanded after just two years and their shared capital of plates and stock was distributed among the five members. Seller lost the rights to a substantial part of his catalogue, the lion’s share of the dispersal going to William Fisher who, with his apprentice Richard Mount, would over a relatively short time, become the sole publishers of all the books of The English Pilot. Seller’s name continues to be erroneously associated with the series but, from this point forward, his involvement with it declined and he did not live to see his vision of a ‘Sea-Waggoner for the ‘whole world’ realised. Thornton and Fisher completed The English Pilot, West Indies (1689). The lucrative trade offered by the American colonies made it a bestseller. In 1703 John Thornton produced a larger version of Seller’s 1675 The English Pilot, Oriental Navigation using some of Seller’s plates. However, it would be his younger son Jeremiah, in partnership with Charles Price, a former apprentice and employee of Seller senior, who would publish the closing book of the series.

The publishers
Jeremiah Seller was the youngest of four children and was apprenticed to his father in 1687. An early mention of him as a publisher and bookseller appears in 1696, the year before Seller senior’s death. The title page of A moderate computation of the expenses in provisions spent in the city of London and Westminster announces: ‘Printed for and are to be sold by Jeremiah Seller near the Hermitage Stairs’, suggesting that he had established himself independently of his father. Unlike his older brother John, who left the maritime community of Wapping to join the Navy Board, recognising the immense difficulty for a sole trader to underwrite the financial outlay for such a large project, argued for a state body to undertake large-scale surveying and chartmaking; ‘Tis fit to consider the unreasonableness that any but a Prince should ever bear the charge which is necessary for the taking good description of Places, and making true Sea Charts. Whether to avoid insolvency, or otherwise, Seller embarked on restructuring his business. Thus, in 1677, he announced to readers of The English Pilot, The Second Book, Mediterranean Sea:

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