



## SUPPORTING CAST

### William Dampier, Pirate Scientist

for *GURPS*

by James L. Cambias

Willam Dampier was probably unique in being the only known pirate scientist. Born in Somerset around 1652, he went to sea, and in 1674 voyaged to Jamaica to manage a sugar plantation. The job didn't agree with him, and Dampier joined the community of illegal English loggers in Campeche. In 1679 Dampier joined a crew of buccaneers for a series of raids on Panama and the Pacific coast of South America. That whetted his appetite, and in 1684 he signed on for a cruise which took him from Virginia around Cape Horn, up the coast of Peru, and across the Pacific to the Philippines. From there Dampier made his way back to England via the East Indies, returning home in 1691. During his pirating voyages Dampier kept careful notes on cultures, animals, plants, and especially wind and weather, which he collected into a book, *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697).

His book won him great acclaim in London, and in 1699 Dampier got a commission from the Royal Navy to take the leaky *HMS Roebuck* on to explore the south Pacific. He reached Australia and cruised along New Guinea and New Britain, but on the return voyage the *Roebuck* got so unsound she had to be abandoned at Ascension Island. Dampier was court-martialed on returning to England; he was acquitted of any fault in the loss of the ship, but complaints about his treatment of the ship's officers led to his removal from the Navy.

As a privateer Dampier accompanied two more voyages, but as pilot rather than commander, and may have been the first person to circle the globe three times. He died about 1715, but where and how are not known.

A lanky, melancholy-eyed Englishman with brown hair, usually dressed in worn sea officer's clothing.

**William Dampier**                      **150 points**

*ST* 11 [10]

*DX* 11 [20]

*IQ* 12 [40]

*HT* 11 [10]

*Dmg.* 1d-1 thr, 1d+2 sw

*Basic Lift:* 24 lbs

*Hit Points:* 11

**Will:** 12

**Per:** 14 [10]

**FP:** 11

**Basic Speed:** 6 [5]

**Basic Move:** 6

**Home TL:** 4

**Cultural Familiarity:** Western [0]

Languages: English (Native) [0]

Spanish (Accented) [4]

Malay (Broken) [2]

Wealth (Struggling) [-10]

**Reputation:** Celebrated traveler and naturalist +1 [5]

**Reputation:** Buccaneer -1 (in Spanish America, sometimes) [-1]

Courtesy Rank 4 ("Captain") [4]

Contact Group: Royal Society (scientists, skill 15) [10]

Cultural Adaptability [10]

Fit [5]

Talent: Mariner 2 [10]

Bully [-10]

Code of Honor (Pirate's) [-10]

Curious [-5]

Greed (15) [-7]

**Quirks:** Broad-Minded, Minor Obsession: capture a treasure ship, Proud [-3]

**Skills:**

Area Knowledge (Caribbean) (IQ)-12 [1]

Area Knowledge (Southeast Asia) (IQ)-12 [1]

Astronomy/TL4 (IQ-1)-11 [2]

Brawling (DX+1)-12 [2]

Broadsword (DX+1)-12 [4]

Cartography (IQ)-12 [2]

First Aid/TL4 (IQ)-12 [1]

Geography/TL4 (Pacific) (IQ)-11 [2]

Gunner/TL4 (cannon) (DX+1)-12 [2]

Guns/TL4 (musket) (DX+1)-12 [2]

Mathematics/TL4 (surveying) (IQ)-12 [4]

Meteorology/TL5 (IQ)-13 [1]\*

Naturalist (IQ+2)-14 [12]

Navigation/TL4 (sea) (IQ)-15 [4]\*

Seamanship/TL4 (IQ)-14 [2]\*

Shiphandling/TL4 (ship) (IQ)-14 [4]\*

Survival (island/beach) (Per)-13 [1]

Tactics (IQ-2)-10 [1]

Writing (IQ-1)-11 [1]

\*Includes bonus from Mariner talent

**Equipment:** At sea or in exotic ports, Dampier would certainly be armed with a cutlass. In battle he would also carry a musket. On his later voyages he has good-quality navigation instruments -- spyglass, sextant, etc. He always has a notebook, carefully protected from damp.

This represents Dampier about 1692, at the end of his first voyage around the world, when his book *A New Voyage Around the World* was getting him a reputation as a scientist but he was still trying to make his fortune. Before the publication of his book, he has no positive Reputation.

## New Talent: Mariner

Later in life his Courtesy Rank of Captain becomes genuine Military Rank, then Merchant Rank after his court-martial. During his naval service he gains a Duty to the Royal Navy. His Wealth improves to Average, but he gains the Debt disadvantage to offset it.

**Mariner:** Boating, Seamanship, Meteorology, Navigation (sea), Shiphandling (ship).  
Reaction bonus: sailors and seafarers. 5 points/level.

Dampier's bullying of those under him includes anyone he thinks is his intellectual inferior. It is entirely verbal, and takes the form of lots of "I told you so" comments and criticism. (What makes Dampier's bullying so intolerable is that he's usually correct.) Though Dampier was married, he spent so much time away from his wife Judith that she counts as neither a Dependent nor an Ally.

His Meteorology skill is TL5 (rather than TL4 Weather Sense) because Dampier's discoveries about trade wind patterns formed the basis of scientific meteorology in the Industrial era.

In any Swashbucklers-era campaign, Dampier can turn up as a PC, a useful NPC, or even a villain! His global travels and surprisingly broad set of contacts mean that PCs can encounter Dampier anywhere on Earth and in any setting from Royal Society meetings to pirate taverns in Port Royal. Renamed Dampier-clones can show up in any campaign from the Elizabethan era to the Age of Napoleon.

To make Dampier a better villain, give him the Callous disadvantage and improve his Weath to Comfortable. He can be just a smarter-than-average pirate with a scientific bent, or a Master Villain with a secret island base stocked with clockpunk deathtraps and lethal organisms from around the world.

## Alternate Dampiers

A pirate scientist requires a home culture which tolerates piracy yet values scientific inquiry. This opens up a number of possible alternate settings for William Dampier (or thinly-disguised duplicates).

The Mediterranean in the Hellenistic era between the death of Alexander and the rise of Rome is another age with vigorous science and plenty of piracy. Kranos the Sidonian could raid Carthaginian merchants and sail to distant India, then report his findings at the Museum of Alexandria.

Many space opera settings (including the *Traveller* universe) could feature a pirate scientist, possibly one putting aside his buccaneering past to command a scout expedition. A futuristic Dampier might well recruit some of his former pirate comrades for a mission of exploration -- or possibly get some naive scouts involved in a spot of raiding, just to cover the expenses of the

voyage.

## Infinite Dampier

William Dampier would be a good recruit for the Infinity Patrol, as his wide-ranging habits and keen powers of observation make him uniquely suited to spot Centrum incursions. He would also be good at scouting newly-discovered timelines at TL4 or below.

Of course, Dampier's pirate background would also make him an excellent crosstime criminal. As a swagman or "Time Pirate" he'd be uniquely dangerous because he takes the time to learn about the worlds he visits. Infinity agents might find themselves in the embarrassing position of having to ask a criminal if they can borrow his notes on an unknown world.

Finally, in a crosstime-swashbucklers game, Dampier and a band of comrades might be the first ones to notice that the late 17th century is being invaded by mysterious strangers with advanced technology. If the same mysterious strangers turn up in Cochin China and London's alleys, something big and weird is obviously going on. The Royal Society would naturally want a man with a good mind and a ready cutlass to get to the bottom of it.

## Occult Dampier

The historical Dampier was a thoroughgoing skeptic and rationalist, always seeking a natural explanation and showing little patience for superstition. But in a world where magic really works, his curiosity and open-minded interest in exotic cultures could lead him to a unique understanding of the magical world.

While the notion of a pirate-scientist-magician has its appeal, it might be more interesting to keep Dampier as a non-mage, with hard-won Occult and Hidden Lore skills but no spellcasting ability. He could be a foe (or agent) of the Cabal, or a perfect investigator of Caribbean horrors in the "Seas of Daring, Seas of Dread" campaign frame from *GURPS Horror*. Equipped with the right magical items (or recruited from the afterlife), Dampier would be an ideal explorer of the Pearl-Bright Ocean or other exotic reaches of the Inner Realms.

## Illuminated Dampier

William Dampier's first two voyages around the world are fairly well-documented in his books and the log of the HMS Roebuck. But his third voyage is almost completely unrecorded. What secret mission did his Masonic Templar masters send him on in 1711? Was he investigating the machinations of Shangri-La in southeast Asia? Or looking for the minions of Cthulhu or the Bermuda Triangle in the "Devil's Sea" south of Japan? The fact that Dampier's death and burial place are also undocumented suggests that his Secret Masters may have rewarded his loyal service with a new identity and a comfortable retirement.

## Upgrades

For a more cinematic, swashbuckling William Dampier, increase his DX to 12, and add the advantages Combat Reflexes, Unfazeable, and Versatile. In settings with nonhuman aliens, his Broad-Mindedness might increase to Xenophilia.

[Past Columns](#)

Article publication date: August 5, 2005

---

102 *Pyramid* subscribers rated this article **3.76** on a scale of 1 to 5. Visit the [ratings page](#) for more info.

---

Copyright © 2005 by [Steve Jackson Games](#). All rights reserved. Pyramid subscribers are permitted to read this article online, or download it and print out a single hardcopy for personal use. Copying this text to any other online system or BBS, or making more than one hardcopy, is *strictly prohibited*. So please don't. And if you encounter copies of this article elsewhere on the web, please report it to [webmaster@sjgames.com](mailto:webmaster@sjgames.com).



[Home](#) - [Subscribe!](#) - [Current Issue](#) - [Playtesting](#) - [Chat](#) - [Advertising](#) - [Index of Advertisers](#) - [Feedback](#)