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Frank M. Snyder

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SET AND DRIFT

Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin Novels

Frank M. Snyder

THE BRITISH NAVY established its maritime predominance between 1793 and 1815. There were two wars of roughly equal length separated by a one-year peace: the French Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars—names that are each sometimes used to refer to both conflicts collectively.

Our knowledge of the naval actions of that period may have come from reading about the real exploits of such Royal Navy flag officers as Horatio Nelson, George Keith, and James de Saumarez, but particularly about the great battles of Nelson. Yet our understanding of that period is more likely to be based on the imagined exploits of Horatio Hornblower by C.S. Forester, Richard Delancey by Northcote Parkinson, Richard Bolitho by Alexander Kent, Nicholas Ramage by Dudley Pope, and Nathaniel Drinkwater by Richard Woodman. To this second list (and perhaps to head it) we most definitely must add the name of “Lucky” Jack Aubrey, whose adventures are recorded in sixteen novels by Patrick O'Brian. These books, initially published in England starting twenty-four years ago, have appeared in this country only in the past four.

Significantly, the series is named both for Jack Aubrey, Royal Navy officer, and for Stephen Maturin, his naval surgeon. The characters of these two professionals so complement each other that their conversations bristle with discovery and insight about life in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars.

Frank M. Snyder is a retired naval officer and a former faculty member of the Naval War College where he is now a Professor Emeritus of Command and Control, and a research fellow.

The Aubrey-Maturin series was originally published in London by Collins, 1970–92. The books have been available in the United States from W.W. Norton, New York, since 1990.

Aubrey is oversized, English, an experienced seaman, an intrepid warrior, a natural leader, but rather a novice in the ways of the world outside the Royal Navy. Maturin is slight, half-Irish, half-Catalan, an accomplished physician, an active naturalist, an effective intelligence operative, but not very clever in affairs of the heart and somewhat accident-prone. Their shared interest in music (Aubrey on violin, Maturin on cello) effectively exemplifies the inner and unstated moods of each.

Some of the novels are set in the Atlantic (*Post Captain*, *The Fortune of War*, *The Surgeon's Mate*, and *The Letter of Marque*), others in the Mediterranean (*Master and Commander*, *Post Captain*, *The Ionian Mission*, and *Treason's Harbor*), the Baltic (*The Letter of Marque* and *The Surgeon's Mate*), the Indian Ocean (*HMS Surprise*, *The Mauritius Command*, and *Desolation Island*), off Southeast Asia (*Thirteen Gun Salute* and *The Nutmeg of Consolation*), the eastern Pacific (*The Far Side of the World*, *The True Love*, and *The Wine-Dark Sea*), and even one in London (*The Reverse of the Medal*). Aubrey's commands range from a Spanish-built 14-gun sloop to a 74-gun third-rate ship of the line. The novels provide the reader only a glimpse of the "familiar tedium" experienced in ships of the line assigned to enforce the "interminable" blockades before Toulon and Brest. Happily for Aubrey (and the reader), most of his adventures place him and Maturin in the French-built, 28-gun sixth-rate *HMS Surprise*, an assignment that results in more varied and interesting adventures.

Set in the age of "fighting sail," these stories illustrate Aubrey's considerable mastery of seamanship, navigation, gunnery, and tactics, and also his effective leadership (not unlike the characteristics of both his fictional and historical contemporaries). But they also reveal Maturin's mastery of medicine, intelligence, languages, and the still-being-discovered wonders of the natural world of birds, fish, and mammals.

Equally impressive is the texture of the daily routine aboard a man-of-war of those times, the phrasing and the jargon of the spoken and written word, and the variety of food and drink served aboard ship. O'Brian's thorough research is evident in his descriptions of the weekly captain's inspection, the flurry of activity on a quarterdeck at Local Apparent Noon, and the method then used to determine a ship's speed through the water, not to mention the phrasing of official correspondence and oral reports. Emerging from dinner conversations in the captain's cabin and the gunroom (or wardroom on the larger ships) are the prevailing attitudes in the Royal Navy toward other countries and other peoples, the intense concern about preferment and advancement, and above all, the ubiquitous consideration (and calculation) of prize money.

There are plenty of ship-to-ship actions, cutting-out operations, rescues, duels against forts, and even movements of ships' guns ashore—all testing Aubrey's skill and nerve. Yet because the Aubrey-Maturin novels chronicle the activities

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and concerns of both men, the combat actions in the later books of this series seem somewhat less frequent than in other fictional accounts of the Royal Navy during this period. The author says he has sought general, overall, historical accuracy about the Royal Navy of the time, noting that a great many officers served right through their careers without any action at all.

Life at sea for "Lucky" Jack Aubrey is not an unbroken series of triumphs, however. His ships suffer groundings, collisions, dismastings, fires, lightning strikes, plagues, and lost chases; Aubrey himself is wounded in several actions, is captured and imprisoned, falls overboard without being noticed, and is (actually) pilloried. Maturin too experiences failure as well as success in both his medical and intelligence endeavors.

While many of Aubrey's adventures are fictitious, some are based on historical fact. The battle of Algeciras (1801) is observed by Aubrey in *Master and Commander*, first as a prisoner from the French *Desaix* and then from the slopes of Gibraltar; the interception of the annual Spanish treasure fleet (1804) (while Britain was still officially at peace with Spain) is described in *Post Captain*; the actual campaign to seize Mauritius (1810) is the main subject of *The Mauritius Command*; Aubrey is present during the duels between the *Constitution* and *Java* (1812) and between *Chesapeake* and *Shannon* (1813) in *The Surgeon's Mate*; in *The Far Side of the World*, Aubrey is in command of a ship that emulates *Phoebe's* pursuit of *Essex* through the eastern Pacific (1812–13); and in *The Truelove*, eyewitnesses describe the Glorious First of June (1794) and *Surprise's* cutting-out of *Hermione* at Puerto Caballo (1799). Admirals Saumarez and Keith both appear in the novels, though toward the end of their long careers, and Aubrey's most vivid memory of Nelson is the latter's injunction during a dinner conversation, "Never mind maneuvers; always go straight at 'em."

Each of the sixteen books can be read separately and independently. O'Brian does a good job of providing the reader facts from previous novels needed for appreciation of present events. Yet it would probably be better to start at the beginning, with *Master and Commander*, and read the books in chronological order, which in fact is the order in which they were written. O'Brian is at pains in the first and second volumes to give Maturin (and the reader) instruction in the arrangement, rigging, and routine of a man-of-war. A few of the books end somewhat abruptly, a summary of the action not appearing until early in the following book. The author himself has resisted the idea that these books are really one novel, preferring to consider them separate adventures that involve characters that reappear.

Some of the other writers of fiction about the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars seem to avoid mentioning the War of 1812, which coincided with the final years of the Napoleonic Wars— but not O'Brian. That conflict is one of the main themes of *The Fortune of War*, *The Far Side of the World*, and

The Wine-Dark Sea. It becomes a factor in *Desolation Island*, when the American animosity toward *Leopard* (which four years earlier had fired on *Chesapeake*, inflicting casualties and carrying off men) undermines the relations between *Leopard* (then commanded by Aubrey) and a Nantucket whaler, two isolated ships that needed each other's support.

A reader of O'Brian's novels may find it useful (as did a former Secretary of the Navy) to keep at hand a copy of *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* or a copy of a good world atlas (as did this reviewer). Most of the geography is genuine, even though some of O'Brian's places are not easy to find because he uses names that were current nearly two centuries ago, and a few names have changed in the interim. Some of the geography is imaginary (at least in *Treason's Harbor*, where a chart of the invented bay is included). There are very useful charts of real islands in *The Mauritius Command*. Most of the books, however, contain no charts. It is not clear whether this is because the author is confident that his descriptive powers are sufficient or because the publishers are unwilling to pay for visual aids. In any case, following the progress of Aubrey's ships on real charts should be part of the enjoyment of these books.

The series reflects the many aspects of life in a man-of-war, but one aspect comes gradually to dominate the reader's attention: the weather, in its many and varied moods. The ships of the time were much smaller than those of today and therefore more subject to the effects of wind and sea, and their movement was almost completely dependent on the skillful harnessing of wind and tide. As Aubrey tells Maturin at one point, "You must understand that everything, *everything* at sea depends on the wind." Captains like Aubrey were not only sensitized to changes in weather but were completely dependent on their own observations of it—no weather channels or satellite pictures for them.

The reader of these stories is keenly aware of being in the presence of a gifted writer who has read deeply in the log books, official letters, contemporary accounts, and the memoirs of participants. O'Brian balances historical accuracy in the larger sense against human relationships intensified by the reduced dimensions of the small, close, shipboard society, and he retains throughout a sparkling sense of humor. In an age when it was customary to serve great French wine with Georgian meals and to toast "Confusion to Bonaparte," O'Brian occasionally has his captain broaching not only Lafite but sometimes Haut Brion.

We might well lift our own glasses to Patrick O'Brian.

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