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The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench

Kemp Tolley
U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Richard McKenna

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McKenna, Richard. *The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986. 355pp. \$16.95

This collection of 10 stories, essays, and excerpts, from a prospective book published 22 years after author Richard McKenna's death, provides something few *Naval War College Review* readers have ever personally experienced: how a mess deck seaman lived, loved, worked, played, ate, slept, fought, and sometimes died on the Asiatic station between the two great wars. For 10 years Dick McKenna was *there*—an introspective observer dissecting his characters, pitting men against each other, unraveling the elaborate enlisted pecking order, revealing nuances of expression and performance, making *The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench* a thoroughly interesting and educational collection. Unlike McKenna's *tour de force*, *The Sand Pebbles*, where the action is a rather fanciful departure from reality, *The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench* is strictly like it was.

McKenna's introduction into the 1931 Navy was aboard the old cargo ship U.S.S. *Goldstar*, a strictly non-reg Hog Island 12-knotter that plodded between Japan, Manila, and its home port, Guam. It transported native products out and essential island needs in, carrying dependents along for the ride and release from boredom on the tiny island of Guam.

From the *Goldstar*, McKenna progressed to the coastal gunboat *Asheville*, destroyer *Edsall*, and lastly, the Yangtze gunboat *Luzon*. As a

machinist mate throughout those 10 years, McKenna watched and participated in the intrigues, plots, joys, and tragedies of life on the mess deck and in the engine room that only a man who was there could know. The "black gang" life was only peripherally intruded upon by the "deck apes" and the officers, the latter sometimes not too kindly treated in the text.

"Life aboard the *Goldstar*" is complete in its description of functions, routine, religion, cultural focus, and love life while in Japan. "The Fiction of History" backgrounds McKenna's difficult search for truth about China and its various myths—the revolutionary myth, the missionary myth, and the history that never was. "Cleaning Firesides" is black gang conflict, challenge, triumph. As in all McKenna's tales, there is the constant emotional turmoil of man against man against machine. "The Girl in Tatsubei" puts one in intimate touch with the fantasies and delights of the Japanese female—the softness, mutual respect, unhurried consideration, charm, and beauty so totally unlike the "romance" of the American bordello. McKenna clearly is charmed and captured by the gentle girls during a week of tranquility at Yokohama.

In the mid-twenties, we midshipmen knew very well who Josephus Daniels was. As President Woodrow Wilson's Navy Secretary for 8 years, "... he had shivered the timbers of the United States Navy so thoroughly that twenty years later they were still twitching with remembered

outrage." McKenna, in his essay, "The Wreck of Uncle Josephus," gives this righteous old gentleman a powerful leg-up in the latter's great influence, "... to remove the stigma of personal unworth traditionally attaching to the enlisted naval uniforms." Those who read McKenna's assessment of the many reforms instituted by Daniels will come away with a much higher regard for the man who abolished liquor in wardrooms as one of his less popular moves.

In certain respects, one can favorably compare *The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench* to a like epic of another century, *Two Years before the Mast*. And there actually was a left-handed monkey wrench, whereof the reader will discover the rather bizarre source.

KEMP TOLLEY
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Crane, Elaine Forman. *A Dependent People*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1985. 196pp. \$25

Elaine Forman Crane's economically written book begins in about 1760 and documents Newport's mercantile character. Once one of the five chief cities of the Colonies, Newport, lacking a hinterland to produce goods for sale to the other Colonies and abroad, survived on a one-product economy—rum—which quickly led the city's merchants and seamen deeply into the slave trade.

Crane looks at tax rolls, lists of slave owners, census figures, and shipping data, and out of this material

produces an interesting history. Church membership figures prove, as usual, one way to quantify the rise of the bourgeoisie. Conversion to Anglicanism and attendance at Trinity Church was then, as now, notification of *haut bourgeois* arrival, counterpointed by Ezra Stiles' endlessly documented fumings.

Though she does not specify it, Crane's data allows the conclusion that Newport's wealthy merchants never became an upper class, probably because they remained so close to the source of their wealth and were not allowed time to become "old money." This interesting sociological fact has persisted until today because the development of an indigenous upper class was stifled at the renaissance by the superimposition of an upper class from elsewhere.

Wealthy colonists, nonetheless, did function partly as an upper class, making improvements to the city's physical amenities while doing justice to their own domestic ones. Their cultural enjoyments were ephemeral, but they at least left for posterity the Redwood Library, Trinity Church, the Brick Market, the Colony House, and numerous paintings and domestic works of art they had commissioned.

Crane also points out that white servants and black slaves were kept off the poor rolls by inclusion in the households of the wealthy. In 1755, 18 percent of the population were black, nearly all of them slaves. She surmises that the drop in this percentage to 13.5 percent in 1774 was due not so much to a decrease in the number of the enslaved but to the