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# Hornblower at the helm

*by John Steele Gordon*

*On the series of novels by C. S. Forster.*

The action of the Hornblower saga, a series of eleven novels and several short stories by C. S. Forester, begins in 1794. At that point in his life, Horatio Hornblower is a penniless, orphaned seventeen-year-old village doctor's son, newly rated a midshipman in the Royal Navy.

His naval career gets off to an unpromising start, to put it mildly. Practically his first act on board ship in the placid waters of Spithead, in the lee of the Isle of Wight, is to become seasick. Worse, he had dim prospects. In an age when who you knew was more important than what you knew, Hornblower knew nobody of any importance. If he was to climb the ladder of promotion in the Navy, it could only be by his own efforts, talents, skills, wit, and pluck. They proved enough. At the end of his life, in 1857, he was Admiral of the Fleet the Viscount Hornblower, a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. He was the squire of a landed estate in his native Kent and the husband of Lady Barbara Wellesley, the (fictional) sister of the Duke of Wellington. In between was a life of adventure at sea and ashore that involved pitched battles, hurricanes, sinkings, capture and imprisonment, escape, diplomacy, state funerals, madmen, mutiny, intrigue, treasure hunting, and tsarist banquets. It stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. If you like your buckles well swashed—and who does not?—you cannot do better than *Hornblower*. But these are far more than just adventure stories.

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The books have never been out of print since the first one appeared in 1937. And they have spawned a veritable publishing sub-industry, with several series of sea novels set in the Napoleonic wars such as the novels about Richard Bolitho by Douglas Reeman (writing as Alexander Kent) and the Aubrey/Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian. Hornblower inspired the Sharpe novels of Bernard Cornwell and influenced Gene Roddenberry in creating the character of James T. Kirk in *Star Trek*. The astronauts Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt named one of the craters they explored on the moon in 1972 "Horatio" in honor of Hornblower.

The books have been made into a movie—in 1951, starring Gregory Peck and Virginia Mayo—and television dramas that often get details regarding life in the Nelsonian Royal Navy ludicrously wrong, something that Forester never did.

There is a *Hornblower Companion* (1964), with an essay by Forester on how the books came to be written and how the character of Horatio Hornblower developed and a series of very helpful maps. (The essay is also a wonderful window into how a great novelist plies his craft.) There's even a "biography" of Hornblower by C. Northcote Parkinson that attempts to clear up some questions that Forester left deliberately unanswered. The best-known ambiguity is how in *Lieutenant Hornblower* (1952) Captain Sawyer, deep in paranoia, came to fall down the hatchway. Did he trip or did Hornblower push him?

While Forester (who lived from 1899 to 1966) is best known for the *Hornblower* series, he wrote many other novels, all of which remain highly readable today. *The African Queen* (1935) was made into an unforgettable movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. *The Last Nine Days of the Bismarck* (1959) was filmed as *Sink the Bismarck!* starring Kenneth More.

What has made the Hornblower books so enduring for generations of readers, besides, of course, the often thrilling action, comes down to two things. The first is the meticulous detail and remarkable verisimilitude regarding daily life in the Royal Navy and society at large, both of which featured rigidly hierarchal structures.

As Forester explains in *The Hornblower Companion*, that detail is in large part due to a chance purchase he made in a used bookstore in the 1920s: three bound volumes of the magazine *The Naval Chronicle*. The *Chronicle* was published between 1799 and 1818 and contained hundreds of o fficial letters from serving naval officers to the Admiralty, first-rate primary source material for navies in the age of sail.

One thing that caught Forester's eye was the complete text of the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812. One clause specified when the war would end: twelve days after ratification in the North Atlantic, forty days in the Baltic, one hundred twenty days in distant parts of the Pacific. This meant, Forester explained, that if you took a ship off Java 119 days after ratification, it was yours under the prize money rules. If you took it a day later, you had to give it back.

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Prize money always loomed large in the minds of Royal Navy personnel, for it could make an officer rich and give a common sailor more money than he had ever seen. To encourage the taking of enemy ships, the British government allowed the officers and crews to keep the ship and its cargo. Warships would be bought by the Royal

Navy, and merchant vessels and their cargoes sold, the money distributed according to a fixed formula.

The admiral who had issued the orders under which the ships were operating, whether he was present or not, got one-eighth, the captain one-quarter, and the members of the crew shared one-quarter. All ships in sight shared the prize money. When four British frigates captured two Spanish ones in 1799, for instance, the four captains received over £40,000 each, a comfortable fortune in the late eighteenth century. Each member of the crew received more than ten years' pay.

Forester put this knowledge to good use. At the end of *Hornblower and the Hotspur* (1962), Hornblower, in command of hms *Hotspur*, a sloop of war, is detached from blockade duty off Brest to go with several British frigates after a Spanish treasure fleet that was known to be approaching Spain. The Admiralty knew this would result in a Spanish declaration of war, but figured that since the declaration was coming anyway, they might as well seize the treasure while the seizing was good.

The officers and crew of the *Hotspur* could practically taste the huge sums of prize money they anticipated. But Hornblower, often unlucky in the gaining of prize money, encounters a French frigate. Although the *Hotspur* was far too small to fight the French ship one-on-one, Hornblower knew that skillful ship-handling could delay the frigate, and he sees his duty as requiring him to prevent the frigate from reaching the treasure fleet. The result was that *Hotspur* was not in sight in the forthcoming battle. The *Hotspur* returned to England, her officers and crew mourning their lost fortunes. But there they learn that since, technically, Britain and Spain were not at war when the fleet was seized, there was no prize money to be had. Instead the ships were regarded as being like enemy ships seized in port at the outbreak of a war and thus the property of the Admiralty.

The second reason these books have lasted is the extraordinary character at the center of the novels. Forester was interested in the nature of command at sea in an age before modern communications, for it was a profoundly solitary position, what Forester called "a Man Alone." These views are embodied by Horatio Hornblower, who is a hero to everyone but himself.

The character of Hornblower began to take shape on a long, slow voyage from Los Angeles, where Forester had been working in Hollywood, to England on a Swedish tramp steamer, the *Margaret Johnson*, carrying both cargo and passengers.

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At that time the west coast of Central America was very remote and poor, and Forester had time to explore it thoroughly. As the plot of the first novel, involving a British attempt to stir up trouble in the Spanish Empire, then at war with Britain, developed, Forester realized that several things would have to be true about the captain. The ship would have t0 be a frigate, for

ships of the line did not operate independently. That meant the captain would have to be relatively young. He would have to speak Spanish. He would have to be of modest birth, which implied a drive to succeed, and considerable ability, especially in logic and mathematics (which made Hornblower both a superb navigator and a world-class whist player). For instance, in *Hornblower and the Atropos* (1953), he is anchored in a heavy fog in the Downs between the Thames estuary and the Strait of Dover, with many other ships awaiting a favorable wind. Hornblower notices an oar floating in the water. Burned into the blade is the number seven, but with a cross bar, in the European—but not British—fashion. Most people wouldn't have given it a second thought, but Hornblower does and as a result captures a French privateer that had seized a British ship among the idle, fog-bound shipping.

But besides the struggle with Britain's enemies, Forester wanted Hornblower to struggle with himself. As Forester wrote in *The Hornblower Companion*,

> He was to be self-critical. Just as no man is supposed to be a hero to his valet, so Hornblower could not be a hero to his own self. He would be too cynical about his own motives, too aware of his own weaknesses, ever to know content; and he would have to be a man of considerable character so that, even though despairing—hopeless—he could maintain this struggle with himself and not subside into self-satisfaction or humility.

Hornblower was all too aware that he was anything but fearless. He could not see that bravery is not the absence of fear, but rather the suppression of it. Instead he believes his fear is just one more character flaw that he has to overcome, like his propensity to become seasick (a trait he shared with Nelson, by the way) and the tone deafness that prevents him from enjoying music.

And while utterly ruthless when necessary, Hornblower could be deeply compassionate. He hated corporal punishment, then all too common in the Royal Navy. In *Hornblower and the Hotspur*, his servant strikes a superior officer after being badly treated. Under the Articles of War, read to the crew by the captain of every ship on Sundays, he would hang. But in the harbor of Cadiz (Spain and Britain were at peace at that point) Hornblower sees an American ship of war. He asks the servant, "Can you swim?" When told yes, he leaves the servant alone to escape.

The result is one of the greatest characters in all English literature, right up there with Shakespeare's Henry V, Fielding's Tom Jones, and Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

The first Hornblower novel that was published takes place in the middle of the character's career. Over the next three decades, Forester filled in his journey from midshipman to admiral in ten more novels (one unfinished at his death) and six short stories. When I first discovered Hornblower, at age nineteen (appropriately enough on a bookshelf on board a twelve-meter sailboat in the Caribbean), I read them as fast as I could acquire them. And I have read them each at least six times since, with no loss of enjoyment whatever: they are that good. But if you are new to Hornblower, I would suggest reading them in chronological order of the narrative, which is as follows: *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower*; "Hornblower and the Hand of Destiny"; "Hornblower and

the Big Decision"; "Hornblower and the Widow McCool"; *Lieutenant Hornblower*; *Hornblower and the Hotspur*; *Hornblower and the Crisis* (unfinished); *Hornblower and the Atropos*; *Beat to Quarters*; *Ship of the Line*; "Hornblower's Charitable Offering"; *Flying Colours*; *Commodore Hornblower*; "Hornblower and His Majesty"; *Lord Hornblower*; "The Point and the Edge" (outlined in *The Hornblower Companion*); *Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies*; "The Last Encounter." Read them at sea or on land; they are transporting either way.

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