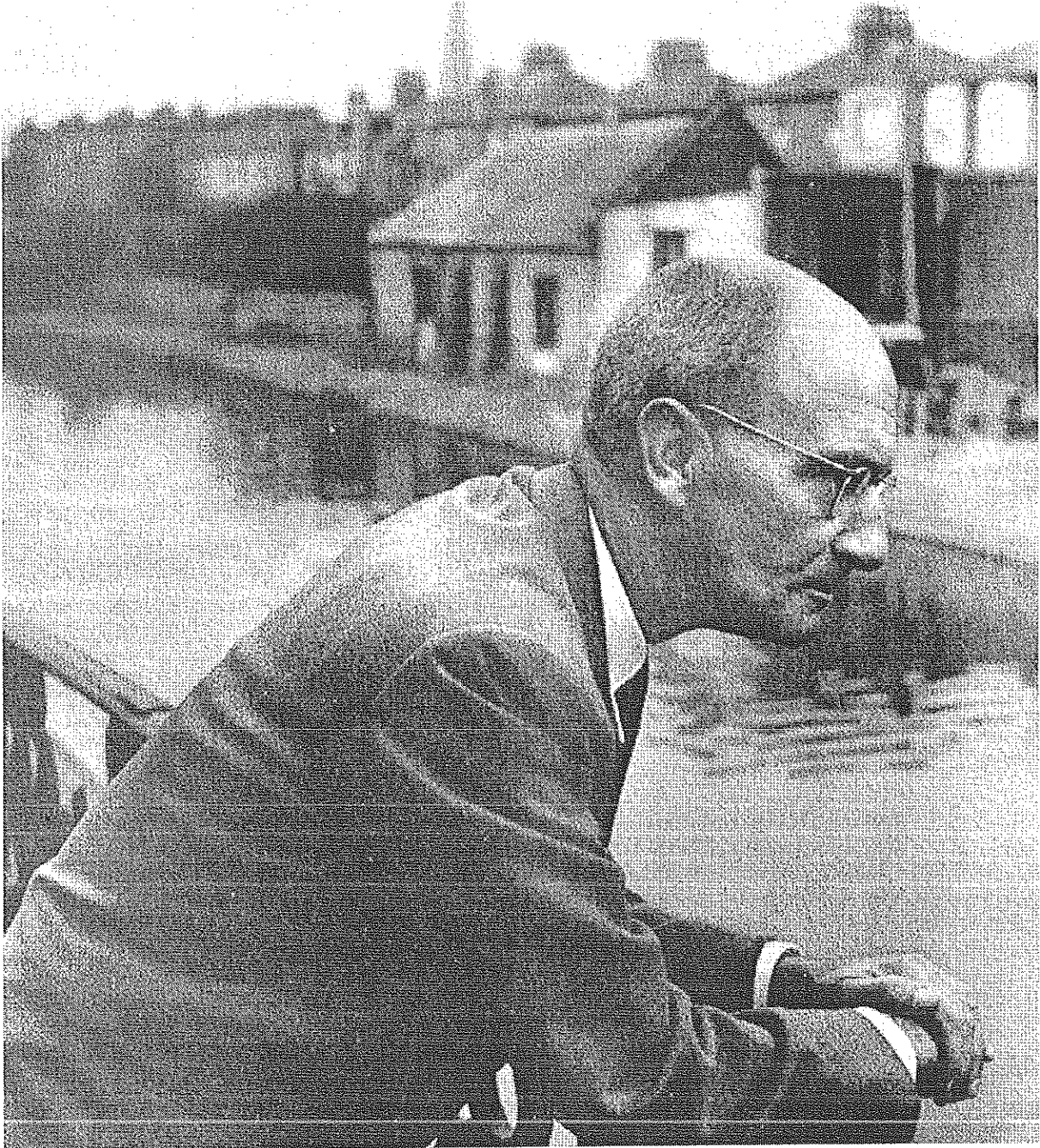


The C.S. Forester
Society

Reflections

www.csforester.eu

Number 12 – March 2008



C.S. Forester: *HORNBLOWER'S LONDON*

memories of an Edwardian childhood and an author's apprenticeship

VAL BIRO: NO HIDING PLACE! – FORESTER AND ROALD DAHL

CSF's Letter to Young Readers of *The Barbary Pirates* – Simon Scarrow

Cartographic confusion! – *U97* and *The "Annie Marble" in Germany*

TWO-AND-TWENTY – more than Verse and Worse!

- Cover of this issue: Forester at the Grand Surrey Canal, South London (from *Hornblower's London*, photo Bill Brandt) -

CORRESPONDENCE



No hiding place!

Lawrie Brewer has done me proud in *Reflections 11!*¹ The pictures reproduced look impressive, and the article (showing lengthy and accurate research) is excellent, with its account of how I've been tracked down! And I'm grateful for the (undeserved) flattering last paragraph. The superb colour repro. of the front cover: will this be an insert, or the actual cover? I am about to read the rest of this excellent edition, but meanwhile heartfelt thanks.

Val [Biro]

The cover of Reflections 11 had a negative image of a design for the cover of Randall and the River of Time which was rejected by the publisher, Michael Joseph. Contributors to the issue were sent an A3-size poster featuring the artwork in its original colours (red, buff, yellow and white on black background) with the remaining text coloured in black and a red as near as possible to that of the artwork.

Val's website has much more for readers – and especially for younger readers – about Val - and Gumdrop too.²

A note to the young reader, from CSF

I am sending a scan of a typewritten note to the "young reader", signed by Forester, which I found in a copy of *The Barbary Pirates* from Landmark Books, Random House. I think it is a first edition, for it says nothing about it. In my other copy it says fourth printing and this copy slightly differs from the first. The letter is 21,5cm x 14cm on special paper with the header and the autograph pre-printed. In the right bottom corner it says "litho in U.S.A." The paper has a watermark-like lining in it and is so divided in columns of 2,5cm wide and has about 16 lines per centimeter. It shows on the scan. The note was

¹ Lawrie Brewer, *Val Biro: artist & illustrator, Reflections 11* (2006), pp. 1-4.

² www.valbiro.co.uk

typewritten but the letters are on the paper and not pushed into the paper. The note is also folded twice.

I've started my website as a hobby. I was learning html and thought my collection of Forester books a nice start. Later on I expanded it on other authors – Pope, Kent, O'Brian. I have long doubted about making it all English and maybe will be one day. For now I don't have enough time to translate its content. I collect multiple editions of Forester books and my website shows them by book but also by publisher (uitgever). Hornblower, of course, has his own chapter.³ I now want to get hold of the books I don't have a copy of. Jetse Reijenga has probably also forwarded you some other scans from the Val Biro illustrations. I'm happy I could help.

John Turfboer

C. S. FORESTER

Dear Young Reader:

When you read about the early adventures and successes of the little American Navy, so far away in the Mediterranean, you will understand what difficulties and hardships those sailors met with and overcame, on coasts that were very strange and foreign.

Nowadays American Naval forces are still cruising there, and the Mediterranean is much nearer to us, and the coasts are familiar. And it was there that General Eisenhower and the American and British forces won the first victories that ended the rule of a tyrant quite as wicked as those you will read about in this book.

You read history here, about matters that still influence what you see in the newspapers today - and that is what children will be reading about as history tomorrow.

Sincerely,

³ <http://www.hetzeegatuit.nl/index.html>



"Für Kaiser und Reich" - U-97 and the Annie Marble

The photograph shows the crew of SM UC 67 on 29th November 1918. For them, the war was over!⁴ But did the reminiscences of such men provide source-material for Forester's *U97*? I cannot comment on the technical knowledge – or lack of it - which CSF applied to his play, as disputed by John Forester and US submariner Walt Peterson.⁵ But Peterson seconds Professor Sternlicht's suggestion that CSF obtained useful information for *U97* and other books on the boating holiday with his wife which he wrote up in *The Annie Marble in Germany*. John Forester dissents: he says that his father would have had no opportunity for discussions in the detail required, even if he had spoken any German.⁶

To write *U97*, CSF adapted the last voyage of UB 116, lost with all hands on 21 November 1918, in a futile raid on the empty anchorage at Scapa Flow – Peterson's article includes the details. But he may also have conflated this mission with the last voyage of the real *U97*, which sank by accident in the North Sea while on the way to surrender. He may of course have created his play entirely out of imagination, but the concrete historical precedents make this improbable.⁷

⁴ <http://www.uboat.net/history/wwi/part6.htm>

⁵ Walt Peterson, *A submariner reads U97, Reflections 10* (2005), pp. 7-11; John Forester, *U97 again, Reflections 11* (2006), pp. 5-6.

⁶ Peterson page 11; Sanford Sternlicht, *C.S. Forester and the Hornblower Saga*, Syracuse (1999), pp. 71-72; John Forester, *U97*, page 6.

⁷ <http://uboat.net/wwi/boats/index.html?boat=97;>
<http://uboat.net/wwi/boats/index.html?boat=UB+116>

If, then, *U97* was research-based, where did CSF do his research? Maybe he had English-language material on the 1914-18 U-boat war – but acquisition of material on the *Annie Marble* trip cannot be ruled out. CSF claimed to have spoken to several Imperial Army and Navy veterans. He may well have done so, although some of what he says in a passage Sternlicht cites may evince false modesty – or simply be false. This is what he says:-

"Before we left England I had tried to initiate Kathleen into some of the mysteries of the German tongue, but she had no sooner reached "der, die, das" than she... left the study of German entirely to me... [I] pick up languages with facility and catch the trick of intonation readily enough to be mistaken for a native (really, not flatteringly) after a week or two.

"The gift was invaluable to me in Germany, because it made it possible for me to compare notes with the people I was most anxious to talk to. I met a man who was in the German Infantry of the Marine and who was wounded when the "Vindictive" came into Ostend; ... I met men who had fought in battle-cruisers, and others who had commanded Turkish warships ... I discussed the blockade with women who were trying to bring up children during that period, and the Treaty of Versailles with men from the plebiscite areas of Silesia..."⁸

There is some fascinating historical detail here!

⁸ CS Forester, *The Annie Marble in Germany*, John Lane (1930), pages 86-88; cf. Sternlicht, page 72.

Sternlicht says, probably on the basis of this alone, that "Forester could speak some German before the trip and his ability in that language improved dramatically on the voyage [b]y continually speaking with German World War I army and navy veterans..." But if Sternlicht is impressed, John Forester is scathing!

"Cecil took some liberties with the truth about himself and Kathleen... With the advantage of his education and his natural linguistic abilities, Cecil knew the languages very well. Kathleen, on the other hand, had really no knowledge whatever of foreign tongues. However, with what was probably execrable pronunciation and worse grammar, she did the shopping, asked the way and gossiped with the river folk. Cecil, on the contrary, was tongue-tied, ashamed of being discovered in a mistake, and had his most enjoyable conversation while abroad talking Latin to a German pharmacist."⁹

The emphasis here is indeed rather different from that of CSF's published statements! Some of these may be worth a second glance. He says, for instance, that:-

"Kathleen and I... never succeeded in buying less than half a pint [of cream] – my German lessons did not take me into fractions, and I never knew the German for an eighth of a litre – and half a pint of cream was much too much for us..."

Could he really not manage the equivalent of "smaller" or even "small" – or is this just a tall story? The incident with the pharmacist is also quote-worthy:-

"The oddest experience I had while shopping was when trying to buy various chemicals – tincture of iodine was one of them – at a druggists. The druggist could not understand my German nor I his... We found a way out of the difficulty, however... Had I not had some nine years' instruction in Latin? I walked behind the chemist's counter. There were all his little drawers labelled in Latin, and I could point out exactly what I wanted. More than that, by some miracle I found myself talking Latin, and the chemist answering me... I said "Habeo parvum navem in flumine" and "fui juvenis medico," and things like that without thought or effort – it was a delicious change from German. I do not expect that chemist will forget that conversation to his dying day; I know I shall not..."¹⁰

What are we to make of all this? We need not necessarily believe that CSF could pass as a native speaker of a given language after a couple of weeks; but this doesn't mean his real ability was as low – and so his interaction with Germans as little – as John Forester suggests! Germans who had learnt English (rather than French) at school might be keen to practise, and a beginner listening to a foreign language *understands* far more than can be recycled into his own speech. It's a pity that his remarks

about meeting veterans are only anticipatory. His best opportunity was surely when they reached Potsdam, with all the pride of a foreign cruiser at a Spithead Review:-

"Hither we came, with our Red Ensign fluttering proudly astern of us, and "Annie's" blunt bows butting up sheets of spray for the honour of England. At the piers were already moored all the finest motor yachts Germany could show, every one with the pre-Revolution German flag flying (as is the habit of German yachts, much to the discomfort of the Republican government), and ours was the only foreign flag in all that long display..."

He had the status and privileges of an accredited press reporter, commissioned by *Motor Boat* magazine to cover the Potsdam competition. And – as he admits – "the presence of English-speaking committee members relieved us of the strain of making ourselves understood in German"! And here, surely, there would be veterans of the War and the Navy, more than willing to talk. What a pity that at this point – as on many other obviously interesting occasions on the trip – he had nothing to say about what actually happened.¹¹

Paul Ellison Hunter, Philadelphia.

• Editor's reply

I know only a handful of words in German – but *parvum* for *parvam* and *medico* for *medicus* would seem rather elementary errors for such a good Latinist to make!

I agree that the historical detail is fascinating – and it could all be true. A sceptic might answer that the conversations are fictional, their content being what an [imaginary] listener might want to hear. This may apply to the Ostend raids, but not to Germans serving under the Turkish flag, let alone to the 1921 German-Polish crisis over Silesia. To me, the conversations have a faint ring of authenticity – though interlocutors may well have exaggerated or invented details.

On the other hand, CSF's knowledge may have come entirely from books. John Forester says CSF owned HW Wilson's *Battleships in Action*.¹² I have not seen this 1926 book, but have ascertained that it was the first English publication to use the considerable information about the Battle of Jutland which appeared in the German 'Official History,' but which was not available for Volume III of the British 'Official History'. It also had hitherto-unpublished material on the U-boat campaign and the Dardanelles fiasco. I also know nothing of what CSF published in *Motor Boat*. I also know that CSF wrote about the two German warships *Goeben* and *Breslau* – transferred to Turkey in 1914 – in the introduction he wrote for Richard Hough's *Dreadnought – a history of the modern battleship*, Michael Joseph (1965). If anyone could send me a copy of it I would be very interested.

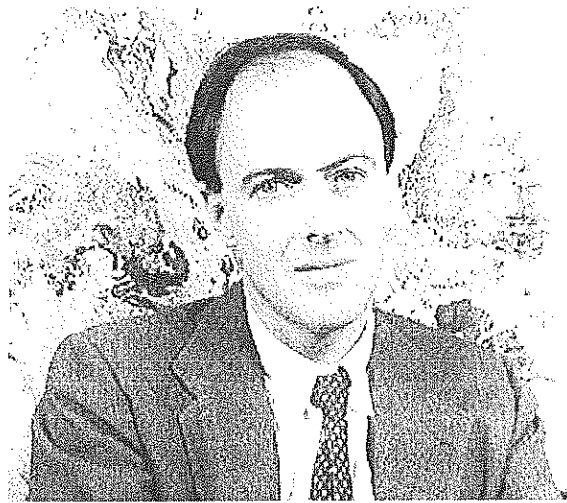
David Stead

⁹ John Forester, *Novelist and storyteller: the life of CS Forester* (2000), page 216.

¹⁰ CS Forester, *AMG*, pages 214; 218-219.

¹¹ CS Forester, *AMG*, pages 181-183.

¹² *Novelist and storyteller* page 224.



"Tiny little details, that's what counts..."

The story of C.S. Forester, as the facilitator of the writing career of Roald Dahl (1916-1990) has been discussed before in the *CS Forester Society* and is widespread on the web - but only as told by Dahl himself. There is no independent confirmation and their encounter in 1942 is not mentioned in John Forester's biography.

After a business career in East Africa and RAF duty in the Middle East, Dahl became Assistant Air Attaché at the British Embassy in Washington, in February 1942, where:-
On my third day of work, there was a knock on the door. 'Come in'. A very small man with thick steel-rimmed spectacles shuffled shyly into the room. 'Forgive me for bothering you... my name is Forester. C.S. Forester.

The visitor then tells Dahl:

*I am too old for war. The only thing I can do to help is to write things about Britain for the American papers and magazines. We need all the help America can give us. A magazine - Saturday Evening Post- will publish any story I write. I have a contract with them.*¹³

What CSF wants, Dahl says, is "your most exciting adventure... the most frightening or dangerous thing that happened to you". During lunch Dahl promises to make notes and send them to Forester, who will then write the story for the *Post*. Forester then gives some tips:-

Please let me have plenty of detail. That's what counts in our business, tiny little details, like you have broken your shoelace on your left shoe, or a fly settled on the rim of your glass at lunch or the man you were talking to had a broken front tooth. Try to think back and remember everything.

¹³ John Davies, *Roald Dahl and CS Forester*, *CS Forester Society Newsletter* 8 (2002), page 5; Roald Dahl, *Lucky Break, or how I became a writer in The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and six more*. Peacock Books (1979); cf. John Forester, *Novelist & Storyteller, the Life of C.S. Forester*, John Forester (2000).

Dahl did so and the result was such that Forester advised the *Post* to publish Dahl's piece just as it stood, under Dahl's name. The contents of the *Saturday Evening Post* for August 1, 1942, are listed as follows: *Marine Soldier photo cover. Fighting Marines in Full Color, Broadway's Howard Cullman, African Highway, China's Flying Freighters, Improved Crops, Yankee Auctioneer, RAF Pilot in Desert Crash* - and this last item is Dahl's! However, the title Dahl gave the story (*A Piece of Cake*) was changed in the *Post* to a more dramatic one, *Shot Down Over Libya*.¹⁴

My opinion, after reading the story in a published collection, is that Dahl took Forester's advice literally, resulting in a gripping storyline, in which at times the level of detail displays stunningly impressive dimensions. The remarks quoted by Dahl sound as authentic Forester as one can expect: seemingly irrelevant details augmenting the authenticity of a storyline. CSF was on the East Coast in the spring of 1942. When in New York City, he nominally worked out of the British Information Service in the Rockefeller Center, but also traveled to Washington to talk to British diplomatic and military officials.¹⁵ We could conclude therefore, that in all likelihood the encounter that Dahl reports did in fact take place as he describes it. But Dahl's account is a mixture of circumstantial evidence and facts, and the fact remains that he describes his visitor as 'a very small man'. This does not match pictures of CSF I have seen. His son and biographer John Forester agrees:-

*Nobody who knew CSF would call him a very small man, and, while he did wear spectacles with metal frames, the lenses were not particularly thick. CSF was above average in height, though not 6 feet as I remember. And I cannot imagine CSF shuffling shyly into a room. He walked with a firm step (until 1943), and was not shy about anything.*¹⁶

Both authors became experts in telling good fiction. So, either Dahl made up his description of CSF and CSF chose not to contradict it - or Dahl was mistaken, in just one tiny little detail! And now for another illustration of how small details count.

First editions of all Forester's pre-war books are hard to obtain. For example, original editions of *The Voyage of the Annie Marble* are seldom on sale. At present Abebooks lists two copies, at £85 and £380. So I bought the D.N.Goodchild edition (2005) for £10 and enjoyed it very much. It reminded me of my favourite Hornblower - *Flying Colours*. The autobiographical style is completely different, of course, and it was written well before the Hornblowers.

¹⁴ www.pastpaper.com/List-SatEvePost40s.htm; Roald Dahl, *Shot Down Over Libya*, in *Saturday Evening Post*, 1st August 1942.

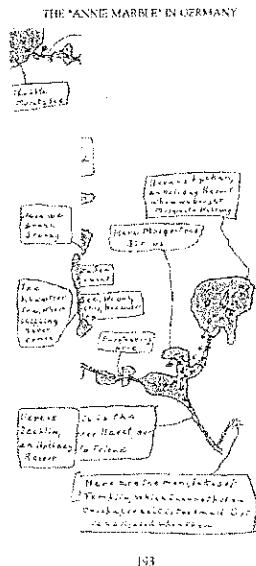
¹⁵ John Forester, personal communication, July 2007

¹⁶ John Forester, personal communication, January 2008

The other travel book, *The Annie Marble in Germany*, is just as scarce in a first edition: I located 5 copies, prices ranging from £54-£425, and only the last has a dust jacket. So I bought the Goodchild edition.

Both Goodchild reprints are advertised with following note: "This is NOT a facsimile reprint; all of our titles are completely retypeset and redesigned and are essentially new editions of the original work. Typesetting and design closely emulate the typeface and design of the original volume, all photographs, engravings and/or line art in the original volume are digitally enhanced, and all full-page photographic plates or engravings are tissue-guarded".

I also enjoyed reading this book. The author at times is even proud of admitting ignorance of certain technical matters, an unexpected frankness. But in this edition, the inside title page mentions photos and two maps. There is however only one map, on page 193.



Map in D.N. Goodchild edition of *Annie Marble in Germany*.

But it looks like different parts of different maps, so I suspected maybe the two maps had been messed-up into one. I sent a scan to D.N. Goodchild to inform them about a possible misprint. They replied:-

"This is the map that was included in the original edition, as sketched by Forester. I agree that its crude, but that was his work".

The above is what I told David Stead, and he said that his original has two *fold-out* maps, opposite pages 40 and 244. Problem solved: the printers of the Goodchild edition forgot to unfold the first map before photocopying it. And they forgot the second map completely. After another letter, D.N. Goodchild was kind enough to send me copies of both complete maps.

Jetse Reijnga, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

• Editor's reply

The story of how Forester urged Dahl to become a writer is indeed well posted, with one of the sites quoting Forester's actual letter, as follows:-

"Dear RD,
 "You were meant to give me notes, not a finished story. I'm bowled over. Your piece is marvellous. It is the work of a gifted writer. I didn't touch a word of it. I sent it at once under your name to my agent, Harold Matson, asking him to offer it to the Sunday (sic) Evening Post with my personal recommendation. You will be happy to hear that the Post accepted it immediately and have paid \$1000. Mr Matson's commission is 10%. I enclose his cheque for \$900. It's all yours. As you will see from Mr Matson's letter, which I enclose, the Post is asking if you will write more stories for them. I do hope you will. Did you know you were a writer?
 "With my very best wishes and congratulations,
 C S Forester."¹⁷

I do not know just where Dahl quotes this letter, or where the original is.

But all's well that ends well! Readers who don't want to shell out an arm and a leg for either or both of the Annie Marble books can order them from D.N. Goodchild, via his website, which currently lists *The Voyage of the Annie Marble* at \$19.95 and *The Annie Marble in Germany* at \$22.95.¹⁸

Simon Scarrow - Hornblower with togas?

I have been reading two of Norfolk author Simon Scarrow's most recent novels, *The Eagle in the Sands* and *Young Bloods*. The former is a racy read indeed; it is the 7th novel in his *Cato and Macro* sequence – no doubt they have been described in some reviews as "Hornblower with togas"! *Young Bloods* is definitely a good read and it is the first of a quartet about Wellington and Napoleon. As you may know, Simon Scarrow was partly inspired in his historical fiction by the works of CS Forester – as well as those of Bernard Cornwell and Patrick O'Brian.

Adrian Taylor, Norfolk.

Contributions to Reflections

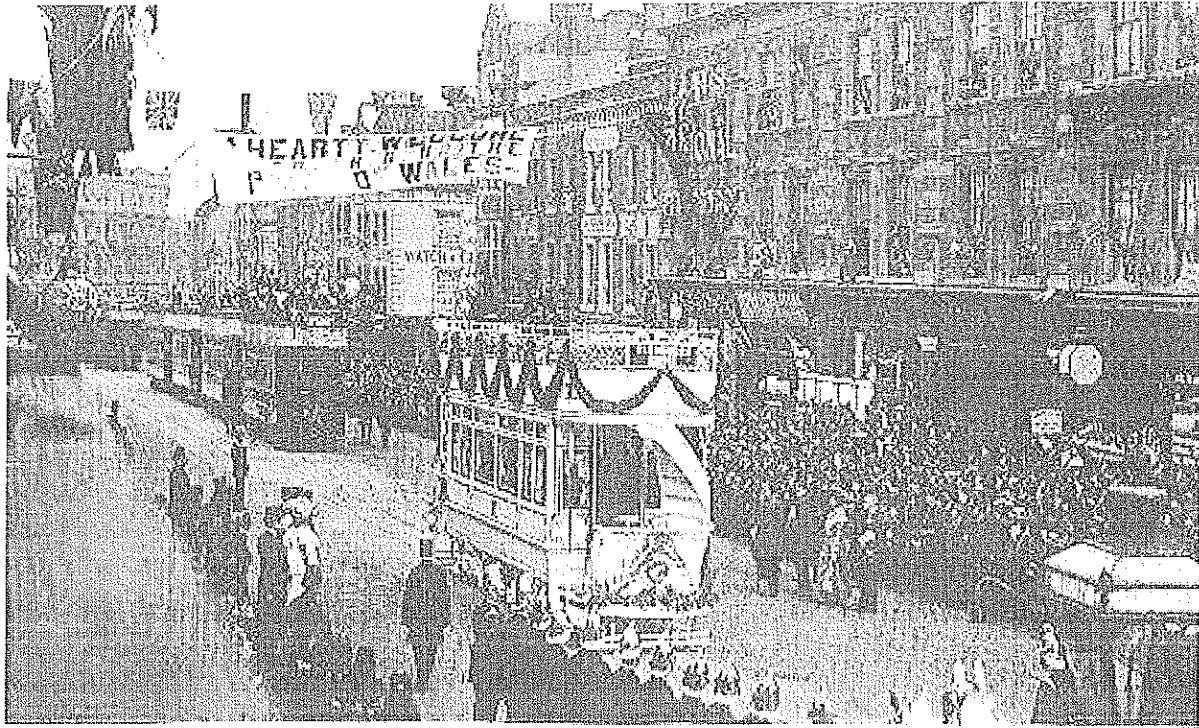
Finished articles and letters on the Works and Days of CS Forester, or the contents of *Reflections*, are welcomed. These should be sent as email attachments in MS Word to:

velero@tiscali.co.uk.

For discussion about proposed articles, or help with content or formatting, please contact: lawrence_brewer@hotmail.com

¹⁷ www.theweeweb.co.uk/public/author_profile.php?id=80

¹⁸ http://www.dngoodchild.com/front_pg_7-06.htm



THE PRINCE'S CAR STARTING.

H.K.U. The Prince of Wales opening the South London Electric Traction, May 15th 1903.

CS Forester - *Hornblower's London*

Another in HOLIDAY's series on the home towns of great authors. CS Forester reminisces about his boyhood and about one of the great sea fighters of modern fiction – Horatio Hornblower.

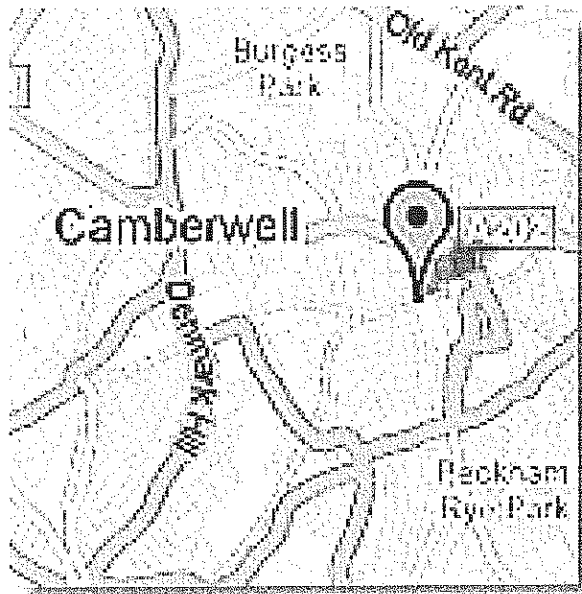
Such was *Holiday* magazine's introduction to an article it published in August 1955.

For a writer, the past has a vast fascination. Not simply the past dug out of history books, tracked down in obscure libraries, ferreted out of the cracked pages of old letters, diaries and ships' logs, but the more personal past – the past remembered. No writer – at least no writer such as myself – ever quite escapes his own childhood. He returns to it again and again, with affection and with longing and with increasing accuracy of recollection and detail, for this is personal history that has been experienced. And this is the stuff that stories and books are made of. Nor does it matter where or what that past was. I know this, because I was brought up in the wrong part of London, the dull part where nothing ever happened. Yet I have gone back to that part of London again and again in my books for events, for people, for stories, for tiny details, for settings and houses and furniture – and for me, this London can never be dull.

And when I do go back (it is an almost daily event, I assure you), a strange thing happens to me now. There am I, my present self, strolling through the streets of Dulwich and Camberwell and Peckham, and there beside me is another figure – a small, frail figure who sometimes skips childishly ahead and sometimes lags behind, his nose buried in a book. That is myself as a boy, fifty years

ago. And beside him there often strides another, more imposing figure; he is a young man, tall, with an air of expectancy about him and an occasional look of impatience in his eyes as he scans these city streets. There is a glint of light from the shiny buttons on his coat, for this is a young naval officer; his name is Horatio Hornblower. This is London for me – my London.

If you cross the Thames, heading south from the West End of London, you enter immediately into the unfashionable half of the city, it is something like crossing the East River from Manhattan to Brooklyn, and South Londoners have the same sort of almost touchy local patriotism that that the people of Brooklyn display. The South London streets which lead you away from the river are drab, one might almost say ugly – I would say so myself if I had not been brought up there. I was born in Egypt, but came to South London while still a child and passed my formative years there, adapting myself perforce to an incredible new society where all men spoke English and only laughed at my Arabic. To me all those streets, from Kennington to New Cross, from the Elephant and Castle to Sydenham, are full of memories, even though remarkably little of historical importance happened there. On Kennington Common one or two of Bonny



Prince Charlie's supporters lost their heads (I cannot tell you why that place was chosen for the horrid exhibition), and Karl Marx lived in Camberwell for a short time, and then you come to Peckham, where nothing happened at all except that William Blake once saw an angel in a tree on Peckham Rye.¹⁹

Peckham is a vast area of brick and slate houses in undistinguished streets. The wave of building that rolled out from London washed over this part in the 1870's and 1880's, and certain areas of it might be slums now if it were not for the determined efforts of a paternal government. But otherwise any one of its streets is exactly like any other, save to the eye of someone like myself who spent his childhood in one of them and can remember the very flagstones in the sidewalks. Peckham Road is the main route of communication east from Camberwell Green; that was where I would spend my Saturday penny, and – much more important to my infant mind then – go to change my books at the Public Library.

It is now fifty years since a small white-faced boy, so thin that he looked half-starved, used to stagger along the Peckham Road with his arms full of books. He was the youngest of a family of five and he had a father and mother, too, so that he had seven library cards available for his own use. Now I come to think of it, you could have separate cards for fiction and non-fiction, so that I must have made use of fourteen cards altogether. It was nearly every day that I carried an armful of books – a double armful – round to the library and carried another double handful back again, to be read during long enchanted afternoons and evenings, oblivious to the frequently violent activities of the older members of the family. No periodic drunkard ever was as far out of this world, or as steeped in pleasure, as I was during those bouts of mine. I

¹⁹ For more information, see [Note A](#) at end of this article, p 15.

can remember losing myself, enchanted, in the endless volumes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, which subsequently became the favourite reading of young Horatio Hornblower; I can remember the vistas which opened up as I turned each new corner of the magic garden of romance – unending vistas of Wells and Kipling and Conrad, the beauty of each enhanced by pride of personal discovery, for it never occurred to that lonely and self-centered little boy that the rest of the world was also reading Wells and Kipling. Yet those seemingly endless volumes and vistas were not actually without limit; there came a time – I must have been every day of ten years old and perhaps as much as twelve – when I had read every volume in the library once at least, if not two or three times, except for the volumes on music and philosophy.

Save for the hole in the ground (thanks to Goering's high explosives) where the library stood, Peckham Road is strangely little changed from those days. The sweet shop where I spent my Saturday penny and the shoe repairer and the chemist still stand side by side at the corner of the street where I used to live; on the opposite corner still stands the chapel and, along the road beyond the chapel, the fire station.

There was a marvellous occasion once as I was about to pass the fire station with my arms full of books, when bells jangled and doors burst open and I looked in to see firemen sliding down posts and putting on their brass, crested helmets, I saw one of them (Did I? It is hard to believe, and I have not checked up on the technique of fire fighting in the 1900's) light a little fire under the brass boiler of the steam engine while the intelligent horses trotted round and round and took up position in front of engine and "escape" – the life-saving ladder. Harness dropped onto the horses' backs, to be buckled up by a well-co-ordinated team of firemen, and then out they thundered with sparks flying from the horses' shoes. Those horses were the famous "Peckham Greys" that won, as I recall, a national award for fire horses.

Peckham Road in those days was a wonderful place (and I suppose still is to little boys not yet in their teens). It was incredibly noisy; the steel-tired wheels of the carts rumbled like thunder over the granite setts and macadam, and the trampling of the horses added to the din. The horses added considerably to the dirt as well; on a rainy day the vast hoofs on the dray horses, coming down ponderously into the puddles, would splash a loathsome mixture all about, sometimes as high as the upper windows. There were horse tramcars when I first knew Peckham Road, and I felt a pitying contempt for the tramcar drivers who drove their horses standing hardly above ground level, as compared with the lordly bus drivers who sat enthroned on high, feet above the vast rumps of their horses. But the horse trams disappeared quite early in the century – 1905 would be my guess. They

were replaced by electric trams, which were ushered in with a tremendous ceremonial, the first I can remember. I stood at the roadside with thousands of other children to watch – I can hardly believe it myself – a white state tramcar being driven with solemn dignity along the newly opened line. It had a roofless upper deck, on which stood the then Prince of Wales, later His Majesty George V, with the Princess and five royal children – the present Duke of Windsor, His late Majesty King George VI, the Princess Royal, the Duke of Gloucester and the late Duke of Kent. They boys wore white sailor suits and all of the children were obviously delighted at the novelty of riding on top of a tram, although of course preternaturally well behaved, looking about hem eagerly while their father stood patiently in his black frock coat raising his glossy silk hat to acknowledge the hideous discords of everybody trying to sing "God Bless the Prince of Wales", which nobody knew.

Thereafter electric trams sailed up and down the Peckham Road, singing what to a little boy were magnificent melodies as they boomed along; at night-time they were like great ships of light cleaving a way through the darkness. In one direction they went to Deptford and Greenwich, and my Saturday penny could take me there, to the scenes where some of Marryat's best novels were laid, and where there was the magnificent Naval Museum with its ship models and its Nelson relics. It became a favourite haunt of mine (how exciting it was in Greenwich Park to stand with one foot in either hemisphere, astraddle longitude 0) and later I was to prowling round there looking at the models again, checking up on how much of the main deck of his ship-of-the-line was visible to Captain Hornblower standing on the poop. If those trams had not run to Greenwich I might today be earning my living in an honest fashion.

But there was something else just as fascinating as Greenwich and nearer. That was the canal. Just north of Peckham Road (have I mentioned that the north side of Peckham Road was the wrong side of the tracks, not nearly as fashionable as the south side?) where Rye Lane joins on to Peckham Road, the Grand Surrey Canal comes unceremoniously to an end, in an inconspicuous terminal. I know now that the Grand Surrey Canal is only some two miles long, but to me once it was as magnificent as its name. It wound about from the Surrey Commercial Docks through the heart of the slums, and it served as a minor, but quite important, distributing channel from those docks, which were and are tremendously important in the commercial life of the London area. Vast barges used to be towed by horses along the Grand Surrey Canal, filled with barley for the Bermondsey breweries and wheat for the millers and sugar for the sweet manufacturers, all



Photo: Rudyard Kipling in his study in *Naulakha* - c. 1895

brought by the big seagoing ships whose funnels crowded the docks.²⁰

One of the strangest things about the canal was its loneliness there in the heart of one of the most crowded areas in the world. The towpath used to be nearly deserted; there was a toll charge of one half-penny for foot passengers on the towpath, and in those days a half-penny was a lot of money in the minds of most other people besides little boys. I could wander along that towpath dreaming dreams, as if the canal and towpath and myself were enclosed in a glass case, outside which, visible and yet unable to influence me, were the tenements and the factories that crowded close upon it. The lighters came gliding over the black water, the only sound accompanying their passage being the slow "clop clop" of the hoofs of the horses that towed them. Sometimes at the horse's head would walk the bargee, his face tanned to mahogany, but often the horses plodded along without other guidance than an occasional shout from the barge. The water, before the barge arrived, would be like black glass; the surface would mount up in a slight unbroken dome before the advancing bow, and then it would flow quickly back along the sides of the barge, and when the barge had passed the ripples of its passage would die away slowly to leave an unbroken surface again. But the ripples never died away in the mind of the boy who watched the lighters pass.

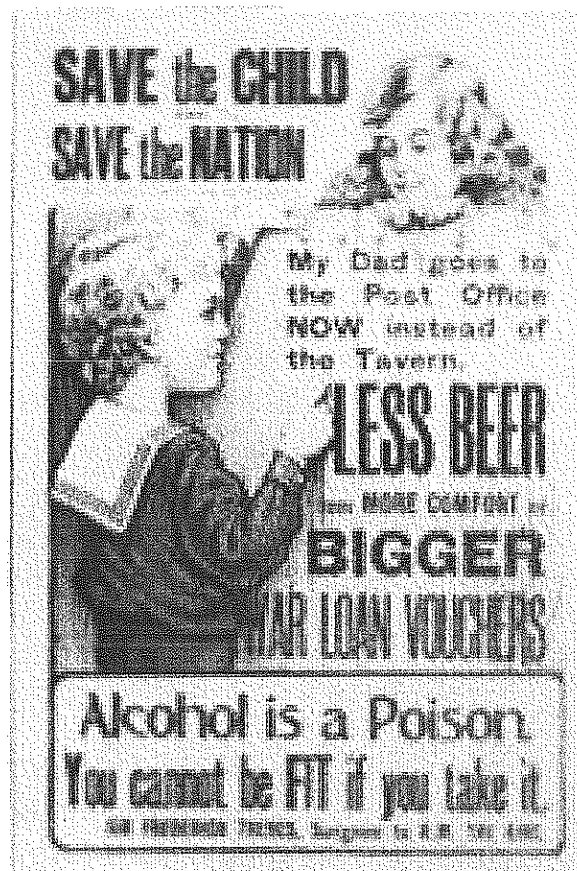
²⁰ For more information, see [Note B](#) on page 15. The Editor believed that everyone would prefer to read this article without footnotes which would detract from the main text – but hoped the notes on pages 15-16 would help set the article in context!

There was only one untroubled moment that I remember along that canal. A group of small boys was playing by the path when a lighter approached from one direction and I from the other. The horse was unaccompanied, and one of the boys lit a firecracker and tossed it under the horse's feet. Tranquillity was shattered like a pricked soap bubble by the bang of that cracker. The horse sprang into the air, he reared and he plunged, his huge feet lashing out in all directions; then he tried to bolt, bracing his feet against the earth for a convulsive bound forward, only to be brought up short by the towrope and the seventy-ton barge at the end of it. He tried again and again, leaping forward madly against his collar, each leap being translated into frantic jerks upon the towrope. I cannot imagine why the rope did not part under those jerks, nor can I fail to imagine what would have happened to me if it had, because I was standing rapt at the sight of the great beast leaping against the dead weight behind him, and I was less than twenty yards in front of him. The bargee ran forward along the barge from stern to bow and soared into the air in a prodigious leap, coat flying and arms and legs working. He landed with a crash on the towpath and ran forward to seize the horse's head and quiet him down, uttering what I knew by slight acquaintance to be filthy words and yet in a soothing tone, in the oddest way. The boys had long disappeared, of course, and the barge, implacable as death, was steadily moving along the canal with its own vast momentum, the towline slackening off and dipping into the water, so that the bargee had to lead the horse past me to take up on the line without sparing me more than a glance. Fifty years later (or a hundred years before, according to how you look at it) Horatio Hornblower was involved in an adventure with a horse-drawn barge while on his way to take command of the *Atropos*.

The canal's farther end, as I have said, was rooted in the docks, and there, and in the Pool, and along the whole stretch of river down to Greenwich, was romance to set the imagination working feverishly. Hundreds of ships, ships in fresh paint and battered old ships, working the strangest cargoes. Every possible flag was to be seen there, although the Red Ensign was of course far the commonest, and I would stand with the wind blowing round me, inflated with pride and excitement. There were flags that presumably will never be seen again – the old Russian merchant flag, and the flag of Austria-Hungary; I think that it was only once that I saw, peering forward to make sure of it, the Stars and Stripes of the United States. The wildest dreams were dreamed, and the wildest ambitions sprouted there, and later some of the dreams came true and some of the ambitions were realized. But this is not the place to write about them, so back we go to Peckham.

There are other isolated memories, some of them peculiarly poignant. Once – it was after I had started

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reading Kipling, and in particular his short story *Wireless* with its description of the symptoms of pulmonary tuberculosis – I saw a man in our road, turning the handle of a barrel organ. He was tall and thin, and to my mind he was handsome despite his hollow cheeks. He had a big golden moustache like a Viking's, and as I looked at him he coughed and then spat bright arterial blood on the kerb. I knew what that meant, thanks to Kipling. I knew that this cadaverous figure, what remained of a fine man, was doomed to death within a few weeks, and I experienced a frightful wave of pity for him and resentment against the world, as intense as the emotions of a seven-year-old can be. I remember thinking that he was standing there grinding out those mechanically gay tunes because somewhere he had a hungry wife and children, and because he was hungry himself, in a world that presented to a dying man no better opportunity than that of turning a barrel organ. I had already spent half my Saturday penny, but there was still a ha'penny in my pocket, and I fumbled it out, growing more and more self-conscious, from among the myriad other things there, and put it in the Viking's hand. Shamefaced, I met one glance from the Viking's blue eyes. That was a disturbing encounter; I do not even remember regretting parting with my precious ha'penny.

Never to be forgotten was the bus with four horses. Why it was necessary to hitch four horses to that bus I never knew, but a hateful fate decreed that when my brothers and sisters were taken to a matinee of *Peter Pan* their bus

should have four horses. Not only were they going to *Peter Pan* while I, too young, was being left behind, but they were going in a bus with four horses! My shrieks of envious rage as I struggled against the restraining hand of the family maid who had brought me down to see them off must have echoed the whole length of Peckham Road. (I can't remember which maid that was, but about that time I remember hearing my mother complaining that she had had to raise the maid's wages from twelve to fourteen pounds – from sixty to seventy dollars – a year. She only worked from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.)

There was in those days, and there may be now, for all I know, a national organisation known as the Band of Hope.²¹ It was a body dedicated to ideals of temperance, and I used to be taken to the meetings of the local branch – not by my immediate family but by a devout old aunt. In those pre-radio and pre-television days the Band of Hope provided entertainment which was scarce enough in any case. The evenings would begin with a magic-lantern exhibition, quite interesting to a small child with omnivorous reading habits, showing the effect of alcohol on the human liver, and when you had sat through that you were rewarded with a concert. There would be orchestral selections, and I used to think of course that the orchestra was the "Band" of Hope. The music was wildly exciting; the person who nowadays can have the finest music in the world by turning on a switch finds it difficult to imagine a world where orchestral music was a rarity. Yet there were other turns more exciting still. I cannot remember the young man's name, but he used to recite. He may have been greasy-haired and pimply-faced; he may have been a most objectionable and self-assertive type; I never knew. It's likely – the odds point that way – that a few years later he died for his country on the Somme, but in the happy nineteen hundreds, with the Boer War satisfactorily settled, further war was unthinkable (no country would ever be able to afford it) and battle, murder and sudden death were things that occurred only in the Litany and at Band of Hope concerts. This young man used to recite about them. He would put on a blue coat with gold braid and recite Fultah Fisher's Boarding House and then he would put on a red coat and recite Gunga Din. Once he put on a cocked hat and a ruffled lace necktie and recited Noyes' The Highwayman, which must have been pretty new at the time.²² He would declaim the verse with shouting and wit formal, melodramatic gestures, and the little boy listening to the resounding words thought they were marvellous. The reciter acknowledged the applause by standing at the salute, and the salute in those days was a strange exotic gesture full of romance to people who never dreamed that they would live to see a world half of which would spend its time saluting the other half.

²¹ For more information, see [Note C](#) at end, page 15.

²² For more information, see [Note D](#) at end, page 15.

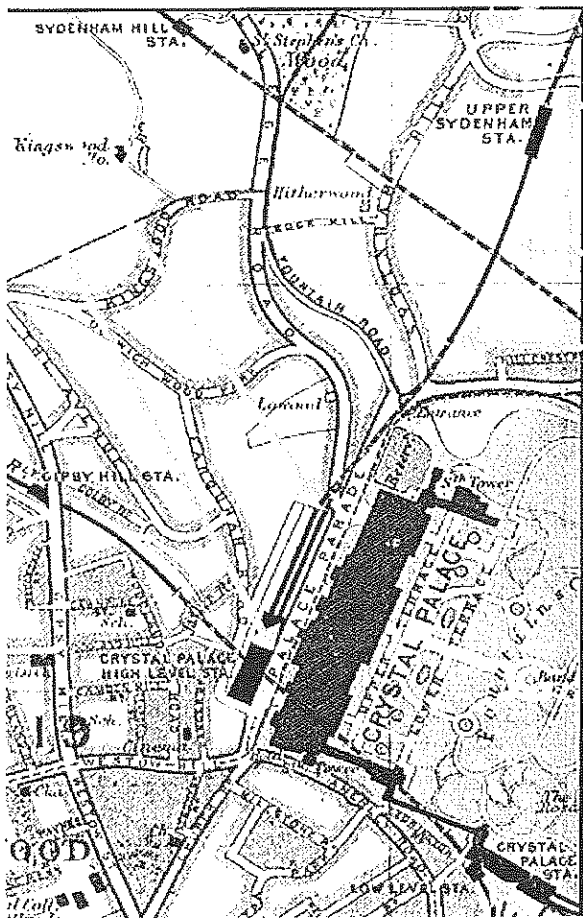


The Band of Hope was, as I have said, a temperance organisation, but at the age of eight I used to emerge from their concerts as drunk as a skunk, drunk on Kipling and Newbolt. I would assume an appearance of sobriety sufficient to persuade my nice aunt to allow me to go home alone, and then, by myself, in the quiet streets full of romantic autumn scents, I would abandon myself to spiritual upheaval. The magic phrases would shoot through my mind like rockets – "The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God", "The Little Silver Crucifix", "You're a better man than I am" – and poetic fervour and the spirit of saintly self-denial would set my heart thumping and my skinny legs leaping.²³

I must have been flushed and glittering-eyed when I reached home, but the advantage of being the smallest of a large family was that it was possible to evade notice, and to crouch in the corner of the gaslit sitting room, ignored by big brothers and sisters, with a pencil and exercise book in my hands. I could hardly wait to scribble away at the poems boiling inside me. And then I would be packed off to bed; but bed, once the grim routine of washing and undressing had been struggled through, was no undesirable place, for I could lie in the darkness with whirlpools of thyme and romance circulating in my mind – whirlpools coloured like a blazing sunset – before going off imperceptibly into sleep where dreams were not much different from what seemed to be the reality of the moment.

It was about that time that the discovery was made that the reading spells had ruined my infant eyesight and that until I should be fitted with spectacles I was as near blind as made no matter. How those spectacles changed the world! All sorts of things became clear to me which I had never dreamed of before. The Town Hall had a clock by which one could see the time! Tramcars carried signs indicating their destination which could actually be read; until that time I had fancied that adults were possessed of some faculty for telling a tram car's destination which was denied to little boys. The posters bore wording that actually made sense – until then my reading of them had been restricted to the words more than a yard high, which made the style rather jerky. And in school I discovered that classes were not exciting games wherein everybody made amusing make-believe of reading what was supposed to be written on the blackboard and was quite invisible to boys in their desks – a leechlike memory and vast reading had enabled me for years to keep up with the rest of the class without my defective eyesight being noticed.

²³ For more information, see [Notes E-G](#) at end, page 15.



workmen removing a fallen tree down toward Herne Hill. These books were written in all sorts of odd places in the world, but that was where they had their start.

Let me explain this phenomenon a bit further, the phenomenon of the writer's creative process in the oddest circumstances and places. The second most sequestered railway station in the County of London is Sydenham Hill (the most sequestered is a mile away at Upper Sydenham). It was at Sydenham Hill station that I placed an odd telephone call when I was thirty-odd years old. I had been talking to my agent in the morning and he had told me that a London newspaper – *the News Chronicle* – had a new project, of running five-day serials, and would pay good money for stories that would break up into five instalments with a punch at the end of each. Had I any ideas? Regretfully I said I had not. I left him and passed a few dull hours – did a little shopping and lunched at the club – and then took the train back from Victoria to Sydenham Hill. As I passed the ticket barrier at Victoria the first germ of an idea bobbed tip in my mind; it was followed by others as I walked along the train. They took more definite shape during the twenty minutes; run to Sydenham Hill, and by the time I had left the train there I was too excited to wait until I reached home. I went into the telephone booth at the station and called my agent and told him that I had a five-jointed idea after all, and that I would start work on it at once. Then I hurried over the hill to get out pen and paper and write about Rose Sayer and her dying missionary brother, and the subsequent adventures of Rose in the steam launch called the *African Queen*. The story appeared as a serial, and, rewritten, appeared as a novel (it is possible for the initiated reader to distinguish the five sections even now) and seventeen and a half years after I walked into that telephone box I walked into the premiere of *The African Queen* in Hollywood to watch Katharine Hepburn play Rose Sayer and Humphrey Bogart give a performance as Alinuit which won him the Oscar for 1951.²⁴

Spectacles changed my world and I changed too; it may have been cause and effect and it may have been coincidence. The white-faced, sickly, industrious infant grew into a healthy, lanky boy who combined magnificent laziness with a talent for ingenious mischief that marked him out as the naughtiest boy of that generation at school. And my environment changed. I said goodbye to Peckham Road – I don't actually remember doing so; at that heartless age I moved away with none of the nostalgic regrets that have distinguished these paragraphs. Camberwell had "gone down" in my mother's opinion, and so we left. But not forever, for many years later Leading Seaman Albert Brown of my book *Brown on Resolution* (*Singlehanded in the USA*) was born and brought up there in a street remarkably like my own, while his mother, before the adventure which brought Brown into the world, lived at the far end of the tramline at Greenwich. Captain Hornblower spent a short period of his nomad life in Deptford. When we left Peckham, we moved to a house in Dulwich; halfway between these two homes Mr William Marble of my *Payment Deferred* later buried a corpse in his back garden, and not far from there Randall (of *The River of Time*) spent his married life. It was while I wandered along those same quiet streets much later on, in the 1920's, that plots formed in my mind; Rifleman Dodd went through his adventures one evening as I walked along Court Lane, and *The Gun* played its part in the Peninsular War in Spain as a result of watching

But this becomes modern history. Let us go back to my childhood; in particular, to my school days. The herring stuck with thumbtacks to the under surface of my form-master's desk caused endless trouble and eventual investigation of the drains before the source of the revolting scent was discovered. Luckily the discovery was not made until term was over and the holidays had begun, so that investigation as to the culprit was not pushed inconveniently far. My record at school might not have been good enough to stand the shock of another school scandal, not when every term report bore some sort of note beginning "Unless his conduct improves..." A certain turbulence of spirit enlivened those days at school – exceedingly happy days, I must hasten to add. An act of injustice brought about a curious situation. I thought of it

²⁴ For more information, see Note H at end, page 16.

as injustice then, although Heaven knows the balance of injustice must have been far over in the opposite direction. At any rate, a clash grew out of the determination of one of the masters, weary of trying to decipher my careless scribble, to improve my handwriting. He set me writing exercises in my own time, which was not merely an injustice but an indignity to a top-lofty fifteen-year-old. My reaction was a solemn oath never to do any sort of other schoolwork in my own time.

That solemn oath gave me an adventurous life during the next year or so. The work had to be done at least well enough to keep me out of the worst trouble, and by the terms of my oath it had to be done in school hours when the timetable said I was supposed to be doing something else. We used to have fifteen minutes of school prayers at the beginning of each day, with everybody (except the rare Catholics and Jews) crowded into the school hall together, standing shoulder to shoulder. My friends would encircle me to conceal me from the eyes of the staff up on the dais, and behind that friendly screen, standing with fountain pen in one hand and exercise book in the other, I would write a Latin theme or an essay on *The Influence of the Lake Poets on Victorian Literature*. The ten-minute midmorning "break" could be utilized for physics or chemistry; I would have to force my mind to concentrate on answering scientific questions in the midst of all the din raised by eight hundred naughty boys. Those precious minutes, however, were never enough to finish what was supposed to be two hours' preparation. A certain mental agility was necessary for the trickiest thing of all, doing preparation in one subject to another. In a French class, for instance, I might be faced with the necessity for handing in mathematics preparation in the next hour. To work – unobserved – on problems in algebra or geometry while answering questions about the past participle of *souffrir* demanded frequent mental adjustments that any reasonable human being would have thought not worth the trouble, but a schoolboy has different standards.

Perhaps it was all to the good. Since that time I have sat at a marble-topped table in a crowded French café at aperitif time writing an article that had to catch the next mail, while crockery clashed round me and high-pitched political arguments soared to a climax at every table. But that was no worse than writing about the development of cabinet responsibility under Walpole's administration while eight hundred boys all around me bellowed *Onward Christian Soldiers* – most out of tune. A professional writer never has to look far for excuses not to write. He can tell himself that his work is so subtle that the intrusion of mundane personal affairs is certain to spoil it. Each working day he can excuse himself on the grounds that he is worried about the baby, or that he sat up late at bridge the night before, or that he has to go and get his hair cut; there is always something to interfere with inspiration, and if he allows it to do so he can easily – really easily –

discover that he has not added a line to the opening chapter he wrote with such high hopes and overflowing energy six months back. It is at least possible that those ridiculous experiences of the schoolboy enabled the young writer to go on working whatever was happening around him.²⁵



There is a memory which I can smile at nowadays. Number One Novel – never published, and quite rightly – had been finished some time back. Number Two Novel – later published although it did not deserve to be – had been written with frantic energy in such a short time that number 1 was still going the rounds of the publishers when Number Three started on those same rounds. And Number Three was just going to be started, early on a grey blustering winter morning. Such a very young man, incredibly thin and lanky, was poising his pen over the paper in a chilly room in a suburban house just where Camberwell becomes Dulwich. Times change and so do we, and I suppose there is very little left nowadays of that young man whose bony frame afforded hardly room enough for all the passions that surged inside him – I can write about him more easily in the third person in consequence. There was the postman's double knock, indicating the arrival of something more than a letter. And the young man went to the door, and the blustering wind burst in as he opened it, and whirled through the bare hall; and the postman thrust two parcels into his apathetic hands. There was no need for more than a glance for him to recognize the labels he himself had written. Those parcels contained the two novels, returned simultaneously by two indifferent publishers. Well, there they were. The young man went back into his chilly room and took up his pen and wrote the opening pages of Novel Number Three. He'd show 'em!

Is it a happy ending that before Number Three was finished Number Two was accepted? It is at least satisfactory that Novel Number One remained permanently in the limbo of the unpublished. There are

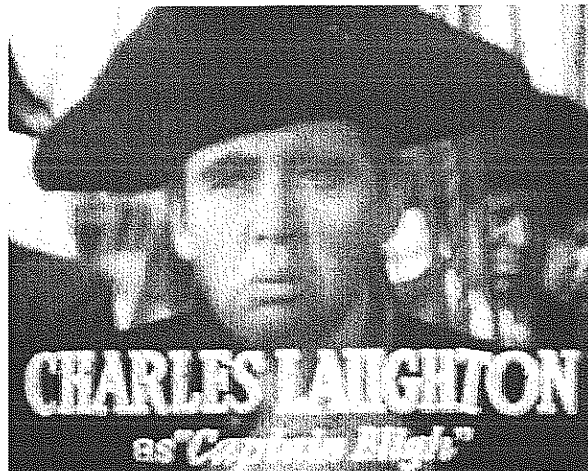
²⁵ For more information, see [Note 1](#) at end, page 16.

memories of happier distractions than that, in any case. A good deal of a later novel was written while a baby son played with his toy bricks at my feet in a sunny house (an air raid ten years later left nothing of that house save the basement) on the shoulder of Sydenham Hill, backing onto a little park, with a remarkable view over Kent; the view was nearly as much a distraction as the baby, and so were the jays who rested close by. There are still jays there, in their very satisfactory colouring, and owls as well (I saw them on my last visit), all within an easy twenty-minute train journey from Fleet Street. The tide of London's houses has flowed out far beyond that area, leaving it as a delightful semirural island; it stands above the fogs of the London basin on the one side and above the red brick outer suburbs on the other.

The final recollection of my London and of a writer's distractions has an intricate history dating back to the period before those sunny years, right back to the days of the lean and hungry young man writing Novel Number Three. It is a history which is still perhaps unfinished; in the coming generation the historian of the American stage and screen may have to take it into consideration. The beginnings of a plot formed themselves in my mind in one of the drearier sections of Dulwich, somewhere near the intersection of Barry Road and Underhill Road. Those impersonal little houses sheltered behind their blank windows hopes and passions and despair. There grew up in my mind the thought of a pathetic little man – a bank clerk – and the little backyard of that house, just the sort of backyard one could peep into from the top of a bus in Barry Road. What would happen to him then? I wrote the novel and entitled it *Payment Deferred* (it was just the sort of cheerless book a cheerless young man would write) and the things that happened to that novel right from the start seemed to presage its later fantastic history. There was publisher trouble and agent trouble, and when it finally appeared – a full two years after it was written – a general strike started within the week and killed it stone dead, to all appearances, as far as any public interest was concerned. But it revived, miraculously. People bought it and people talked about it. Next there was a question of making a play of it – perfectly fantastic of course, and yet it happened, and there was a question of producing the play – still more fantastic, and yet there it was, in rehearsal, and then there came a fashionable first night at the St James Theatre, and glowing critical notices and all the other unbelievable appurtenances of success. The principal part was played by a rising young actor whose outstanding ability and personality had been noted some time before by the critics; his name was Charles Laughton. When the West End run was completed it was decided to produce the play in New York, with Laughton making his American debut in the same part, and then Metro bought the film rights and Laughton moved on to Hollywood, while I settled down to work on something else altogether – the full version of *The African Queen*. It was

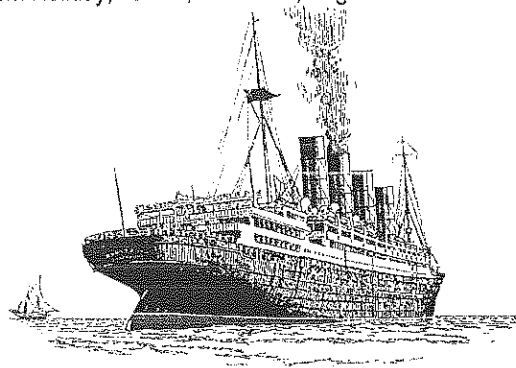
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not to be finished without distraction, all the same. The telephone rang; Hollywood was calling me too. So the African story which had first been discussed in a telephone box at Sydenham Hill station was finished in a swaying cabin in the old *Aquitania*; I knew perfectly well that if I did not finish it then I would never finish it during the run of my Hollywood contract. Not even the experience that I had gained while writing essays during prayers at school would fit me for toiling on with a novel during the continuous upheavals the newcomer to Hollywood must experience. And it was after that, sailing in a dilatory ship to England from Los Angeles, that I first began to think about a character called Captain Hornblower.²⁶



That is the way one thing leads to another, how the past and the present seem equally vivid and valuable to the writer. Once there was a little boy walking along Peckham Road with his nose in a book; and there was a gaunt young man striding through the same London with his head whirling with plots; and maybe one of these days there will be a senile old man with his vague mind misty with a thousand pictures of the past overlapping in his memory. But perhaps at that time some other little boy will have his nose in one of the old dotard's books, which might afford some gratification to the old dotard in question if he could know about it.

From *Holiday*, vol. 18, number 2, August 1955



²⁶ For more information, see [Note J](#) at end, page 16.



NOTES ON "HORNBLOWER'S LONDON"

A. THE HISTORY OF PECKHAM

Of 49 Jacobite prisoners tried in Southwark in July 1746, seventeen were publicly hanged, drawn and quartered on Kennington Common, "a short walk from the New Gaol through the flower and vegetable gardens at the end of Newington Butts". These details are in John Prebble, *Culloden*, Penguin Books (1967), pages 256-271. Peckham Rye, where the child William Blake saw an angel in a tree, was at the end of the 18th century still a rural village, the last stop for cattle drovers on the route to London, now becoming a centre of the brick industry. Blake told his long-suffering mother all about this most exciting of apparently frequent visions; she was not amused. In 1993 the event was recreated by muralist Stan Peskett, but the work was damaged by vandals in 1997 and not restored. Source: David Thorley, <http://www.hotel-assist.com/literary-london/blake-on-peckham-rye.html?lpos=fromtheweb> (2007); cf. William Dalrymple, *God in Peckham Rye*, *The Guardian*, 24.10.2003; Neil Spencer, *Into the Mystic*, *The Observer*, 22.10.2000; <http://www.peckhamsociety.org.uk>

B. THE GRAND SURREY CANAL

The Grand Surrey canal was begun in the first decade of the 19th century as part of a waterway intended to link London with Portsmouth. The project was abandoned in 1826 with the canal only dug out as far as Peckham; this cut remained in use until the mid-20th century. Recent urban development has all but obliterated evidence of its presence.

C. THE BAND OF HOPE

The Band of Hope was the juvenile branch of the Church of England Temperance Society, founded in 1847, with branches all over the country until the 1930s. The Peckham branch met at Rye Lane Chapel on Tuesday evenings at 6.45, according to *The History Of Rye Lane Chapel, Part 3 1909-1927*. Unfortunately no information for the years before at www.theobamber.co.uk/history%20of%20rye%20lane.htm

D. ALFRED NOYES (1880-1958) - photo

Born in Wolverhampton, the son of a classics teacher in Aberystwyth, he studied at Exeter College, Oxford, and published six books of poetry between 1902 and 1908, to great acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. His best-known poems from this time include *Drake*, a 200-page epic serialised in *Blackwood's Magazine*, and *The Highwayman*. In 1914-1923 Noyes taught English Literature at Princeton in the USA, and chronicled the long march of science through the ages in his epic trilogy *The Torch-Bearers* (1922-30). He subsequently returned to England, lived on the Isle of Wight and converted to Catholicism. *The Highwayman* is a romantic fantasy of doomed love, betrayal and struggle against King George and his wicked redcoats.

E. RUDYARD KIPLING (1865-1936)

Now resident in Edwardian England, Kipling was at the height of his fame. Born in Bombay (Mumbai) and sent to school in England, he had returned to India as a journalist in 1882-1889, to achieve literary fame with *Barrack Room Ballads* and – later and in America – with the *Jungle Books*. One of his Ballads concerns *Gunga Din*, a heroic but despised batman who saves the life of British soldier Thomas Atkins at the cost of his own. *The Ballad of [Fultah] Fisher's Boarding House* is a tale of tragedy amongst the dregs of humanity in a sailors' hostel. When the young CSF heard these poems, Kipling had taken refuge from celebrity in the Sussex countryside. He refused most of the honours offered him - a knighthood, the Poet Laureateship, and the Order of Merit - but in 1907 he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature - and was universally acclaimed as the People's Poet.

F. HENRY NEWBOLT (1862-1938)

Son of a Staffordshire clergyman, he was educated at Clifton College, Bristol, and Corpus Christi, Oxford. In 1897-98 he published two books of ballads on naval theme, but is best-known for *Vital Lampada (The Lamp of Life, with its refrain Play up and play the game!)* If Waterloo was won on Eton fields, the Clifton pitch inspired the triumphs of Victoria!

G. THE THREE TAGS QUOTED

The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God by J. Milton Hayes (1884-1940) was set to music by Cuthbert Clarke in 1911. Hayes and Clarke seem to have been a down-market Gilbert and Sullivan. "The little silver crucifix" is from *The Ballad of Fisher's Boarding House*, whose text will also shed light on what happened on the canal bank! . "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!" are that poem's famous last words.

H. THE GENESIS OF *THE AFRICAN QUEEN*

A 1930's map shows the two Sydenham stations in relation to the Crystal Palace, to which the Southern Railway ran excursions from its opening for the Great Exhibition of 1851 till its destruction by fire in 1936.

The account here of what took place on Forester's return journey is a piece of romantic fiction, progressing from a stroke of genius on the part of a struggling author to a triumphant climax with the unveiling of a milestone in the history of the cinema. The very great differences between the book of *The African Queen* and the serial version published in *The News Chronicle* in July 1934 are glossed over, and nothing at all is said about the story's long gestation, its historical antecedents or its complex relationship to *Brown on Resolution*, *Two-and-Twenty* and *The Sky and the Forest*.

Reflections has devoted more space to *The African Queen* than to any other book.²⁷ Let us avoid repetition, therefore, with something new – and consider George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* (1938). George Bowling, the insurance salesman who is its anti-hero, wends his homeward way into Charing Cross station one evening to confront newspaper hoardings about the 1930s King Zog of Albania. The name conjures up images – first of Darkest Africa, then of Og, the monstrous King of Bashan, whose unhappy demise is hailed in Psalm 135, which Bowling remembers hearing in the village church of his boyhood. This in turn unleashes a 6-chapter-long series of memories of an idyllic childhood, boyhood and youth: from the turn of the century and the Boer War through the Edwardian era to the euphoria of autumn 1914. Now, despite some thematic parallels between *Hornblower's London* and *Coming up for Air*, the suggestion of a literary relationship between these two accounts of lost childhood might seem utterly far-fetched, but for two anomalous words of Forester's. Orwell's narrative is built around angling, as its title suggests: angling was Bowling's obsession – from the day he felt the first "sharp bob" of his float which signalled a bite, until the yearning to return to a secret pool and catch the huge fish that lurked in its depths set him on the soul-destroying return to his childhood haunts which forms the last part of the book. But young Cecil Smith's interest in the Grand Surrey Canal did not penetrate the ripples on its surface; the cruelty of the naughty boys he saw was directed at animals on the towpath, and he desisted no angler thereupon. All the more strange, then, that an idea Forester had on a station platform should have "bobbed tip", like a fisherman's float! Another detail brings Forester even closer to Orwell: he saw the poster advertising "the Dark Continent" near the barrier at Victoria station, in the same way as Bowling saw the inspirational headlines at Charing Cross.²⁸

²⁷ Colin Blogg, Isabelle Roblin and others, *In the wake of The African Queen*, *Reflections* 1, (2002); David Stead, *Stranger than fiction: the origins of The African Queen*, *Reflections* 5 (2003), pages 9-10; CS Forester, *Seventy years ago: the original African Queen*, *Reflections* 8, (2004), pages 16-20.

²⁸ Colin Blogg, *The riddles of The African Queen*, *Reflections* 1, page 2.

I. FORESTER IN PARIS

This paragraph throws the tiniest ray of light on the still-unresolved mystery of Forester's journalistic career. We have no record of any such work until 1937, when he took the credentials of a journalist to the northern front of the Spanish Civil War. This trip apparently opened further doors: John Forester says that "in 1937 [CSF] wrote a weekly newspaper column, whose subject and context I never knew"²⁹ – and here we have a statement about journalistic work in Paris. John Forester mentions visits of his father to Paris in the late 1930s which are not linked to journalism: if the fancy took him, CSF caught the afternoon plane from Croydon to Paris for dinner in a posh restaurant, after which he flew back home to bed.³⁰ It now seems that these trips may have been more than sheer self-indulgence, as CSF pretended; but the matter will only be settled if examples of his journalism are identified or if categorical third-party verification emerges.

Meanwhile, it may be possible to identify a more tangible result of trips to Paris, inspired by the cinematic sensation of 1937: Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*. In the climax of the film, two French officers – Maréchal and Rosenthal – escape from captivity. With Rosenthal wounded in the foot, their recapture looks certain, till they find sanctuary on the farm of Elsa, a German war-widow. She recounts the tragedy that the great battles of Tannenberg and Verdun have brought upon her. She and Maréchal fall in love, and he promises to return to her after the war; Maréchal and Rosenthal set off again, and evade an ineffective pursuit to get across the Swiss border. The history of *La Grande Illusion* is interesting in its own right, quite apart from the striking resemblance of its plot to a series of key episodes in *Flying Colours*.³¹

J. FROM LONDON TO HOLLYWOOD

The houses of Barry Road, Underhill Road and adjacent streets were built after 1875 for socially mobile members of the lower middle classes – typically London clerks with young families. Malcolm Road presumably acquired its name from grand Victorian Gothic Barry Road, but Marble's house was more like those of Underhill Road.

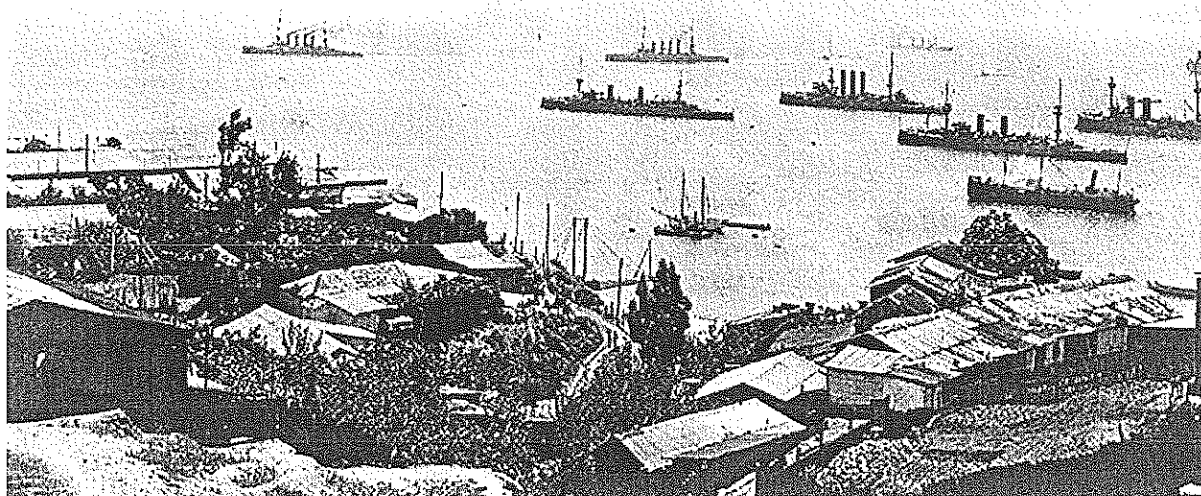
Payment Deferred was written in early 1925 and published in spring 1926. *The African Queen* was published in 1935, well before Forester's voyage to New York on board the *Aquitania* that December, for an unsuccessful two-month stint in Hollywood. What Forester says here befores the clear blue water between the simple facts and two myths, one which he created and the other which he at least tolerated. He claimed he wrote *Payment Deferred* at the age of 23 and implied that his Hollywood contract led to others, every year until 1939.³²

²⁹ CS Forester, *A Preface to [the 1947 US edition of] The General*, *Reflections* 11 (2006), pages 9-10; David Stead, *Forester and the Spanish Civil War*, *ibid.* pages 17-20; John Forester, *Novelist and Storyteller* (2000), page 322.

³⁰ *Novelist and Storyteller* page 343.

³¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Illusion_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Illusion_(film))

³² Regularly stated in the cover biography of Penguin editions!



Von Spee's ships leave Valparaiso for the Falklands after the Battle of Coronel - *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the lead, *Nürnberg* following. In the middle distance - Chilean cruisers *Esmeralda*, *O'Higgins* and *Blanco Encalada*, and battleship *Capitán Prat*.

Arms and the Muse: *Two-and-Twenty*

A century ago, Coronel in Chile (the port of the city of Concepción, at latitude 37 South) was of vital strategic importance. England was Chile's main trading partner, importing vast quantities of nitrates – a trade the German Admiral Maximilien Von Spee aimed to disrupt at the beginning of World War I. Abandoning Chinese waters to evade the Japanese navy, he crossed the Pacific and on 3 November met Sir Christopher Cradock's squadron off Coronel. The modern armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* made short work of the ageing *Monmouth* and *Good Hope*; only the modern cruiser *Glasgow* escaped. In response, First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill and First Sea Lord Fisher added two battlecruisers, *Invincible* and *Inflexible*, to a squadron of half-a-dozen cruisers deployed under Admiral Sturdee to the Falkland Islands. Ignorant of their arrival, on 8 December Spee moved to destroy the Port Stanley installations, but was deterred from attacking the battlecruisers at the coal-wharf by the guns of the old battleship *Canopus*, moored in the inner harbour. Spee withdrew, but was run down, outgunned and annihilated. Three of his ships (*Scharnhorst*, *Nürnberg* and *Leipzig*) were sunk, *Gneisenau* was scuttled and only the light cruiser *Dresden* escaped – to be trapped in Chilean waters by the *Glasgow* and scuttled on 14 March 1915.

The history is well documented. CS Forester adapted it for *Brown on Resolution* (1929) – and in a very different style, and with very different results, in *Two-and-Twenty*.³³

Two-and-Twenty opens in Peckham, early in 1930, although it is strangely some time before these details are made quite clear. Its protagonist is making his way through the evening crowds to a converted cinema:-

"Mr Cyril Meryon Leigh, the poet, walked along the High Street in the rain. It was a Thursday night... Leigh was hungry, and he was a poet, and he had only been a professional boxer for three days... He was the strangest of many strange entrants to be expected in a novices' tournament. He was very tall – over five feet ten... He was old for a novices' tournament; twenty-two, and he looked older than that."

But "Cyril Lay of Camberwell" (as he is announced), went on to win the final – and the vital prize money – at the cost of a broken hand. He staggered home, after a humiliating incident in a restaurant, to the dingy attic he shared with a old typewriter and his library books - one of them H.W. Wilson's *Battleships in Action*, of which Forester owned a copy.³⁴ He went to the doctor and told him, in casual conversation, that – just like Forester - he had been a medical student. Pain kept him awake, as he wrestled with the makings a long narrative poem.

"This was the genesis of C.M. Leigh's famous 'Ballad of Coronel', which was to attract so much notice" – and not only from "the hysterical Press, which was to hail Leigh as one of England's major poets".³⁵

³³ AJP Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Pelican (1975), page 40; <http://www.worldwar1.co.uk/falkland.html>; John Forester, *Novelist and Storyteller* (2000), pages 211-215; 221-225.

³⁴ *Novelist and storyteller* page 224.

³⁵ CS Forester, *Two-and-Twenty*, John Lane (1931), pages 1-41; cf. pages 189 (for Peckham); 140; 297; 307 (for the date).



Leigh had sold a few sentimental verses to popular magazines. But he knew that no magazine would touch an unromantic poem like *Coronel*. That left only the prestigious literary reviews which printed famous poets like Masfield (above) and Sassoon. Leigh thought his poem was as good as anything written by "Masfield and company", so sent it to the *Monthly Review*, the most prestigious of all.³⁶

Hereupon Forester digresses into Leigh's background. His father (a General) had been killed in 1916, when he was ten, and his mother had died of influenza in 1918. His uncles (one of them a senior civil servant, the other a famous surgeon) now took charge. Leigh was sent to a Public School, where his peers shunned him as an oddball, because he resisted the culture of bullying, preferred boxing to team games - and took to English poetry with a will. First came Fitzgerald and Swinburne; then Laurence Hope, [Robert] Browning and Tennyson. "Kipling satisfied one mood; Robert Bridges satisfied another". He preferred Laurence Binyon and Siegfried Sassoon to Rupert Brooke, but "it was Keats who was his dearest friend". This may be why he eventually decided that Shelley's *Adonais* (an *Elegy on the Death of John Keats*) was the finest poem in the English language!³⁷

Continued page 19, column 1.

³⁶ *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 115-118.

³⁷ *Two-and-Twenty*, pp. 50-65; cf. page 48.

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Of Coronel – and Sea Fever

Leigh's opening was as hackneyed as the close of Kipling's *Gunga Din*:-

"This is for the men in the ships // and the stubble-haired boys who died
With the hard set smile on their lips; // in their hearts the unvoiced pride..."
The *Ballad* then took shape "madly and rapidly... throughout a whole long feverish day", with pauses only for Leigh to quarry further facts from his book. He began with how "the grey ships came across the world at a committee's word" and met the *Glasgow*: "at grey midday they made their way to where one watched alone", at a spot "where the grey waves flog the Chile coast and the wind cuts to the bone".

"Slowly they held their course to the north, while the look-out blinded with
spray/Raked the desert of grey and white for the first sight of Von Spee."
Leigh did not know how to pronounce that name, but guessed right – the first of two variations upon the joke about his own name! Von Spee hove into sight, "with his straight line ruled ahead". From the German mastheads "the Black Cross flew its challenge to the Red". They closed, till "a gunshot could have spanned them/ the double line of iron ships and iron men who manned them". Cradock's orders and Spee's options were cast into lines which would defeat amateur reciters for ever. But "the severely critical remark passed in the *Naval History* that Good Hope's lower deck guns could not be fought in a seaway gave [Leigh] one of his most vivid couplets – that describing Cradock's squadron as

"Rolling their decks awash // and rolling their lower guns under;
While the grey waves beat against their sides // in fretful thunder."

"And anyone can guess which passage of the poem was inspired by the *History's* dry comment that after sunset the English squadron showed up clearly against the red afterglow in the west – that bit of detail was a perfect gift to any stringer of words and rhymes." And so the *Ballad* pursued its "workmanlike" way through its 250 lines to an "effective, if abstruse" close:-

"And the grey waves still toss endlessly, // flinging their arms out wide;
Tossing eternally troubled, //where Cradock and Cradock's men died."³⁸

Many readers will have noticed the echoes of Masfield's *Sea Fever*:-

"...a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking...
... where the wind's like a whetted knife"

Forester makes several more passing references to Masfield in *Two-and-Twenty*, besides which a number of other factors link the two men.

Forester's autobiography *Long before Forty* leads Sanford Sternlicht to suggest that the first part the 1928 novel *The Shadow of the Hawk* echoes Masfield's novels on Latin American themes. Masfield was at a tea party in Ledbury in 1939, hosted by the Forester family's landlady Nancy Ballard, as John Forester recalls – but he says nothing more except that a letter shows Masfield was in Hollywood at the time of CSF's own visit in 1935. Masfield's first full-length book was a groundbreaking account of *Sea Life in Nelson's Time*. First published in 1905, and reissued in 1920, it stated that "Our naval glory was built up by the blood and agony of thousands of barbarously maltreated men". Christopher Lloyd notes that "In the days of Jacky Fisher, this was not the angle from which naval history was usually approached!"³⁹ But it would be the approach of CS Forester – the author-to-be of *The Happy Return* and *A Ship of the Line*.

³⁸ *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 42; 47-50.

³⁹ Sanford Sternlicht, *CS Forester and the Hornblower saga*, Syracuse (1999), pp. 54-55; citing CS Forester, *Long before Forty*, Michael Joseph (1967), p. 149; John Forester, *Novelist and storyteller* pp. 291; 358; CC Lloyd (ed) - John Masfield, *Sea life in Nelson's time*, Conway Maritime Press (1971), page xi.

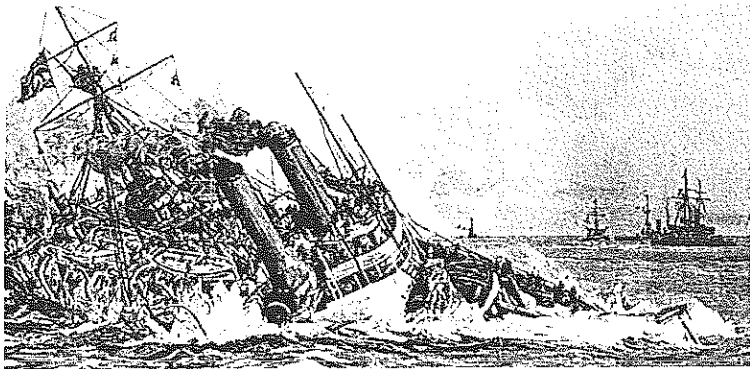
Leigh's guardians enrolled him as a medical student at a London hospital. He passed his first year exams, but failed Anatomy in year 2, because to tedious study he preferred reading and solitary walks. But he had taken the lead in a prank. He had urged his classmates to use the corpse of a young virgin girl, taken from those available for dissection, to raise the Devil. The recitation of the Black Mass roused only the Dean – and brought trivial punishment. But his uncles' sarcasm drove Leigh to renounce them and all their works:-

"He moved from his comfortable and expensive lodgings in Streatham into one room at Camberwell, but the drab surroundings of that drabbest of London suburbs had no depressing effect. The free library found him masses of poetry, over which he continued to dream away hour after hour in his little room or in some park or other; quite near where he lived Blake once saw God in all His glory perched in a tree on Peckham Rye, so there is nothing surprising about C.M. Leigh living in Camberwell, any more than in W.B. Yeats in Euston Road."⁴⁰

Leigh survived by selling his verse to magazines and by boxing, until injury put paid even to that. He resisted the doctor's wish to send him to a physiotherapist, until it was clear that the clinic was at a different hospital from the one where he had studied. That first hospital could have been the London Infirmary, founded in the 18th century to care for those living in poverty from the manufacturing and merchant seaman classes.⁴¹ As it turns out, the physiotherapist at Peter and Paul's is Lucia Graves, a glamorous student from a Ladies' Physical Training College in whose hockey team she is the star player. Her social standing and the literary associations of her name might suggest that when she and Leigh fall in love, as they inevitably do, she will open the door for him to the patronage he so needs. For an important figure connected with the *Monthly Review* is actually the father of one of Lucia's fellow-students!

⁴⁰ *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 106-107.

⁴¹ Sheffield Theatres, programme for Bernard Pomerance, *The Elephant Man* (2008).
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What actually happens is that Leigh dazzles Lucia with an astonishing letter of acceptance from the *Review's* editor:-

"... Of course we shall be delighted to publish ['Coronel']... I think it extremely likely that the publication will attract a good deal of notice; comparable, perhaps, with the attention with which 'The Everlasting Mercy' was received when it appeared in the English Review twenty years ago... Mr. Newham Newton, and Mr. Eric Hull, to whom I have shown 'Coronel,' both speak of it in the most flattering terms."

Newton has got *Coronel* noticed by the jingoistic popular press. The *Daily Mail* rates it above *The Battle of the Baltic*, *Trafalgar's Bay*, and even Tennyson's *Revenge*, and praises the coincidence of its publication with an International Naval Conference that might affect England's security. The 1930 London Conference would produce an agreement between the UK, USA and Japan to apply to submarines, destroyers and cruisers the ratio of 5:5:3 already agreed for battleships in Washington in 1922 - outcomes imposed on the Admiralty, and opposed by the right-wing press.⁴² We shall return to this political dimension to the discussion.

Forester writes contemptuously of Newton - "a poor, little fussy man [with] a passion for poets" – like some people's for stamps or ornaments. "The ambition of his life was to call the attention of the public to some new Milton... He would have loved to be the man who discovered Fitzgerald's 'Omar Khayyam'..." Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, the Persian poet, was published anonymously in 1859 but ignored for some time till Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti endorsed it. Newton devoted time and money to his own quest, although some of those he had thus sponsored had been far from grateful.⁴³

Newton introduced Leigh to Thomas, a top literary agent, whose criteria were purely those of business, and Eric Hull, "a poet of great promise and good performance", who had served at sea during the war. On this basis, he felt enabled to ridicule Kipling's *The Ballad of Clampherdown*, but his diatribe should perhaps not simply be taken at face value. His list of technical blunders seems damning, but the real explanation for their presence is not that Kipling is "absolutely squiffy" (as Hull says) but that he has a satiric purpose. *Clampherdown* is intended to evoke HMS *Camperdown*, which in 1893 collided with HMS *Victoria* off the coast of Lebanon and sank, with the loss of 358 lives, including the commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon. The cause was Tryon's delusion that such factors as the size and speed of modern ships counted for little against the need to reintroduce Nelsonian values into the navy. This must be crucial to the evaluation of *Two-and-Twenty*. And Forester immediately brings a second piece of thinly disguised satire.

⁴² *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 170-171; Taylor, *English History*, pages 201; 345.

⁴³ *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 201-204.

"War literature, after the lapse of a dozen years, was coming into its own... One or two splendid books made their appearance... and following upon them came the stupendous success of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and, on the stage, of *Journey's End*... People were expecting a masterpiece... Moreover, there had been no recent output of war poetry corresponding with the new output of fiction... 'Coronel' had made its appearance at a psychological moment. It was verse an unpoetical public could understand, it met a new public demand, and it was the sole example of its kind of both verse and Naval verse. That was why the Press had acted so readily on Mr. Newton's suggestion to take notice of it."

The notion of a political agenda is reinforced: "the *Monthly Review* was backed by the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily News*". And the phenomenal outpouring of war-related literature is well-documented: "Views about war which had been held during the 1920s only by a minority now became widespread. Indeed, for a little while, they were the accepted orthodox opinion. The end of the twenties saw a sudden rush of war books. ... novels, memoirs, and a play (*Journey's End*) published between 1928 and 1930. All preached the same lesson: the futility of war, the incompetence of generals and politicians, and the ordinary men on both sides victims of this incompetence."⁴⁴

If neither Newton nor the jingoistic press commented that the message of the new wave was hardly what they would have wanted to hear, it can only be because Forester wants his reader to believe that they did not notice it. They hadn't actually read the books – or were just plain stupid!

Newton had seemed a "pathetic little man" for whom even Leigh could feel "a funny little gush of affection". But he had suggested a sequel to *Coronel*, and Leigh had now started to think like a professional writer. The result was *The Battle of the Falklands*. It was almost self-parody, a shameless imitation of "C.M. Leigh's brilliant poem on *Coronel*", cast into "very fair Brummagen verse":-

"The fleet-winged death" left England shrouded in a mist – both a real one and a mist of secrecy. Inevitable as fate it made its way across the Atlantic, while "anxious admirals" in Whitehall noted how it crept across the map towards the "ever-widening ring" which marked von Spee's possible position. And then "in the pale clear morning" (that was Leigh's paraphrase of "good visibility") von Spee appeared out of "the barren wastes of the Horn," thrusting towards Port Stanley, "where the fleet-winged death lay resting, ready to spring." ... [and] "the unflinching Germans fled". Then "the great grey ships flung death across eleven miles of sea" (such was Leigh's version of "fire was opened at eighteen thousand yards").

The new poem contained "no noble metal at all", and Leigh was limited in what he could say (and here, for the third time, comes the joke) "because he did not know whether the 'G' on 'Gneisenau' was pronounced or not,

which naturally affected scansion... But he drew a dreadful picture of Scharnhorst's crew drowning in the freezing water while the fleet-winged death sped by in the wake of the other flying ships. And as the battle closed... albatrosses swept down on the Nürnberg's crew struggling in the water, attacking the struggling wretches with beak and claw – "the white wings swooping from the blue sped on an errand of death." At that last horrible detail in the fading light, the poem closed with epic suddenness."⁴⁵

I have said little about *Two-and-Twenty* as autobiography, despite its crucially-important fictionalisation of Forester's secret marriage to Kathleen Belcher and its similarity to the posthumously-published *Long before Forty* and the 1955 article on *Hornblower's London*. Nor have I said much about *Two-and-Twenty* as a novel. What attracted me to it was the history and the poetics which have been discussed. But even here, much has been omitted. There is nothing about Robert Bridges, the now-forgotten poet laureate whose *Testament of Beauty*, followed by the announcement of his death in April 1930, persuaded Leigh to give up poetry and resume his medical studies. And I have so far avoided comment on Forester's own performance as a critic, partly because on this (as on many things in *Two-and-Twenty*, including his attitude to Leigh and Lucia Graves) he is inconsistent. I believe Leigh's admiration for Bridges is probably Forester's own, the main reason being that it was so unfashionable. I also believe that, for the reasons stated, among others - he was as impressed by Masfield as I am. On his critical and poetic abilities, a brief comment.

If *The Ballad of Coronel* derives from *Sea Fever*, it was not the only such plagiarism. One of Leigh's love poems transposed to Ancient Greece his combined reaction to meeting Lucia and an encounter with a young prostitute. Called *The Moon-Worshippers*, it has this: "...the stars Are gleaming around the horizon. Mysterious bars Of nothingness blow from the branches on to your face." I believe that the source of *The Moon-Worshippers* is:-

"A little while I fain would linger here:
Behold! who knows what strange, mysterious bars
Twixt souls that love, may rise in other stars?"

A reference in *The Sky and the Forest* may have derived from *Battleships in Action*. It points to CSF's interest in the American Civil War. He must have looked elsewhere for the poems of Paul Hamilton Hayne (1830-1886)! He had already tried to fill a gap in the market with his own stab at *Nothing doing on the Kiel Canal* – but *U97* was a play, not a poem, let alone an epic.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ *Two-and-Twenty*, pages 224-226.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155; 205-206; *the sky and the forest*, michael joseph (1948), p. 195; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/hayne/hayne.html>

⁴⁴ *Two-and-Twenty*, pp. 204-206; 217; Taylor, EH, pp. 446-447.