

## The Origins of a Classic Novel: The Happy Return

We all know how C.S. Forester's first Hornblower novel, "The Happy Return", was created. According to "The Hornblower Companion" Forester was a passenger on a slow freighter travelling from Los Angeles to Britain, when he started to think about the stresses that military command created for 'the Man Alone'. This archetypal figure was to become the genesis of the character of Hornblower, and as the journey progressed the man and his story took shape in the author's mind. This account seems quite believable in describing the creation of the personality of Forester's protagonist.

The basic plot of the novel involves Hornblower, having captured a Spanish frigate named the *Natividad*, being required by his government to turn the prize over to a local tyrant, 'El Supremo'. The captain is then forced (by a change in political alliances) to retake the frigate, which is now manned by fanatical rebels. On the face of it, these events seem too outlandish to be anything other than a product of the author's fertile imagination.

But in fact I believe that there were historical events that gave Forester inspiration and even some of the specifics for this story. They are given in some detail on pages 451 to 455 of Volume 28 of "The Naval Chronicle"; in *The Hornblower Companion* Forester mentioned this contemporary naval journal as a source for many of Hornblower's adventures.

Briefly, in 1809 a French frigate, *La Felicité*, was taken by two British warships in the Caribbean, but rather than being commissioned into the RN, the ship was sold to General Henri Christophe, leader of the independent republic of Haiti. Renamed *L'Améthyste*, she was operated by Christophe's forces for a couple of years. In 1811 the ship was seized by rebels who turned it over to General Borgellat, who was trying to set himself up as an independent ruler in the south of the island. On the 3rd of February, 1812, the rogue frigate (now named "*L'Heureuse Réunion*"), was stopped by *HMS Southampton* under Captain Sir James Lucas Yeo. When the commander of the rebel frigate would not provide evidence that his ship was in fact a legitimate

man-of-war commissioned by a recognized government (as opposed to a pirate), a conflict ensued. The two vessels exchanged multiple broadsides, and Yeo narrowly avoided his ship being boarded by the oversized crew of *L'Heureuse Réunion*. However he easily outmanoeuvred his opponent and pounded her into submission. The ship finally surrendered with over two hundred casualties, including most of the officers. Yeo took her to Jamaica and she was eventually restored to Christophe under her old name.

These events, as presented in the Naval Chronicle, suggest the basic outline of *The Happy Return*. An enemy ship is captured by the Royal Navy, handed over to a local potentate, and then must be captured again, only now it is manned by a large, undisciplined and fanatical crew. Clearly Forester has made some changes, transferring the events from the Caribbean to the Pacific coast of Central America, making them occur some years earlier (1808) than the historical precedent, and having the same Royal Navy ship take the frigate on both occasions. The historical prize frigate was French; Forester has changed its nationality to Spanish to enable his plot to make use of Spain's change of allegiance in the summer of 1808.

However it seems clear the basic outline of his story derives from the account in the Naval Chronicle. One telling detail is that Borgellat's rebels threatened to detonate the ship's magazine rather than be captured; in Forester's book, the *Natividad's* rebel commander makes this same threat. It cannot be a coincidence that the historical rebel ship's name (*Heureuse Réunion* i.e. "Happy meeting") is reflected in the title of Forester's book, at least in the British edition. (The American edition was called "Beat to Quarters".) An additional minor piece of evidence is that Forester certainly knew of Yeo's existence, since he mentioned his name in "Lord Hornblower" as a brother member of the Order of the Bath. Incidentally, here the author made a small error, since while Yeo was a knight, at the time that Lord Hornblower takes place he was not a Knight of the Bath, and so would not have been present at the ceremony. Since Yeo was by no means one of the most celebrated Royal Navy officers of his day, it seems curious that Forester chose to single him out in this way.

It says something interesting about Forester's unwillingness to reveal too much about the origins of his creation that in *The Hornblower Companion* he spends nearly eight pages discussing the writing of *The Happy Return*, mentioning the *Naval Chronicle* and the problems caused by changing alliances and slow communications in the age of sail, but never even hints at a real-life model for the most dramatic events of his story.

Even his son John did not seem aware of any historical source for his father's most famous book, but he also noted in his memoir "Novelist and Storyteller" that CSF kept some aspects of the story's origins hidden, such as his extensive knowledge of Napoleonic history, and the source of the names of the major characters (friends from his time as a screenwriter in Hollywood). However John implies that the plot came solely from Forester's brain, being created in order to place his protagonist in an interesting and challenging situation. Might the source of the plot not be another of the secrets that his father had concealed, like the source of his character's names? It does not diminish the work to point out that in fact the major events of the story probably had historical origins, which Forester then reshaped to give the book the colour and excitement that still attract readers eighty years later.

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