

DID HORNBLOWER HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOUR?

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I chose the subject of this talk because it provided me with the rare opportunity for an American to spell “Humour” with two “u”s. With that hard work done, I thought I could relax and leave the substance of this report to ChatGPT, which answered the question with an instant three-page report that gave examples of Hornblower’s humour as the time he carried the ship’s bell; the time he complained about being promoted too quickly; and the time he joked about abandoning ship. Of course, we here in this room know what all of these incidents have in common: they are found nowhere in C.S. Forester’s books. So, I had to prepare my own talk after all.

What I want to ask today is whether our appreciation of the books, at least in part, is because of Hornblower’s sense of humour, or his lack of it. Is he fun? Did he make jokes? Does Forester ever want to make us laugh? -- which is not the same question.

John Maunder touched on this issue in the entry in his Miscellany, entitled “Hornblower and Humour – or the Lack of It?” John’s focus there is more generally on Forester’s sense of humour, not entirely on Hornblower himself. I hope to take John’s paragraphs as a springboard for a more detailed analysis of every humourous occasion in all the books.

As a preliminary note: although the books weren't written in chronological order, we know Forester was exceptionally good at maturing his characters as they progress; and I should add, at de-maturing them when they are younger. I spoke a bit about that in a literary biography of Bush in Greenwich in 2017, when I examined the books in the order they were written. Here, I propose to get into Hornblower's humour in the chronological order of his career.

To begin: we first meet Hornblower at his most serious and least confident, and most self-analytical -- in the opening chapters of *Midshipman*, when he provokes what he thinks is a life-or-death duel with Simpson; and when he fails in his command of the *Marie Galante* and the Cargo of Rice. There is a slight hint of humour when he jokes with MN Kennedy that he would "condescend to make an appearance" at Capt. Pellew's dinner; and when he jokes with MN Bracegirdle that "Other matters demanded [his] attention" when he was holding onto the falling mast in *The Man Who Saw God*. Forester himself characterizes the falling mast line as a joke, but it was a pretty weak one. Hornblower then gets involved in the ludicrous circumstances of Noah's Ark. He ruefully remarks to the diplomat Tapling that he would find no satisfaction in being avenged if the Bey kept their gold and cut their throats; and he describes the apparently drunken Moor on the pier as "totally dismasted." And he has a sharply humorous response when Bracegirdle greets his boat as Noah's Ark, when he says, "Shem and Ham have taken a prize. I

regret that Mr. Bracegirdle can't say the same." That's probably Hornblower's funniest line in the book.

In *Lieutenant Hornblower*, things are far more serious under the mad Capt. Sawyer; and at the end in the perilous games of whist in the Long Rooms. Of course, Hornblower has less opportunity to display humour in a book that's told entirely from the viewpoint of Lieutenant Bush. Hornblower does show his high spirits, and even a grin, when he asks Lt. Buckland to allow his bath under the wash-deck pump, and he grins again when he expresses uncertainty about the red-hot shot burning through the wads during the attack in Samana Bay. He even elicits a laugh when he jokes about entering SN Cray in the ship's books as "Cray, D.D.," for "discharged, dead." In the last few chapters, he joshes with Maria about Johnnie Bristow not getting the mumps and about patching his own shirts; and he even makes a real joke of a sort when he remarks on Bonaparte's name and suggests that "Lieutenant Napoleon Bush" wouldn't sound well. They laugh together –one of only three occasions when the two of them laugh together. We'll come to the other two.

In *Hotspur*, Hornblower makes light-hearted comments about his marriage that elicit laughs, like "I thank you on behalf of Mrs. Hornblower and myself;" and he uses a mock-bullying tone to get Maris to eat her breakfast – but those are hardly jokes. After the exchange of broadsides with the Loire, he mischievously remarks, "You may tell the hands we are at war." Sometimes Forester shows his sense of humour when he makes fun of Hornblower who can't

recognize the tune of “God Save the King.” (To jump ahead, Forester does the same kind of thing when Hornblower fails to recognize that the odd stumping sound he hears overhead on *Nonsuch* is Bush’s wooden leg.) But there are not a lot of laughs from the officer who orders a sailor guarding a prisoner, “If he makes a sound, cut his throat;” or who uses a dead body to hold down a length of fuse. He makes There is one single outright joke when he tells Doughty, “Tonight Horatio Hornblower dines with Horatio Hornblower,” but he admits that “no joke ever fell as flat as that.” By the way, I am indebted to Society member James Ashton for illuminating the classical allusion Forester refers to as a reference to the Roman general Lucullus, who was renowned for his lavish meals, and insisted on his customary excess even when he dined alone.

There are two light jests in the incomplete *Hornblower During the Crisis*, when Hornblower rebukes the worried innkeeper by asking, “Look out the door and tell me if Boney’s marching down the street;” and he adds, “The worst thing Boney’s done today is to keep me from my breakfast.”

In *Atropos*, there is no humour, unless you want to count slipping the sausage into his pocket on the canal boat and winking at his neighbor.

Hornblower even objects to Bracegirdle’s joke that his watch may be buried in St. Paul’s along with Nelson’s casket.

I find no humour in the very serious and perhaps ironically-titled *Happy Return*, other than the outlandish character of El Supremo. There are certainly no jokes from Hornblower. The same is true of *Ship of the Line*, though we

reenacted in Spain last year the funny scene where Hornblower orders a sailor to apologize to the Spaniards by saying, “God Save Our Gracious King, senor; say it humbly.” In these first-written books Forester is concentrating on establishing Hornblower’s character as an introspective, self-conscious man –a man whose principal traits have little to do with making jokes.

There are the beginnings of a more humorous side in *Flying Colours*, when Hornblower jokes with Bush that he thinks “Napoleon wants lessons in navigation from you, Bush.” That is the second time they laugh together. He also makes the sardonic joke on their escape down the river, “God help sailors on a night like this,” and he even reluctantly giggles when Brown impertinently repeats the line. But he makes the best joke of all on the escape from France, when he thinks, “if his career were ending, he would end it with a joke:

- “*What cutter’s that?*” hails the midshipman from the *Triumph*.
- “*His Britannic Majesty’s armed cutter Witch of Endor, Captain Horatio Hornblower.*”

Bush and Brown chuckled audibly at a joke that appealed to them forcibly indeed.

The Commodore begins with the third occasion when Hornblower and Bush shared a laugh; when they break out the Commodore’s pennant on board *Nonsuch* – Ludwig told us in Stockholm that this is his favorite scene in the book. “He met Bush’s eye and he laughed outright, and Bush laughed with him. They were like a pair of schoolboys exulting over a successful bit of mischief.”

Later, when he is referring to Finland and the Baltic states, Hornblower says sarcastically to Lord Wychwood that the Czar has swallowed more than insults from Bonaparte. And then he playfully asks his captains to use their signal flags to spell out lines from Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. I think that's funny, but the first lieutenant aboard *Lotus* didn't get it. I note here a very small error, when Forester very slightly misquotes "the lowing herd winds" slowly o'er the lea (in plural), rather than the correct "wind."

I find no humour in Lord Hornblower, but then I find the whole book humourless and unsatisfying -- except for the scene in the Lady Chapel that we re-enacted so gloriously in Westminster Abbey in 2017 under the guidance of the delightfully-named Canon Ball.

In *Hornblower in the West Indies*, the mature Admiral repeatedly teases Spendlove and Gerard about eating while he missed breakfast, or not serving him dinner on time.

As we conclude our chronological discussion, I can't leave out the ludicrous story of Bandsman Hudnutt and the spurious B-natural, which is not a joke, but is quite funny, especially in its denouement when Hudnutt reappears in Puerto Rico. I think this incident is the best example of Forester's sense of humour, in a situation that Hornblower sees no humour in at all.

There is nothing to be added from the five short stories. The only joke -- unless you want to count the harmless banter with Mad King George -- comes not from Hornblower, but from the rebel McCool, who complains of the raised

lettering on his trunk that he has no desire to have his name impressed on his posterior.

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So, what conclusions can we draw from these details in the stories? How do we answer the questions I posed at the beginning?

I think it's clear that Forester had a sense of humour – in devising the plots of Noah's Ark, and the man who saw God, and the over-punctilious Hudnutt, and others; and in creating characters like John Jones the Ninth and Dr. Eisenbeiss and Kitty Cobham. But Hornblower himself is no jokester and shows only occasional flashes of humour – and always in the context of the plot. We can't imagine Hornblower going up to Bush and saying, "Did you hear the one about the two midshipmen walking into a pub?"

I note here that Hornblower is unlike Jack Aubrey, who told the same two weak puns over and over: first, that you must choose the lesser of two weevils; and second that dog-watches got their names because they are cur-tailed. Hornblower's humour is not for its own sake (except maybe the line about Napoleon Bush or the failed joke he made to Doughty). His humour is always deployed in the cause of character –his light-hearted moments as a Midshipman, his friendship with Bush, his paternalism towards his staff. He sometimes uses dry humour in difficult situations or to make a point: as with Cray, D.D.; or "Ham and Shem have taken a prize;" or "you may tell the hands we are at war."

So, what is the answer to the question, does Hornblower have a sense of humour? Is it (a) no, but Forester does; or (b) yes, but he rarely showed it; or (c) it depends on your definition? That the answer is not clear is another reason why we enjoy the sophistication and literary skill of C.S. Forester.