

The Hornblower Short Stories

It is generally accepted that C S Forester's magnificent documenting of Hornblower's life and career was achieved by the writing of **eleven novels and five short stories**. The eleven novels, that should be so well known to us, are listed here in abbreviated form in the order of his career development but also showing the years of their publication:

Midshipman (1950), Lieutenant (1952), Hotspur (1964), Crisis (1967), Atropos (1953), Happy Return (1937), Ship of the Line (1938), Flying Colours (1938), Commodore (1945), Lord (1946), West Indies (1958). Additionally, *The Hornblower Companion* was published in 1964. (The average number of words per book for this group excluding *Midshipman, West Indies, Companion* and the unfinished *Crisis* is about 88,400).

The five **short stories** are:

- *Hornblower and The Widow McCool,* 1950 (6269 words)
- *The Last Encounter,* 1966 (3759)
- *The Hand of Destiny,* 1940 (5002)
- *Hornblower's Charitable Offering,* 1941 (4719)
- *Hornblower and His Majesty.* 1940 (6132)

The first two short stories are included in CSF's last and unfinished novel, *Hornblower and the Crisis*, while the other three, originally published in magazines in 1940 and 1941, were later re-published in *Hornblower One More Time*, a limited edition publication commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of Hornblower's birth. A further short story was never written but CSF outlined its plot in section 39 of "Some Personal Notes" published both in *The Hornblower Companion* or included at the end of later editions of *Long Before Forty*. The story would have been called *The Point and the Edge*.

Short stories are so called because they are much shorter than novels – as illustrated in the above figures for word counts. They are also referred to as short because they can more or less stand alone with much less connection, if any, to other novels. For example, in the case of the Hornblower saga, the *Widow McCool* could have been included at the beginning of *Lieutenant Hornblower* before Bush joined *HMS Renown* but its non-inclusion does not affect its separate status. *The Last Encounter* is set in 1848 when both Hornblower and Barbara were in their seventies and living peacefully in their manor in Smallbridge in Kent long after their return from their life in the Caribbean as related in *Hornblower in the West Indies*. *The Hand of Destiny* could have been included in *Mr Midshipman Hornblower* and *Charitable Offering* could have been slotted in between chapters 8 and 9 of *A Ship of the Line* but again their non-inclusion does not affect their ability to be read separately without feeling that they should really have been included in these two books. *His Majesty* was set in 1813 after Hornblower's return from the Baltic and before his later return to France in *Lord Hornblower* and it is totally separate from any other Hornblower book.

CSF later appears to have “disowned” the latter three short, early magazine stories when he made no reference to them in *The Hornblower Companion*, either by inclusion in any of the thirty maps or even mentioning them in the *Some Personal Notes* section in that book.

In a brief article entitled *Hornblower and I* written in July 1956 and reproduced in *Hornblower One More Time*, CSF wrote that after his first five books, Hornblower was “to make a different kind of entrance”. This time his adventures appeared as short stories, an approach that was quite different from the earlier novels. “They were his adventures as a very young man”. CSF thus wrote *Mr Midshipman Hornblower* using the medium of short stories in contrast with his earlier use of the novel. He went on to refer to these stories as “plots” and this appears to be the only comment that he made on adopting the use of short stories for a Hornblower book. However, later in section 33 of *Some Personal Notes*, CSF said that he had found writing this book easy “because the stories had presented themselves as separate episodes, so that a sensible man would be able to write one and then stop and recover before starting the next”. “Story after story flowed from my pen”. It should be realised that at this stage in his life, he was only recently recovering from a nearly fatal heart attack or “coronary occlusion”, as he referred to it.

Writing a mixture of novels and short stories was for CSF no different from what most other successful authors did when they used such a combination to relate the careers of their subjects. For example, Arthur Conan Doyle told the world about Sherlock Holmes by way of four novels and fifty-six short stories. CSF also used the medium of the short story in later non-Hornblower books such as *The Nightmare*, *The Man in the Yellow Raft* and *Gold from Crete*.

After recently reading some short stories by the very accomplished English crime writer, P D James, I happened to read her foreword to one of these collections and this made me think more deeply about the nature of this genre particularly with reference to the short stories that CSF wrote about Hornblower.

P D James wrote: “The scope of the short story is inevitably restricted and this means it is most effective where it deals with a simple incident or one dominant idea.....although it is far less complex in structure than a novel, more linear in concept driving single-mindedly to its denouement”. Many other descriptions of a short story can be found but there does appear to be a general consensus about it. For example, a short story is:

“a brief fictional prose narrative, shorter than a novel, usually dealing with only a few characters”,

“it can typically be read in a single sitting”,

“it focuses on a self-contained incident or series of linked incidents”,

“its form encourages economy of setting, concise narrative and the omission of a complex plot”,

“its story should be strong, a record of things happening”.

If one now goes back to consider the Hornblower novels, nine out of eleven of them would not pass the above tests to be considered as short stories. These are novels with a narrative that flows from chapter to chapter with no chapter that could easily be extracted and used as a short story. None of the chapters in these nine novels has its own title.

By applying the above indications for a short story, there are two Hornblower books that can be considered as being more a collection of short stories than a novel and significantly each one of their chapters does have its own title. These books are, of course, *Mr Midshipman Hornblower* and *Hornblower in the West Indies*.

Mr Midshipman Hornblower has ten chapters with the headings of:

- *The Even Chance,*
- *The Cargo of Rice/The Penalty of Failure, (two chapters making one short story)*
- *The Man Who Felt Queer,*
- *The Man Who Saw God,*
- *The Frogs and the Lobsters,*
- *The Spanish Galleys,*
- *The Examination for Lieutenant,*
- *Noah's Ark,*
- *The Duchess and the Devil.*

Hornblower in the West Indies comprises five chapters with the headings of:

- *St Elizabeth of Hungary,*
- *The Star of the South,*
- *The Bewildered Pirates,*
- *The Guns of Caribobo,*
- *The Hurricane.*

All of the above chapters or stories can stand alone as a separate story and the omission of any of them from the books would not interrupt the main story of Hornblower's progress either from midshipman to lieutenant or his later time in the Caribbean as HM Naval Commander in Chief in the West Indies. They fit the descriptions of a short story as listed above. Each one is narrated in brief fictional prose, could be read in one sitting and focuses on a self-contained incident or series of incidents. The narratives are concise and without a complex plot and the stories are strong with a record of things happening.

One can therefore conclude that the Hornblower saga, rather than comprising eleven novels and five short stories, is actually made up of **nine novels and nineteen short stories**. Does it really matter whether it is "eleven and five" or "nine and nineteen"? The answer is an emphatic "NO". CSF is one of a very long line of authors who used a combination of both novels and short stories to entertain us. There are many superb short stories that have been written, several of them by C S Forester himself!

John Maunder.
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