

HORNBLOWER FIRST TO LAST
Anachronisms from Beat To Quarters to Hornblower and the Hotspur

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I'd like to talk today about something that distinguishes C.S. Forester from other British writers of fiction; something that adds particular pleasure to reading Hornblower as a whole chronological series.

It seems that many British authors have difficulty maintaining a consistent chronology for their characters as the authors and their characters age.

The most extreme example may be another nautical novelist writing about the Napoleonic Wars, **Richard Patrick Russ** -- otherwise known as Patrick O'Brian. Mr. O'Brian ran into a very big problem with his series, because he so quickly got up to 1813 that he had to set the next **11** books all in the **same year** before he ran out of Napoleon. So he had to invent a series of fictional years, like 1813A and B, to fit in all the action.

Then we have **Arthur Conan Doyle**. He has his own fan club, too, the Baker Street Irregulars, and I can report from attending one of their annual meetings that they are very intense. But Conan Doyle got tired of his hero, and he somehow thought that writing science fiction and proving the existence of fairies were his best work. So he prematurely bumped off his hero, and thereby infuriated his readers. To placate them, he wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but he had to call it a "memoir" of Sherlock Holmes, set in 1889, two years before Holmes's apparent death. But the demand was so great that Conan Doyle eventually had to bring Holmes back from the dead; unfortunately Dr. Watson's carelessness with dates – and also his carelessness about the number of his wives – continue to bedevil Holmes's biographers to this day.

Another British author, **Agatha Christie**, didn't seem to care much about chronology at all. There is a vagueness about Poirot's dates, though she eventually shuffles him off his Belgian waffle in a story called *Curtain* that she allowed to be published only after her own death, to avoid any criticism.

Then there's **George MacDonald Fraser**, and his Flashman books. He avoids the problem altogether by haphazardly discovering packets of memoirs from random periods in Flashman's career.

And finally, there's Horace Rumpole of the Bailey, the creation of **John Mortimer**. Rumpole rushed towards senility so quickly that he was on the verge of hanging up his wig for over thirty years. You may recall Pooh-bah in the Mikado, who says he was born sneering. Rumpole appears to have been born dribbling into old age. He was already in his sixties in *Rumpole for the Defence* in 1981. There was *Rumpole and the Age of Retirement* in 1979; *Rumpole's Last Case* in 1981; *Rumpole Rests His Case* in 1987; and *Rumpole and the Primrose Path* in 2002. And he was still going strong in *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror* in 2007.

Well, **our** favorite, C.S. Forester, is a refreshing contrast to all of these. Even though he wrote about the **young** Hornblower only **after** promoting him to flag rank, he took care to adhere to a consistent timeline – very well, though not always perfectly. He did it so well, of course, that C. Northcote Parkinson was able to write a very coherent biography. To me, it's one of the great pleasures of the books to see how the pieces fit together across the series, and how Hornblower matures, and even how some characters re-appear at accurate intervals, like Captain Bolton of the *Caligula*, who had been a lieutenant on the *Indefatigable*; and the pleasantly-named Midshipman Bracegirdle, who reappears as Lord St. Vincent's flag lieutenant in *Atropos*.

But even Cecil nodded at times, and he created some difficulties for himself in the first novel, *Beat to Quarters*, as we Americans say, or *The Happy Return*. *Hotspur* was his last chance to straighten them out (except for the *Crisis* fragment, which doesn't do much except explain where Hornblower was, leading up to Trafalgar). And though Forester does a pretty good job straightening out the chronology, he wasn't always successful. So let's have a look at some of the problems he created for himself, and whether he solved them.

To start, just how old was Hornblower? In *Beat To Quarters*, we learn, in chapter IX, that he is 37. The year is no doubt 1808, so Hornblower would have been born in 1771. That would have made him 17, the age of an even old midshipman, in 1788. But 1788 was peacetime, before the French Revolution, and it afforded little of naval interest. So when Forester wrote *Midshipman*, he boosted Hornblower's birthday, rather impishly, I think, to July 4, 1776, a date we are fond of in America, making him 17 when he reported and got seasick at Spithead.

Forester also tells us in chapter V of *Beat to Quarters* that Hornblower had been "15 years at sea." That would take us back to 1793, exactly right to have him reporting on board the *Justinian*. He confirms that in *Hotspur*, where we learn in Chapter 3 that Hornblower had been a naval officer for ten years. That, too, is exactly right, taking us back again to 1793, consistent with *Mr. Midshipman*. The problem, never resolved, is that by the *Beat to Quarters* birthday, Hornblower would have started his naval career at age 22, very unlikely.

Now, what about that career? *Beat to Quarters* recites (Chapter XII) that Hornblower had been "midshipman and lieutenant in Pellew's ship." That's a bit of a stretch, because Hornblower as we learn later (or earlier) in *Midshipman*, failed his examination for lieutenant while aboard *Indefatigable* – or he would have failed it, according to Capt. Foster, if the examination hadn't been interrupted by the fireships. But he was temporarily an *acting*

lieutenant, so maybe that counts. He gets his formal promotion only while a prisoner at Ferrol, not serving aboard Pellew's ship.

We have a slightly different chronology in *Commodore*, which is a bit more consistent with the rest of the series, so maybe Forester was already thinking ahead -- or rather thinking **behind**. In *Commodore*, Hornblower tells the Comte du Nord, who is of course the Czar, that he has been at sea 19 years, nine as a captain, six as a lieutenant [or should I say left-tenant?], and four as a midshipman. That all works out very nicely, assuming he is talking to the czar in 1812. Though he states he was a prisoner in Spain for nine months, when it was two years. So when Forester goes back to Hornblower's early career after he writes *Lord Hornblower*, his stories fit neatly into this chronology that he had written years before.

Of course, we have a big problem with the short story *The Hand of Destiny*, where Hornblower is a very new lieutenant aboard the *Marguerite*, not the *Renown*. But that story, written in 1940, before *Midshipman*, contains a whole different set of troubling anachronisms, and we'd best leave it out altogether.

So, more about the evidence in *Beat to Quarters*. We are told there that Hornblower "had fought in 10 single ship actions" in his career to date. It's very hard to get to ten. Help me out here.

There are none that we know of in the *Justinian*. There's at least one aboard the *Indefatigable*, when Hornblower is in the maintop with Finch, the man who saw God. There are no single ship actions in *Renown*, unless they happened before Bush came aboard and the book begins. There's the *Castilla* twice -- or two different *Castillas* once each -- once as a lieutenant in *The Hand of Destiny*, and once as a captain in *Atropos* -- although that was in cooperation, more or less, with the *Nightingale*, so it technically wasn't a single-ship action. *Hotspur* adds two

more, if you count forcing the *Loire* to be dismantled, and fighting off the *Felicite*, which distracted Hornblower from the treasure fleet. I make that five, not ten, at the time of the battle with the *Natividad*. Any other suggestions? Maybe there were more in *Indefatigable* that Forester didn't write about, because Pellew was a fighting captain.

Then there is the interesting question of who was Hornblower's first first lieutenant -- the one that presumed on his talkativeness to question every order. *Beat to Quarters* says this happened "when he first sailed as a captain five years ago," which would be 1803. That was when Hornblower went to sea in *Hotspur*. But it can't have been Bush. We see Bush's relationship with Hornblower in *Hotspur* for two years, and that description certainly doesn't fit Bush. So how to solve this conundrum? **Fortunately**, we have the benefit of a scholarly article on this very subject, helpfully titled, "Who Was Hornblower's First First Lieutenant?" in the rather obscure *Naval Gazette* of October 1996, published by the now-defunct C.S. Forester Society of the United States. Modesty prevents my identifying the author. The thesis of this article (which I, for one, find very persuasive) is that Hornblower's first command was not *Hotspur*, but in fact *Retribution*, the captured prize he sailed home just before the Peace of Amiens. We know nothing about that ship's voyage, or its first lieutenant, but it must have had one, or a warrant officer filling that position, and that fits the chronology neatly.

A related issue arises from the statement in *Beat to Quarters* that, in his last commission, Hornblower had tried unsuccessfully to limit discussion with his first lieutenant. His last commission was in *Atropos*, and the lieutenant was the lamentable John Jones the Ninth, with whom Hornblower shared little, not for reasons of self-restraint, but because Lieutenant Jones was a dunderhead. There is a single incident that fits the description, when Jones pleads with

Hornblower to see the ships orders: “Please, sir, please, sir,” he says, and Hornblower relents. “Oh, very well,” he says.

Then we have the question of Hornblower’s relationship with the very loyal Lieutenant (and later Captain) Bush, whose biography we considered last year. Forester tells us in the very first chapter of *Beat to Quarters* that “In a voyage of seven months, Bush had learned something of his Captain’s likes and dislikes.” This certainly implies no prior acquaintance between Bush and Hornblower; while we know that they sailed together in *Renown* (where Hornblower was not a captain), and in *Hotspur* (where he was). So, maybe Hornblower didn’t have his captainly likes and dislikes when he was a lieutenant. And, possibly, Bush learned more about his captain’s habits in a frigate than he had in a sloop – but I think we have to chalk this up as an inconsistency.

Then there is the question of Hornblower’s 50-guinea sword, which *Beat to Quarters* tells us was a gift for the capture of the *Castilla* six years ago. Six years ago would have been 1802, when Hornblower was in command of *Hotspur*. Hornblower did in fact capture *Castilla*, but not on *Hotspur*; not until *Atropos*, and that was 1806, just two years earlier, not six. And he participated in the capture of another *Castilla* (or maybe the same *Castilla*) in *The Hand of Destiny*, but that was in 1796, *twelve* years earlier, and he was only a lieutenant.

Probably the most often commented-on inconsistency is the off-hand reference in *Ship of the Line* to Maria as the friend of Hornblower’s childhood. As we know, Hornblower was no longer a child when he met Maria at the end of *Lieutenant* in 1802 or 1803 (depending on when he first lodged with Mrs. Mason). But perhaps we are talking about Hornblower’s *emotional* childhood, and judging from the way he handled Maria’s infatuation with him, that might be inaccurate.

One other detail I want to mention relates to an odd metaphor Forester repeats in *Hotspur*, and its reoccurrence is rather jarring. At the end of *Flying Colours*, he describes Hornblower's success and fame as a "Dead Sea fruit" that turns to ashes in his mouth – something that appears to be beautiful but is only an illusion. The only other time I have come across that phrase in all of literature is in *Hotspur*, where Forester describes Hornblower's feelings after allowing Doughty to escape. I have since learned that there is a British band of that name, Dead Sea Fruit, which is said to "combin[e] the deadpan wit of the Bonzo Dog Band and the social-conscious lyricism of the Kinks." But of course you knew that. According to my sources, the band reached its high point in 1967, with its tongue-in-jowl single, "Lulu, Put Another Record On." I hope that helps.

Conclusion

So, taking this all together, let's not allow the minor anachronisms that we've been discussing obscure the overall consistency of the Hornblower story. Forester does an exceptionally good job of making the pieces fit, and making Hornblower's personality consistent, but maturing, at the various stages of his career: from an inexperienced and frightened Midshipman dealing with bullying in the gunroom; all the way up to a paternalistic Admiral dealing fondly with his young staff; and all the while his creative thinking, and his self-analysis, and his loyalty to King and country, show through in different ways at the different times of his life. Even most of the short stories (*The Widow McCool*, *Hornblower and His Majesty*, and *Hornblower's Charitable Offering* -- even they fit in well, culminating in the charming glimpse of Hornblower in old age in *The Last Encounter*).

Forester writes in the *Companion* that he knew of the gap between *Lieutenant* and *Atropos*, and he very neatly fit in the narrative of *Hotspur* to account for that time. He uses his

last complete novel to fill out Hornblower's relationships with Maria and with Bush, and even with the little ill-fated Horatio Junior. He illustrates the activities on blockade through the cycle of the year. He establishes more of Hornblower's character as The Man Alone. And he gives us a lot of reading pleasure along the way.