

HORNBLOWER AND THE UNITED STATES

Presented by Ronald W. Meister
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Since Plymouth and the *Mayflower* have a special meaning for citizens of the United States, I thought this would be an appropriate location to discuss C.S. Forester's and Horatio Hornblower's relationship to the United States.

C.S. Forester spent a lot of his life in the U.S. He tells us in his Personal Notes in *The Hornblower Companion* that he had a brief and unhappy stay in Hollywood in the 1920's trying to be a screenwriter. He escaped from that on a ship bound for England via Central America, where he became familiar with the Gulf of Fonseca, which was later to be of much use to him in *The Happy Return*.

He more or less moved to California in the 1930's. As Sanford Sternlicht describes it in his Forester biography, he commuted between the U.S. and England for thirty years.

In the 1930's, Forester served as European correspondent for the *New York Times*, among other things covering the Spanish Civil War – which presumably supplied him with material for *The Gun* and

Rifleman Dodd. Before the U.S.'s entry into World War II, he worked in Washington for the British Ministry of Information – writing, not to put too fine a point on it, propaganda to encourage America's entry into the War. He was on board the U.S. battleship *Tennessee* in 1943 when he suffered his first attack of arteriosclerosis. He ended the war on board *HMS Swiftsure* in Tokyo Bay after V-J Day, where he wrote the last words of *Lord Hornblower*, which he said is the best page he has ever written – an opinion with which I wholeheartedly disagree.

And finally, his obituary was on the front page of the *New York Times*. I don't mean to suggest that that is proof of his *bona fides* as an American. Queen Elizabeth's obituary was also on the front page of the *New York Times* (that's Queen Elizabeth II), and so was the obituary of Igloo, the dog that accompanied Admiral Byrd to the South Pole. But it counts for something.

One of the oddest connections between C.S. Forester and U.S. culture was his appearance on an American television quiz show, *You Bet Your Life*, with Groucho Marx, in 1956. That show was an excuse for a comedy show with Groucho. We have a tape of that appearance:

Forester won \$ 2000 by knowing the meanings of four words: carbine, mastiff, javelin, and spigot -- all pretty easy. But the last question was tougher, and it required serious knowledge of American history: who became President when President Garfield was assassinated? The answer is Chester Arthur, and Forester knew that right away.

Another interesting event in his relationship with the United States was the publication of a serialized edition of *The Commodore* in the *Saturday Evening Post*. As Forester writes in *The Hornblower Companion*:

“[T]here was a certain small amount of adultery. Not even very profound adultery, if such an adjective is permissible. But it was adultery, all the same, and never before, not since the days of Benjamin Franklin [the original publisher of the *Saturday Evening Post*] had adultery made any appearance at all in [its] pages. It really caused quite a flutter.,,, It was the first rift in the dike of convention. Before very long, topics that had been barred for a century and a half were being freely discussed in the pages of the *Post*. The Commodore was not the cause of all this, but he certainly was the *Saturday Evening Post's* first adulterer.”

So, let us now ask how Forester's attachment to, and his familiarity with the United States, is reflected in his writing.

First, a couple of non-Hornblower examples. Forester himself remarked about his early “Hack Biographies” – his own word, which he says in *Long Before Forty* “are the poorest work I have ever done.” (Those of you who have tried to read *A Pawn Among Kings* or *The Paid Piper* may not so readily agree with that). But Forester pointed out that the biographies were published in America as well as in England, and he observed that, “apparently there is a class of reader in America who is prepared to pay out three dollars (remember this is the 1920’s, when a dollar was a dollar) for badly written biographies.” But I think we may take this autobiographical note more as a self-deprecating comment than as an insult to American readers.

After the first Hornblower books came out, Forester wrote what I believe are his only two novels focused on American characters. *The Captain from Connecticut* came out in 1941. The first half of the book shows great promise, seeming to foreshadow the development of an American counterpart to Hornblower, but the rest is pretty bad. The reviewer from the still adultery-free *Saturday Evening Post* wrote, the “story bears marks of haste and improvisation [T]he characters are sufficient for romantic narrative, but they are without depth and have

only elementary psychology." Possibly, this book reflects Forester's propaganda writing in Washington, trying to promote cooperation between heroic Americans and Englishmen at the beginning of World War II -- though the two rival captains here do fight a duel. The character of the American protagonist, while perhaps "without depth," is favorable, and not a caricature like El Supremo.

The second book with an American protagonist, *The Good Shepherd*, was published in 1955, and again has an underdeveloped character commanding a ship, this time during the Battle of the Atlantic. This is the book recently made into the movie *Greyhound*, with Tom Hanks. I liked the book, but I gather from people in this room that my opinion is not unanimous.

Of course, in our book of the year, *The Age of Fighting Sail*, we know from our discussion last June that Forester adopted a sympathetic tone to the United States (except for his criticism of President Madison) -- or, perhaps it's better to say, an equally unsympathetic tone towards both sides; though he is highly complimentary of American seamanship, particularly that of Capt. Isaac Hull in the *Constitution's* battle with the *Guerriere*.

Moving on to the Hornblower works, America or Americans play a role in three of them, though one is almost in passing. That one is *Hornblower and the Hotspur*, where the steward Doughty is saved from a lifetime as a penniless refugee on the waterfront in Cadiz by the fortuitous appearance of the *U.S.S. Constitution* -- surely Forester's favorite American ship, as we learned from *The Age of Fighting Sail*, written five years earlier. One of my favorite lines of dialogue in Hornblower is, "By the way, Doughty, can you swim?"

The first of the two Hornblower works with substantial American involvement is the delightful story *Hornblower and His Majesty*. There, with the dotty King George on board, Hornblower speculates about surrendering to the Americans, possibly hastening the end of the War of 1812. He expresses no animosity to the Americans, and even assumes that they would "make the poor old King as comfortable as possible;" and wondering how he would enjoy a trip to Boston or Philadelphia.

Here, I will digress to a book in which America plays no part in the action, but may have indirectly influenced the plot. Forester puts Hornblower and his squadron in the Baltic in 1812. He did this, he tells us, to avoid "the danger (which I did not like to contemplate) that it

would be [Hornblower's] bomb that burst in the air over Baltimore”
(employing the language of the Star-Spangled Banner.)

Finally, we come to the only time that Hornblower actually sets foot in the United States. In May 1821, as Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels in the West Indies, he pays a call on the Governor of the state of Louisiana in New Orleans. Here I must give a tip of the hat to our member James Ashton, who has enabled me to find the many references to the United States in the unpublished original first chapter of *Hornblower in the West Indies*, which James found in his researches. There are also ample references to the United States throughout the St. Elizabeth of Hungary story, including the amusing moment when Hornblower toasts the President of the United States, and catches himself in time before he adds, “Long may he reign.”

Throughout this book, Forester shows his considerable familiarity with the issues the United States faced in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean in the 1820's: Latin American independence movements; suppression of the slave trade; U.S. expansion into the Mississippi Valley; piracy. Curiously, he does not mention the Monroe Doctrine in this book, though he does refer to it in the *Companion*. There is little

reference to the United States in the other stories in the book, but we know, again thanks to James, that there are more citations to the U.S. – 33 in all – in *Hornblower in the West Indies* than in all the other Hornblower novels and stories combined. So, perhaps, in the Society's continuing quest to visit the sites of Hornblower's exploits, we can some day hold our annual meeting in New Orleans.