

WILLIAM BUSH – A LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

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Poor Bush. Hornblower's devoted follower, who loses first his foot and later his life supporting his leader. The narrow-minded, unimaginative, but capable and loyal officer who passed for lieutenant on the strength of seamanship, despite his weakness in navigation.

Last year, in Stockholm, I attempted to prove that Hornblower was an actual historical figure – not just a literary character based on a British captain or captains, but a real person. And I relied in part on the powerful proof that he was the subject of a scholarly biography by the respected C. Northcote Parkinson, which has actual footnotes; and that he was portrayed in a movie by Gregory Peck, who never lies. But today, I propose to do the opposite for William Bush. I propose to examine how Bush's character developed through the Hornblower books; and what Forester thought of him; and, finally, to discover through the growth of his character the best order to read the books. And, as a hint, I'm going to discuss this by reviewing Bush's career as it was written, not (so to speak) as it was lived.

Early Character Development - BTQ, SOL, FC

We first meet William Bush on the quarterdeck of the *Lydia* as it's about to land on the coast of Nicaragua. The perfect landfall has nothing to do with Bush's skill, or lack of skill – Hornblower had done the navigation himself, and he hadn't even taken his first lieutenant into his confidence about the destination. And Bush's first appearance isn't a promising one: he had sworn to a crew member that he would have him flogged every time he spit on the deck, and Hornblower felt compelled to back him up, though he detested flogging. So, we see Bush first as a disciplinarian; a follower of the rules, but an unimaginative subordinate who doesn't always understand what his Captain is thinking. And when Hornblower goes ashore to meet El Supremo for the first time, he has to caution Bush not to attempt a rescue if he doesn't return promptly, because he doesn't trust Bush to blunder around in the jungle with a landing party. And Hornblower swears at Bush, not for the first time or the last, but Bush at least has enough tact to limit his response to a simple "Aye, aye, sir."

But Bush very capably manages the ship and the crew in the battle with the *Natividad*. And he clearly enjoys the battle, despite being hit on the head by a falling block. On the day after the battle, he gets one of the very few compliments he was ever to get from Hornblower, who remarks on his good work in preparing the ship for its weekly inspection so soon after the battle: "Sunday, or no Sunday," he says, "Mr. Bush, you have done magnificently."

Along the way, in *Beat to Quarters*, or *The Happy Return*, as some of you call it, Bush fills in some of his early history, as a lieutenant aboard the Fighting *Temeraire* at Trafalgar. And we have glimpses of his fondness and protective attitude towards Hornblower, when he urges him to get some rest after spending the whole day on deck; and when he describes Hornblower to Lady Barbara as skillful and shy, like Nelson.

In *Ship of the Line*, the next book, Bush capably supports Hornblower through a series of adventures. His seamanship is impeccable, and so is his management of the crew. Hornblower thinks, “The skies would fall before Bush neglected his duty;” and Forester takes the occasion to comment on Bush’s loyalty and admiration for Hornblower; and even to describe their relationship fondly as like a “father dealing with a high-spirited son.” For Hornblower’s part, Forester writes, he “saw in [Bush] a fighting man of the type to which he regretted he did not belong.” We begin to see Forester’s developing fondness for the character. He even sympathizes with Bush over his relationship with his difficult captain, writing, “Bush felt sometimes that his life was being shortened by his captain’s reticence.” But Bush knew his place. When Hornblower proposes to tow the *Pluto* off a lee shore, Bush jumps in surprise, but he “could only look his expostulations – he knew his captain too well to demur openly.”

And then, of course, he suffers his terrible wound, and in *Flying Colours* he engages in the long adventure of the escape and return to England. Bush is much more of a central character now, with his convalescence, his adaptation to a wooden leg, and his role in a ridiculously top-heavy crew of three. Forester rounds out his character a bit, even giving him a little flicker of a sense of humor, when he jokes to Hornblower that they are being taken to Paris to have tea with the Empress Marie-Louise; and Hornblower suggests that Napoleon wants Bush to teach him navigation. But Bush is mostly his old, familiar, solid self, supervising the building of their boat, incapable of learning French, and suffering the agony of having to play whist with Hornblower and the Count.

Late Career - COMM, LH

Seven years passed between *Flying Colours* and the publication of *The Commodore*. But Forester couldn’t bring Hornblower back without Bush. “It would have been irksome in the extreme [he writes] to go to sea with any other captain than Bush.” And then we have the scene that both Ludwig and I identified as our favorite in *Commodore* at our meeting last year, when they break out Hornblower’s broad pendant, and dance a little jig like “a pair of schoolboys exulting over a successful piece of mischief.” The bond between Hornblower and Bush is now complete. Forester writes, “It was extraordinarily pleasant to be aware that Bush was not only pleased to be serving with him again, but was also pleased just because Hornblower was pleased.” And Bush’s character is now fully developed. There is that funny scene where Hornblower is forced to invite Bush to dinner after he belatedly realizes that the thumping sound on the deck is Bush’s wooden leg. And Hornblower suspects that Bush’s brusque manner towards his lieutenants was modeled on his own manner towards Bush when he was first lieutenant. But Hornblower is still capable of rebuking Bush when he doesn’t know the precise minute of sunrise, and he has to adapt to allowing Bush to manage the ship while he stands by as a passenger, occasionally dropping indirect hints. And Bush remains just as unimaginative as ever, when he fails to see through the ruse of the quarantine flag on the *Maggie Jones*, and when he wants to hang the mortally wounded renegade Clarke.

There are many interesting characters in *Commodore*, as we saw last year in Stockholm – Mound and Braun, Clausewitz and Essen, and the Czar, and the Countess; and Bush takes more of a back seat, compared to his central role in *Flying Colours*.

He returns, briefly, in *Lord Hornblower* -- and Forester kills him. I've always been angry at him for that. Forester must have been in an exceptionally bad mood when he wrote *Lord Hornblower*. He kills Bush; he kills Marie; he leaves the count bereft of his only support; Hornblower betrays Barbara; and his life is saved only by a *deus ex machina* that he doesn't deserve. Phooey.

Forester even breaks the literary convention that an author doesn't kill a character he has already wounded. Though, come to think of it, there was another well-known nautical captain who had lost a leg at sea and then was killed hunting the killer, with his harpoon. But I still don't like it.

Retroactive Development – MID, LT and ATROPOS; WEST INDIES, HOTPUR, CRISIS and final compliment

And I suspect that Forester ultimately didn't like it either. He went on next to write a Bushless book, *Midshipman Hornblower*. But I like to think that he missed Bush. Hornblower is not the same without a sidekick. Skylarking with Midshipman Bracegirdle is not the same. So Forester went on to write the Bushiest book of all, *Lieutenant Hornblower*. It's told entirely from Bush's viewpoint. The very first words of the book are "Lieutenant William Bush." Only what Bush sees, is in the story, and only what Bush thinks. This serves an essential purpose in the plot, allowing Forester to leave unobserved how Captain Sawyer came to fall down the hatch. But I like to think that he also did it out of fondness for Bush. The plot device allows us a better look into Bush's inner thoughts -- about promotion; about his shipmates (including Hornblower); about corporal punishment, and the Articles of War, and initiative and routine. And we see, of course, the developing friendship between Bush and Hornblower -- Hornblower's genuine concern when Bush is wounded (not so seriously this time), when he brings him a pineapple in the hospital; and Bush's fondness for Hornblower during the lurid period when the two of them go off on a carouse in the dubious delights of Jamaica; and when Bush gets up early to see Hornblower sail off in *Retribution*. And then, of course, there is their companionship back in London during the hard times of the Peace of Amiens.

There follow two more non-Bush books, *Hornblower and the At'ropos* and *Hornblower in the West Indies*. *Atropos* gives us a contrast in the most non-Bush, nondescript first lieutenant imaginable, the lackluster John Jones the Ninth, who ridiculously ends up as a Captain in the Sicilian Navy. In *Hornblower in the West Indies*, Hornblower can't serve with Bush, because he's dead, and his successor as Captain of Hornblower's flagship, the oafish and unimaginative Sir Thomas Fell, is a poor substitute – it's as if John Jones the Ninth had stayed in British service and achieved post rank.

But then Forester returns to his second favorite character in the last complete novel, *Hornblower and the Hotspur* – just as Conan Doyle resurrected Holmes, after he died, with a

posthumous story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. By the time he wrote *Hotspur*, Forester was entirely comfortable with his characters, and he didn't need to do much character development. It's just fun to read of their adventures together, from Bush's performance as Hornblower's best man; to his always-capable seamanship; to his eagerness for a fight and his enjoyment of rough weather. And to relish that last scene where Bush, a little drunk, comes over to tell Hornblower and Maria that Captain Moore's prize money isn't prize money at all, but droits of admiralty.

But there is one final piece, in the incomplete novel, *Hornbower During the Crisis*. That's when Hornblower takes his leave of *Hotspur*, and gives Bush the best compliment of all: "Mr. Bush," he says, "there couldn't be a more perfect first lieutenant." And I think that's Forester's way of wrapping up the history of William Bush, and saying goodbye to a character he had really come to love.

And Forester himself confirms this, telling us in his own voice, in *The Hornblower Companion*, that he made his own symbolic farewell to Bush, years after writing *Lord Hornblower*, when he took a canoe trip down the Seine, and dropped a flower nears Bush's unmarked grave.

[And that's why I recommend to people, if they are starting out to read the Hornblower Saga, read it in the order the books were written – if only for the sake of William Bush.]

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