The Commodore Short Guide

The Commodore by Patrick O'Brian

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Characters

Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin maintain their long-established characteristics in this novel, well known to readers of the series, and they continue to show the effects of age even though Patrick O'Brian has allowed them to live through the year 1812 several times over. Jack is a confident, experienced, and courageous naval commander more at home in a ship than at his estate or in Parliament; Stephen is a model practitioner of early nineteenth-century medicine who indulges his passion for natural history (especially birds) and coca leaves, who speaks numerous useful languages, and who volunteers his services to the naval intelligence department in order to bring down the hated tyrant Napoleon Bonaparte.

Jack Aubrey has risen in rank throughout the series (and been expelled from the service once, in The Reverse of the Medal, 1986) to the point that he is now appointed not just to the command of a ship but to a small fleet of them. In certain respects Jack's career has been helped by his association with Dr. Maturin, his particular friend, since the naval intelligence department sometimes allows Stephen to recommend or select a captain to transport him to his destination.

Naturally, he always recommends or selects Jack Aubrey. And in certain respects Stephen's two careers—as a doctor and as an intelligence agent—have been helped by his association with Captain Aubrey, who has on occasion saved his life. When they first meet, in Master and Commander, Stephen is penniless and devoid of prospects, and Jack persuades him to become ship's surgeon, an ideal occupation, it turns out, for an intelligence agent needing to travel to various ports of call without arousing undue suspicion or notice. Later, Jack extracts Stephen from the torturous grip of the French at Port Mahon in H.M.S. Surprise, and he pulls Stephen from the ocean (and many others —prime seamen among them—as well) not once but repeatedly.

Characterization is the great attraction for many readers of the Aubrey/Maturin series. Jack and Stephen become more fully rounded in the earlier volumes, and new layers of complexity develop as they face increasingly difficult challenges, achieve military and personal triumphs, and endure disappointments or even failures. A host of recurring minor characters also become more and more indelibly delineated as the series unfolds. This familiar crew, both the lovable ones and the reprobates, reappears in The Commodore—Killick and Bonden, Mrs. Williams, young Reade, and others—but the strong personalities of the captains whom Jack commands dominate the story. Captain Thomas's obsessive tidiness and ineffectual rage eventually destroy his usefulness as a naval officer, while Captain Duff's showy courage, unsupported by the technical skills of seamanship, costs him a great victory and his leg. These failed captains are presented in sharp contrast to the unfortunate Lieutenant Whewell, a competent, eager, and knowledgeable young seaman whom Jack promotes from the midshipmen's berth while in Africa because of his great utility to the mission. Whewell's expertise regarding the slave trade had come about because he so longed to sail that he was willing to try even the slavers in order to advance himself as a sailor. But changes in the Royal Navy were quickly making the success of Whewell impossible, since a faint ancestral connection to

Africa is apparent in his skin. Whewell cannot "pass for a gentleman" because of prejudice against some unknown ancestor, and therefore he cannot rise in the ranks of the class- and race-dominated Royal Navy; Thomas and Duff, "well-connected and thoroughly English, can command ships in spite of their flaws.

Social Concerns

The moral issue relevant to the slave trade in the early nineteenth century would by itself provide ample material for The Commodore, but the personalities of the other captains in Jack's squadron extend the range of ethical, social, and psychological issues that the novel examines. Captain Thomas of the Thames, also known as the Purple Emperor for his perpetual irascibility and barely suppressed rage, is a brutal disciplinarian who sentences his sailors to scores of lashes for performance that other captains would find perfectly acceptable. In contrast, Captain Duff of the Stately is, on the testimony of his ship's surgeon and on the evidence of his crew's behavior, a pederast in an era when homosexuality could be punished by death. Both men are courageous officers, but the flaws of each man as a commander of other men and as a fighting captain leave Jack with a less efficient war machine than he could wish for. His own skills as a leader are taxed by his role as the commodore of this poorly matched squadron.

While the behavior of the squadrons' captains is an important and absorbing aspect of the novel, the issue of slavery dominates the action of the story. Jack has ample opportunities to surprise several slave ships at sea and to exercise his considerable strategic skills in plotting his campaign to yield the greatest number of captures. These are small, brief battles compared to the great actions against the French he has previously fought, but they are amplified by the horrors encountered on the liberated slavers. A further complicating factor impinging on the success of the mission is the fact that Captain Thomas is a member of a family that has made its wealth in the slave trade; his brutality to his men is a small-scale version of the dehumanized conditions found on the slave ships.

The action at sea is complemented by Stephen's adventures on land, where he meets colonialists from virtually every nation in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The huge profits to be derived from the slave trade have drawn entrepreneurs of every nationality, race, and religion, all scrambling to turn human cargoes into fortunes, along with bureaucrats of varying political persuasions attempting futilely to regulate or eliminate the trade. The story travels to the marketplaces, the harbors, and the holds of slave ships to portray a substantial part of this unhappy chapter in human history.

Techniques

O'Brian unfolds the action of The Commodore through the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator. Although the narrator almost always examines the events of the story through Jack's or Stephen's eyes, keeping these two characters in the forefront of the reader's attention, the omniscient quality of the narration is particularly apparent at several points in the story. The novel includes an uncommon sequence during which the squadron is viewed from the harbor it is entering, and the key perceptions noted are those of African, Arabic, and European townsmen and other landlubbers who are stunned by the display of force as Jack's ships blow an empty captured slaver to bits. Later in the story, the exact nature of the discordance in the squadron, and even on Jack's own ship, is revealed through a rarely seen conversation between two supporting characters frequently met in the series, Jack's steward, Preserved Killick, and his coxswain, Barret Bonden. These loyal followers conclude that Jack's marital difficulties are contributing to the tension and strain within the small fleet. Interestingly, this conversation recaps an earlier one between Clarissa Oakes and Stephen Maturin in which the lady had explained why Sophie Aubrey had come to hate her and how two lengths of beautiful scarlet silk could prove so dangerous to a marriage.

But only rarely does the narrative point of view expand in this manner to examine the story through the thoughts and feelings of the many familiar supporting characters; instead, one becomes intimately acquainted with the inner lives of the dual heroes of the series.

Another frequent technique throughout the Aubrey/Maturin series is the transfer of a story's setting from the sea to some remote and little-known (biologically "nondescript") stretch of terra firma. In The Commodore, Stephen carries the story into the swamps and jungles of the western coast of Africa, giving the reader a more detailed view of the flora and fauna there (especially the potto) than most novels would. The same technique is also used in The Thirteen-Gun Salute (1990), when Stephen visits a crumbling Buddhist monastery in an ancient volcanic crater on a island in the Indonesian archipelago and enjoys the company there of the orang-utang, in The Nutmeg of Consolation (1991), when he tours a small part of New South Wales and discovers why one should not handle the male platypus too carelessly, and in The WineDark Sea (1993), when he escapes from a French intrigue in Peru by traveling through the high plateau of the Andes in former Inca territory. But for every perambulation of some little-known hab-itat he enjoys there are others he must pass by untouched when Jack insists that "there is not a moment to be lost."

Themes

The most commonly reiterated themes throughout the Aubrey/Maturin series are duty, love of glory, freedom from tyranny (especially as embodied by Napoleon), the pursuit of knowledge, and the maintenance of civil relations among the sometimes fractious members of the human race, considered as individuals and as nations. In The Commodore, these themes are expressed as the characters pursue the double mission of patrolling the west coast of Africa against the slave trade and then defending the coast of Ireland against French invasion.

Freedom from tyranny is an especially important theme in The Commodore. Not only do Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin carry on their part of the ongoing struggle against Napoleon, but other characters struggle against other forms of tyranny also. Sailors encounter tyranny of different sorts on both the Thames and the Stately, so severe in the former case that mutiny may occur; the captains of those ships are subject to the tyranny of their own personalities. Africans sold into slavery encounter tyranny so extreme that for some of them life becomes unendurable and they die of despair even while being rescued. The theme is reiterated in the second mission to the coast of Ireland: There, British tyranny has persuaded some Irishmen to aid Napoleon in the hope of casting off British rule. On the personal level, Stephen struggles against the tyranny of his coca-leaf habit, and Jack and Sophie try to cope with the petty tyranny of marriage. Stephen's wife Diana has fled from the tyranny of new motherhood, and their daughter Brigid struggles against the tyranny of language and social custom. Only some of these struggles can be successfully resolved.

The qualities and characteristics of good leadership constitute another theme that recurs throughout the novel. Jack Aubrey has led his own men into numerous battles in the past, sometimes against overwhelming odds. In his present situation, however, he must lead the captains who command the men who will actually fight the battles he has been directed to engage. The courage that propels him to the front of a boarding party in the heat of a close encounter is not the kind of skill that will enable him to avert a mutiny on Captain Thomas's ship, where the men resent the brutal lashings they must endure, nor will it improve the seamanship on Captain Duff's ship, where some foremast jacks gain favor by pleasing the eye of their commander rather than by meeting the exacting standards of naval gunnery. Jack encounters a new challenge to his skills as a leader, and one that he must master if he is to fulfill his heart's desire and hoist his pennant as an admiral. If his career is to continue, he must transform himself from a man of direct action into a manager and motivator of other people's actions. His ambition proves to be an exacting tyrant, forcing him to conduct psychological maneuvers in dull meetings and at emotionallycharged dinner parties instead of following the dictum of Admiral Nelson, whom he so admires: "Never mind manoeuvres; always go at them."

Adaptations

The Aubrey/Maturin series is available in the form of audio tapes from Recorded Books, even though the longer volumes such as Master and Commander and Post Captain run to as many as twelve tapes. The books are read with gusto in a wide range of appropriate accents by Patrick Tull. The series has inspired tapes of a different kind as well: Musically-inclined readers can hear renditions of the favorite compositions that Captain Aubrey and Dr. Maturin play in between sea battles and raging storms on two audio recordings, Musical Evenings with the Captain and Musical Evenings with the Captain, Volume II. The selections are played by Philharmonia Virtuosi, under the direction of Richard Kapp, and are available from ESS.A.Y Recordings. The series may also be turned into motion pictures at some time: Master and Commander has been optioned by the Samuel Goldwyn Company.

Key Questions

One intriguing aspect of O'Brian's writing is the way he communicates the spirit of the age about which he writes in a "warts and all" portrait. He does not gild the lily—or the farthing. Instead, the reader encounters medical ignorance that induces shudders, unchecked imperialism, class-based arrogance, and casual and unexamined racism, homophobia, and gender bias. In many cases these characteristics, so unacceptable to many in the contemporary world, are expressed by fictional people who are otherwise charming, witty, courageous, and even noble. The Commodore makes a particularly good example of O'Brian's mixing of attractive characters with unattractive behaviors and attitudes that nonetheless have the ring of historical authenticity.

The novel shows us a world in which the British are actively suppressing the slave trade, or at least some parts of it, after having profited from it for many years; ironically the same squadron proceeds to Ireland to ward off an invasion of French troops intending to liberate the island from English rule and incorporate it into Napoleon's empire. Readers should take note of O'Brian's treatment of class, race, gender, and nationality in this novel. Is he commenting on the contemporary world by using the early nineteenth century as his stalking horse?

1. Slavery is a key topic in The Commodore because Jack Aubrey's orders instruct him to lead his squadron to cruise the coast of Africa and halt the slave trade there as much as possible. Reconstruct the procedures of that trade based on evidence presented in the novel. How does the picture of the slave trade presented by Patrick O'Brian compare with your previous understanding?

2. Captain Thomas of the Thames provides an impassioned but unwelcome defense of slavery at one point, although it is eventually revealed that his family's wealth is partially derived from the trade.

Analyze his arguments in favor of slavery and try to develop counter-arguments to his position.

3. Homosexuality was punishable by death during the period when this novel is set, and yet it continued to exist in British society and in the Royal Navy, as evidenced by Captain Duff of the Stately.

Based on the evidence presented in the novel, why was homosexuality perceived to be a threat to shipboard life?

4. The character of Lt. Whewell makes an interesting case study of several prejudices common to early nineteenth-century Britain, as well as the modern -world.

What are Mr. Whewell's crippling limitations that so vastly outweigh his obvious qualities? How are class and race prejudices exemplified in this one character?

What part does personal beauty play?

5. Very few children appear in any significant way in the Aubrey/Maturin series, setting aside the cabin boys and junior midshipmen who are expected to perform virtually as adults. Stephen Maturin's daughter Brigid and the Melanesian refugees Sarah and Emily are somewhat exceptional. How are these children of two different worlds similar?

What differing fates can these little girls anticipate in the future?

6. Diana Villiers has abandoned Stephen Maturin on at least three earlier occasions. What is different about this time?

Are her actions in any way forgivable (and if so how are we to understand her), or is she a flat cipher rather than a fully rounded character?

7. In the attack against the French invasion fleet along the Irish coast, what cultural attitudes and biases are symbolically suggested by the fates of the Thames and the Stately?

8. What lessons can be learned from the unhappy dinner party thrown by Clarrisa Oakes for Sophie Aubrey at which both ladies show up wearing dresses cut from the same bolt of red silk?

9. Discuss the many ways that the "Purple Emperor" is the complete reverse of Jack Aubrey as a naval commander and as a human being.

10. Jack Aubrey serves as a commodore in one other book in the Aubrey/ Maturin series, The Mauritius Command.

Read that book in conjunction with The Commodore and compare his experience of administrative commands on these two missions.

11. Was it really fair of Jack to keep the Ringle after winning it in a mere backgammon game with his old friend Heneage Dundas?

12. What are the effects of Jack's marital discord on his ships and on the sailors, especially his longtime followers, who man them? How does this parallel between domesticity and seafaring illuminate the quality of shipboard life?

Literary Precedents

The Commodore is a seafaring tale and a historical novel closely based on actual events. Seafaring tales constitute a minor subgenre among novels, not numerous enough nor popular enough to rival the mystery or the romance. Nonetheless, some of the greatest writers in the English language have crafted seafaring stories, and the traditional canon of British and American novels features some outstanding examples.

Readers with an inclination towards history might enjoy the novels of a real—life sea commander who sailed and fought during the era of the Napoleonic wars, when the Aubrey/Maturin series is set. Captain Frederick Marryat (17921848) would have been a mere squeaker or a mid could he have sailed with Captain Aubrey; indeed, he served under the man upon whom Aubrey and the other great fictional naval hero, Captain Horatio Hornblower, were patterned. Another sea adventure based on real-life experiences is Richard Henry Dana's Two Years Before the Mast (1840), from the perspective of an American sailor during the period just after the time of the Aubrey/ Maturin adventures. For plain ripping good yarns, plunge into Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883; see separate entry) or Rudyard Kipling's Captains Courageous (1897); for more introspective, philosophical, and symbolic seafaring tales, read Jack London's The Sea Wolf (1904; see separate entry), any number of Herman Melville's novels, including Moby Dick (1851), or any of several novels by Joseph Conrad (see separate entries).

Related Titles

The Aubrey/Maturin series includes eighteen tides, all published in 1994: Master and Commander, Post Captain, H.M.S.

Surprise, The Mauritius Command, Desolation Island, The Fortune of War, The Surgeon's Mate, The Ionian Mission, Treason's Harbor, The Far Side of the World, The Reverse of the Medal, The Letter of Marque, The Thirteen-Gun Salute, The Nutmeg of Consolation, The Truelove, The Wine-Dark Sea, The Commodore, and The Yellow Admiral. A nineteenth volume in this series is expected in 1998. O'Brian is also the author of two additional seafaring historical novels, The Golden Ocean (1996), and The Fatal Shore, both designed for young adult readers.

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