The Cruel Sea Short Guide

The Cruel Sea by Nicholas Monsarrat

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Characters

A writer could hardly have been better prepared for writing a book than Monsarrat was for composing The Cruel Sea, as it was very much based on his own experience during World War II. The protagonist, Lockhart, resembles the wartime Monsarrat in age and background; he starts the war as a twenty-seven- year-old journalist turned naval officer and ends it, as did the author, as a seasoned veteran (although Lockhart goes no higher than executive officer, while Monsarrat eventually commanded three ships at various times). Lockhart's mentor is his commanding officer Captain Ericson, the professional seaman back in naval uniform for the war, a man who loves going to sea and who accepts, however difficult it may be at times, the full burden of combat command. The negative examples include the crude Australian First Lieutenant, Bennett, who functions on bluster and bullying rather than responsibility and courage, and Ferraby, the young sub-lieutenant too innocent to stand up under Bennett. If these and other characters seem somewhat stereotyped, Monsarrat's reader will be convinced it is surely in part because there is truth to the stereotypes.

Social Concerns

The chief social concern in The Cruel Sea is, quite simply, World War II.

Although the war had been over for a half-dozen years when the book appeared in print, the subject was still one of close concern to the author and, no doubt, to most of his readers. Monsarrat's leading characters all focus on the necessity of fighting and winning the war. The Germans are — at least for the war's duration — "bastards."

Nevertheless, various comments show a perception by some characters, including the protagonist Lockhart, of a world not totally black and white, although each tries to have his particular shade of gray emerge dominant.

Certainly, too, Monsarrat shows the tension between those who are really fighting the war — risking their lives from day to day — and those who are less fully engaged. Readers meet the cynical journalist, the uncaring wife (young Lieutenant Morell's wife is too busy with her lover to be concerned about Morell's death), and the shorebound staff officer who visits the ship Compass Rose only to drink gin in the wardroom and leave an inconsequential instruction.

Finally, as one might expect of any war novel, and especially a World War II novel, The Cruel Sea impresses the reader with the enormous waste, of people and material, as ship after ship explodes and sinks, and as Compass Rose and her successor Saltash steam through seas littered with the dead, the dying, and the barely surviving.

In general, though, Monsarrat seems less concerned with social matters than with telling a story, and a story focused less on plot that on reconstruction of the experience of living through the North Atlantic war. This he achieves superbly well, although in so doing he has been accused of producing journalism rather than literature.

Techniques

The Cruel Sea is divided into seven parts, one for each year from 1939 through 1945, and the narrative is in chronological order. The effect is of a chronicle, as the third-person narrator follows two ships and their crews.

First, HMS Compass Rose is followed, from her fitting out until her sinking in the North Atlantic, the victim of a submarine. Second, most of the handful of Compass Rose survivors and the narrative are transferred to HMS Saltash.

Although Lieutenant Lockhart is the main character, the focus often shifts to various others. As Monsarrat himself puts it in his introduction, the book is "the story of one ocean, two ships, [and] about a hundred and fifty men."

Monsarrat's style is gracefully transparent, with much use of dialogue, and frequent omniscient insights into characters' feelings and thoughts. The many little details — technicalities of naval procedures and equipment, the frequent encounters with those who have survived torpedoing and those who have not survived it, the many ways that weariness can be manifested — are well observed and carefully woven into the fabric of the book.

Themes

The Cruel Sea is famous for its graphic depiction of North Atlantic convoy duty. Having spent virtually all of World War II as an officer on escort ships, Monsarrat draws upon his experience to show what life — and death — were like for the men engaged in that dangerous and arduous enterprise.

By the nature of convoy warfare, the opposing military forces-the Germansare for the most part perceived not so much as human beings, but rather as threats, forces and objects — a torpedo wake, a periscope, an airplane, a fragment of wreckage. The crews of the corvettes and frigates in Monsarrat's novel must constantly fight both this declared although not always present enemy, and also the cruel and constantly present sea. When the Germans do appear in closeup, as captured survivors of a sunken U-boat, they are clearly still the enemy, in a stereotyped way: The U-boat captain is blond and arrogant.

Not surprisingly, one of Monsarrat's themes is courage. One of the great strengths of the book is that it engages the reader in understanding not only the courage needed to confront the terrifying moment of attack by an enemy weapon or by the elemental extremes of wind, water and cold, but also the courage exercised in repeating such risks day after day, week after week, convoy after convoy. Then, too, Monsarrat shows the difficult process of making life and death decisions and acting on them, as a junior officer becomes a medical officer or as, in the most horrendous scene in the novel, a captain explodes a depth charge under a group of swimming men in order to get the submarine he believes to be below them.

For Monsarrat, gentleman amateur boater turned naval officer, an important theme is the rapid development of such amateurs into highly competent seagoing warriors. The protagonist Lockhart resembles the author in being a journalist. He begins, as Monsarrat did himself, as a graduate of a fiveweek officer school who knows nothing about warships but is willing to fake his role until he can play it for real. He ends the novel, as Monsarrat ended the war, as a highly competent frigate officer (although Monsarrat rose to command, while Lockhart declines the opportunity). The book is a sort of naval bildungsroman, as Lockhart learns his new trade and grows into his new way of life and as around him the other green officers and crew members, freshly brought from all walks of life, do the same; the recruits become veterans. They become so partly out of repeated exposure to necessity, but also because they are under the tutelage of such seasoned persons as Lockhart's captain, Lieutenant Commander Ericson, RNR, who embodies decades of naval and commercial seagoing experience, and Vice-Admiral Sir Vincent Murray-Forbes, KCB, DSO, RN, who is too old to go to sea but runs a crack training program.

Connected with the theme of seasoning is that of command. Ericson serves throughout the book as the model of what a commanding officer should be like — "professional . . . strong, calm, uncomplaining, and wonderfully dependable."

Another important theme in The Cruel Sea is that of steadfastness in the face of fatigue. Page after page, as convoy after convoy confronts its human and natural enemies, the crews must interminably surmount fatigue, with whatever resources they can muster. Readers are told early on, for example, that Captain Ericson "was tired -he could not remember ever having been so tired-but he knew that he was not too tired: there were always reserves." Monsarrat vividly shows how the weariness accumulates from days of little sleep, hours of taut nerves, and the constant physical exertion of simply remaining upright and functioning as one's small vessel rolls and pitches violently in the grasp of the North Atlantic. The very last line in the book, appropriately, is Ericson's comment after more than five years of war: "I must say I'm damned tired."

Finally, there is the sea itself, which Monsarrat shows over and over again as neither beautiful nor generous, but powerful, treacherous, and cruel. That Monsarrat should show it thus, when his seagoing experience was largely on the North Atlantic, where the water is often cold enough to kill a man in minutes and the weather is consistently rough, is not surprising. Monsarrat shows the sea as a hostile, rather than neutral, background for the struggles of opposing human forces.

Adaptations

The very successful movie version of The Cruel Sea premiered March 1953, with a screenplay by Eric Ambler and starring Jack Hawkins as the captain.

Literary Precedents

Although Monsarrat said he was "always impressed" by the work of Joseph Conrad, his own work is not very much like that of Conrad, despite their similar interests in such matters as the sea, courage, leadership and (seen in books other than The Cruel Sea) colonialism. Monsarrat's characters lack the psychological richness of Conrad's, and his novels are philosophically much less powerful or profound.

J. Jaffe, noting that in The Cruel Sea and other works Monsarrat is really a writer of "adventure fiction," calls him "a worthy successor of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, and Robert Louis Stevenson." Monsarrat indicated warm admiration for Evelyn Waugh, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Aldington, and some affinities can be found between his work and theirs, although any major direct influence might be hard to demonstrate.

Although it is not a question of precedence, The Cruel Sea is in many important ways very comparable to a book with which it shared the American best seller list in 1951: Herman Wouk's The Caine Mutiny. Wouk's book also depicts young men coming of age in the crucible of naval combat during World War II. An important difference, of course, is that while Monsarrat's captain is a splendid positive example of what a good commanding officer should be, Wouk's commanding officer, Captain Queeg, has become a byword for the opposite.

Related Titles

The most closely related of Monsarrat's other titles is Three Corvettes (1945). The three parts of this book originally appeared separately as short novels: H. M. Corvette (1943), East Coast Corvette (1943), and Corvette Command (1944). Composed aboard ship while Monsarrat was on active duty in the North Atlantic, these books are based upon journals and notes kept during that same period. Called fiction then, and listed as novels, they might more recently have been called "new journalism," for they are vivid first-person accounts of actual experiences. Among other features, one may observe here more bitterness toward those who in various ways benefited from the war without concomitant risks, as well as those who benefited in frivolous ways from the sacrifices of Monsarrat's comrades-in-arms, some of whose lives seem to have been ended so that others, ashore in England, could wear nylons or take holiday drives on extra gasoline. Also striking, and perhaps more valuable in the long run, is Monsarrat's rumination on the qualities of a good commanding officer. Here he sets forth explicitly those things he dramatizes in The Cruel Sea.

H.M. Frigate (1946) and Depends What You Mean By Love (1947) also draw heavily upon Monsarrat's wartime seagoing experience.

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