

## A Real Jack Aubrey? Max Adams

Did author Patrick O'Brian model the hero of his popular sea novels on Lord Nelson's second in command at Trafalgar, Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood? The author of a biography of the British admiral weighs the case for Lord Collingwood.

Was there a real Jack Aubrey? In the last ten years or so, since Patrick O'Brian's sea stories graduated from the adventure sections of bookstores to their literature shelves, there has been a suitable increase in critical scrutiny of the author and his very human, very much larger-than-life hero. In a sense, to speculate that there might have been a "real" Jack Aubrey is folly. O'Brian was far too shrewd to base his captain on a single living counterpart. Aubrey is an epitome, a statue cast in iron from a mold that produced thousands of officers during the Napoleonic Wars.

Conventionally, Aubrey has been identified with Thomas Lord Cochrane, one of the most famous fighting captains of the day. A brave, enterprising commander of frigates who had the dash and genius of Horatio Lord Nelson afloat, Cochrane possessed the ill luck of a beached whale ashore. Many of his exploits were faithfully donated by O'Brian to Aubrey: The cruise of the *Speedy* in 1801 is that of the *Sophie* in *Master and Commander*, and the Stock Exchange trial that results in Aubrey's dismissal from the post captain's list in *The Reverse of the Medal* is that of Cochrane.

But Aubrey is not Cochrane. O'Brian himself said the Scottish aristocrat was "too flamboyant, too full of himself" to be a typical officer. And by typical, O'Brian meant an open and cheerful, though publicly reserved, man of good breeding crossed with the roughness and adaptability conferred by a life at sea. He was brave, of course, and a cunning opponent as well as honourable and decent to his men. The typical officer was also politically conservative, but without bigotry, and above all devoted to the Royal Navy (and to the acquisition of prize money). A great many of the service's captains could not claim all of these attributes; very few could claim none. Those hundred or so officers turned ashore by the Spithead mutineers in 1797 must be counted against the thousands whose men would and did die for them. Genuinely rotten officers—brutal tyrannizers like Captain Hugh Pigot of the frigate HMS *Hermione*—were rare, even very rare.

There can be no single model for Aubrey any more than there could be for his particular friend, the naturalist, surgeon, and spy Stephen Maturin—or, for that matter Preserved Killick, the captain's unbearable steward, or his coxswain, Barret Bonden, as immutable and salty as 20-year-old beef. But to the extent that Aubrey is a typical officer, he bears a strong resemblance to a man who is a genuine exemplar of the British naval officer in the wars against France.

Cuthbert Collingwood was untypical of naval captains in that he was a northerner, the eldest son of an unsuccessful Newcastle trader, born in 1748 and sent to join the Royal Navy as a captain's servant at the age of 13. He spent 44 years of his life at sea, dying as commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean fleet in 1810. Collingwood first distinguished himself at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, winning his lieutenancy there, and later earned accolades in three of the great fleet actions of the era: the Glorious First of June (1794), Cape St. Vincent (1797), and Trafalgar (1805). In the last of these, as Nelson's second, he took command (of) the British fleet after the death of "England's saviour" and saved it from certain destruction in the terrible storms that followed the battle.

Trafalgar may never have happened at all but for Collingwood's brilliant—one might say Aubreyesque—defensive action in August of that year. Nelson had vainly chased French Vice Admiral Pierre Charles Villeneuve and his fleet to the West Indies, and then returned to England for what was to be the last time. With a tiny squadron of three line-of-battle ships and one frigate, Collingwood remained off Cadiz, blockading the Spanish fleet. Just after dawn on 20 August, over the horizon came 26 enemy ships—Villeneuve's returning French fleet. Collingwood's tiny squadron lay between eight Spanish ships-of-the-line in the port and the approaching ships. Knowing that the odds of escaping such a fleet with his slow old ships, let alone fighting them, were negligible, he could nevertheless do nothing but run for it. But Collingwood confused Villeneuve with his insouciance, trailing his coat, so to speak. Two hours later, the French commander detached 16 of his fastest ships and sent them after the British vessels as they made for Gibraltar.

Knowing that the situation had become critical, for Villeneuve must not be allowed to escape into the Mediterranean, Collingwood then pulled off a masterpiece. He shortened sail, turned back, and sent the very fast *Colossus* off to get as close to the enemy as possible, meanwhile throwing out a series of signals. The enemy's interpretation of the activity was that Collingwood had sighted a large British force in the distance, and thus he had decided to wait and fight the French. So Villeneuve's ships turned tail and fled back to Cadiz; 16 ships-of-the-line had been seen off by three. *The Naval Chronicle*, a contemporary compendium of Royal Navy news, recorded it as an instance of genius unparalleled in the pages of naval history, though few historians of the campaign mention it.

Collingwood lived in the shadow of his friend and hero Nelson for 35 years even though Nelson was ten years his junior. But Nelson recognized in him great virtues both as an officer and a man. The 19th-century novelist and social commentator William Makepeace Thackeray called Collingwood the greatest English gentleman, and King George III wept when he read his beautifully composed Trafalgar dispatch. Although Collingwood has suffered at the hands of historians—playing the doughty but dull Watson to Nelson's erratically brilliant Sherlock Holmes—he was a complex, subtle man of immense character and humanity.

Like Aubrey he was devoted to his wife and daughters (as well as a sadly neglected cabbage patch), set standards for gunnery that were never bettered, and hated flogging. He was famous for bringing on junior officers and was a consummate seaman and battle commander. He was old fashioned and yet forward thinking and preferred, as he put it, that officers should enter the navy through the porthole rather than the cabin window. Aubrey and Collingwood also share a strong sense of the ridiculous and a love of a good pun. Collingwood's wit was certainly sharper than Aubrey's, but it betrays a common sense of humanity, especially on the subject of midshipmen—a favorite of both. He complained of one "young gentleman":

Mrs Currel's son never can be a sailor: he has something very odd in his manner, or rather he has no manner at all, but saunters a melancholic for a week together, unnoticed and unnoticed, except when I give him a little rally to make his blood circulate, and this I do, not in the expectation that it will make him better in his profession, but merely for his health's sake. It is a pity she had not put him apprentice to Jno. Wilson, the apothecary; he might have gone on very wisely. His gravity would have established his reputation as a learned doctor, and if he did poison an old woman now and then, better do that than drown an entire ship's company at a dash by running on the rocks.

If Collingwood bears more than a passing resemblance to Jack Aubrey it is no coincidence. Patrick O'Brian was well acquainted with Collingwood's career. He makes frequent reference to him in the Aubrey-Maturin novels, in particular crediting Aubrey's devotion to gunnery to Collingwood. He borrows several anecdotes from Collingwood's earliest biographer (and son-in-law), G. L. Newnham-Collingwood, and from the memoirs of his midshipmen. One of these, instantly recognizable as a classic Aubreyism from *The Ionian Mission*, relates how a midshipman reported an elderly seaman (one thinks of Able Seaman Joe Plaice) for rudeness, an offense punishable by flogging. Collingwood wrote to the young gentleman, saying:

In all probability the fault was yours. But whether it were or not, I am sure it would go to your heart to see a man old enough to be your father, disgraced and punished on your account; and it will, therefore, give me a good opinion of your disposition, if, when he is brought out, you ask for his pardon.

When, after receiving this letter, the midshipman duly begged the man off his punishment, Collingwood said to the sailor, though with a show of pained reluctance, "This young gentleman has pleaded so humanely for you, that in the hope that you will feel a due gratitude to him for his benevolence, I will for this time overlook your offence."

*The Ionian Mission*, indeed, might be seen as a double tribute to Collingwood. Not only does the book closely follow the events of 1806-10 when Collingwood became effective viceroy of the Mediterranean, controlling a staggering portfolio of diplomatic, military, and naval affairs from Cadiz to Constantinople, but Collingwood himself appears in the guise of Admiral John Thornton, the aging fleet commander whose body has been worn like storm canvas to an almost translucent thinness, but who hopes for one last touch at the French before dying. These were the years after Trafalgar when Collingwood, who had been at sea in a single tour of duty since 1803, often not even anchoring his ship for 15 months at a time, was repeatedly refused leave by the Admiralty. He had become so important to the British government's strategy against Napoleon that he had to die—at sea, off Minorca, while on his way back to England—before it would allow him home.

Port Mahon, the capital of Minorca, provides another link with Aubrey. There, at the top of a broad staircase known since the 18th century as Pigtail Steps, Lieutenant Aubrey looked out in vain for a glimpse of the *Sophie*, his first command. There, as a master's mate in 1771, and often thereafter, Collingwood learned his trade as a seaman. And there today, visitors go to the house where Collingwood spent his last months, and are given a tour by the present owner, Fransisco Mantonari.

O'Brian's knowledge of Collingwood's career was penetrating, and in typical fashion he trails clues to his erudition throughout the Aubrey-Maturin series. For example, the name of Aubrey's agent and man of business, Ommaney, is the same as Collingwood's. From one of Collingwood's midshipmen, Jeffrey Raigersfeld, O'Brian borrows some delightful tales from the period 1783-86, when Collingwood commanded the 44-gun fourth-rate *Mediator*—in effect a heavy frigate. Raigersfeld provides us with the tale of the captain of the hold catching and skinning rats (“only we call ’em millers to make ’em eat better,” according to Jack Aubrey), laying them out skinned and dressed for the midshipmen to purchase for a few pence each. He also relates how Collingwood disrated him and turned him before the mast while he was at English Harbour in Antigua, and how grateful he later became for this valuable insight into the mind and culture of the lower decks. In HMS *Surprise*, it is Jack Aubrey who recalls with affection his time as a “mid” in the *Surprise*, at that exact same anchorage, when he too was turned before the mast. In his case it was for hiding a trollop in the cable tiers.

Aubrey's love of an ample bosom and the smile of a wench reminds us that Aubrey and Collingwood are not one and the same. Aubrey ashore is frequently and disastrously laid by the lee; Collingwood was much more astute in landsmen's matters. When he inherited a coalmine in 1806, he proceeded to manage it with considerable skill from a distance of more than 2,000 miles even as he was composing a letter on the subject of the *Koran* to the emperor of Morocco. Collingwood, alas, did not play the violin. Aubrey did not sail with a dog for more than ten years as Collingwood did. The canine, Bounce, was famously “human”: After Trafalgar and Collingwood's rise to the peerage, he refused to consort with commoners' dogs and “truly thinks he does them grace when he condescends to lift his leg against them.”

Collingwood never had to ask for help with an elegant phrase; he was, in fact, one of the great letter writers of his age. Nor was his intimacy with Nelson confined, like Aubrey's, to relating how his lordship had asked him very kindly for the salt; the two men had even fallen in love with the same woman—Mary Moutray—in Antigua.

Nevertheless, in his own time and afterward, Collingwood was regarded as a naval paragon, just as Jack Aubrey is an almost unimprovable fictional one. If this author's biography of Collingwood biography serves to revive the officer's reputation, it might also underscore the credibility of Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. As Aubrey—but not Collingwood—might have said, it would, so to speak, kill two birds in the hand.