

## **BILLY BUDD: A STUDY IN SOURCES**

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### **Abstract**

***B**illy Budd, which is considered one of Herman Melville's best novelettes, is one of those works in which the historical background plays a vital role in the development of the action.*

*In order to appreciate this work the reader should bear in mind the primary theme it sets forth, that of a common sailor, a midshipman, who sacrifices himself in his attempts to seek justice. **Billy Budd** is a story which is based on historical facts as it reveals the writer's own story and experience as an ordinary seaman aboard the American frigate, the **United States**.*

*This paper, then, attempts to indicate some of the historical incidents which Herman Melville, the American writer, used as a background to his "nouvelle" **Billy Budd**, such as the Great Mutiny at the Nore (Spithead Mutiny), and the **Somers** case and the brutal system of the navy, with special reference to Captain MacKenzie and midshipman Spencer*

"Background" is "a term, like many others used in literary discussion, borrowed from the kindred art of painting, where it signifies those parts of the painting against which the principal objects are portrayed. In literature the term is rather loosely used to specify either the setting of a piece of writing or the tradition and point of view from which an author presents his ideas ..."<sup>1</sup>

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, published nearly thirty three years after the death of the writer, is a work in which the background plays a vital role: it is a tale which is based on historical facts since it reveals Melville's own story and experience as an ordinary seaman aboard the American frigate, the *United States*. It also deals with the *Somers* case and the brutal legal system of the navy.

This paper attempts to indicate some of the historical incidents which Melville used as a background to *Billy Budd*; it discusses the importance of Herman Melville's own experience as a sailor on U.S.S., *United States*, the Great Mutiny at the Nore (Spithead Mutiny), and the *Somers* case: Captain MacKenzie and midshipman Spencer.

I shall also indicate the importance of the notorious *Somers* case to Melville's story, a case which he also refers to in his novel *White Jacket*, in which he openly attacks the navy and accuses Captain MacKenzie of being a murderer.

From boyhood, Herman Melville had a great love for the sea and the life of a sailor. He tried many jobs, but they did not succeed in holding his interest for one reason or another. He was really magnetized by the sea, especially after his first trip to England in June 1837. He enjoyed his first trip so much that he was never able afterward to resist the lure of the sea. On the other hand, Guert Gansevoort, Melville's cousin, was a very close friend and throughout Melville's youth was in the United States Navy, first as a midshipman from 1823 to 1837, and then after some years as a lieutenant. As a boy of twelve, Gansevoort went to the sea on his first mission, from 1824-1827. Most of his time was spent on board ships. During his short intervals on land, Gansevoort used to meet Melville to tell him more and more about the sea and about his various adventures on board ships. Thus, his friendship to Gansevoort, the stories of his uncle Thomas Melville about the sea and finally his lack of interest in various jobs he had attempted, all these factors together made Herman Melville anxious to have his own experiences as sea. In 1843, Melville "had enlisted in the United States Navy as an ordinary seaman in order to work his way home from the Pacific ... and he had been assigned to an insignificant and therefore (considering his extraordinary pride) humiliating station aboard the frigate *United States*. More than one year later, the frigate reached Boston, where Melville was honorably discharged from the Navy. This experience constituted a great unit of raw materials for what he hoped would be another money-making potboiler."<sup>2</sup> In fact, to me, the last sentence of this statement does not seem to be completely true because money was not the only factor or even the main cause for Herman Melville, (or for most writers) to write a novel. Of course, money plays, and always will play, a vital role in our lives, but it should not be our main aim. Melville's experience in the Navy really provided

very rich and "a neat unit of raw materials" for creating some of his best novels and tales such as *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno*, *White Jacket*, and many others. In *Billy Budd*, Melville's main purpose was no doubt to attack the tyrannical and oppressive behaviour of the officers of the navy in order to show how mean and inhuman these officers were toward the enlisted men. He severely attacked flogging and other abuses in the navy. Thus, money was not the motive in Melville's mind when he wrote his books. He did not wish to see his own people losing their freedom for the sake of man-made laws.

The place of *Billy Budd* was mainly on board a man-of-war. The time of the story was 1797 during the time of the revolution and of the British naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. These two mutinies had just been suppressed, the former without bloodshed. The Great Mutiny at Nore cost many lives and did enormous damage. The principal leaders were hanged as an example. Billy Budd has been taken from the merchant, *Rights-of-Man* to serve on the British man-of-war, H.M.S. *Indomitable*. Figuratively, Melville here used the name the *Rights of Man* for the ship as if to say that sailors such as Billy Budd always lost their rights as men when they were taken by force and impressed to serve on any man-of-war under the authority of a brutal navy. They lost their rights as men when they lost the power to stand up against the brutal treatment of the navy. But they had no choice. There were always those "higher laws" which they must follow without any hesitation, or death and destruction would be waiting for them. The reason for such mutinies was that the sailors complained against their bad conditions in the navy and wanted to be dealt with and treated as human beings, not as animals.

In fact, once, on board the *Lucy Ann*, Herman Melville was arrested along with many others who were accused of being mutineers. They were kept in the brig of the French frigate, *Le Reine Blanche*, in irons and with poor food. Almost the same thing happened to Billy Budd when he was accused of being a mutineer. Thus, it seemed that Melville, here, was telling his own story, and also the story of the common sailor; of how badly accused sailors were treated by superior officers in any navy. In fact, Melville was always against the navy and its brutal treatment of the helpless crews.

Billy Budd has been tried and convicted on the mere suspicion of being the ringleader of a suspected mutiny, and later, for killing his superior officer, Claggart, though Captain Vere was sure of his innocence and equally certain that Billy Budd did not mean to kill the Master-At-Arms. When Vere noticed that Claggart was dead his immediate expression was that Claggart was "Struck dead by the angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Captain Vere was sure that Billy Budd struck Claggart because Billy was outraged at the lies Claggart had told about him. He had a "tied tongue," but a free hand. Claggart's hate for Billy Budd started at sometime even before he had seen him, though Billy himself never knew of such hatred and furthermore, he was astonished when he found out that this accuser was this same Claggart whom he would never have suspected of doing such a thing. Billy Budd was hanged at dawn on board the *Indomitable*. His only spoken words were, "God bless Captain Vere!"

As a matter of fact, what happened on board the *Indomitable* did not merely come from Melville's creative imagination. On the contrary, the main situation in *Billy Budd* was carefully adopted by the author from a similar situation in a notorious naval case called the *Somers* case of 1842. Thus, one must pay attention to this source for *Billy Budd*, a source which Melville himself referred to in Chapter 22 in the book. The ease of mutiny on board the *Somers* was of great importance and of personal concern to Herman Melville because his first cousin Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort, whom we have mentioned before, was the accuser of the three men who were convicted and hanged for being mutineers. The midshipman was Philip Spencer, son of Secretary of War John C. Spenser, who insisted on a formal inquiry which officially pardoned the officers. Among those who were executed was "... English Small, a great favourite of the crew, who exclaimed, "God bless the flag!" at the moment he was run up to the yard-arm."<sup>3</sup> We can easily notice how close Small's cry was to Billy Budd's, "God bless Captain Vere." James Fenimore Cooper's severe attack on the *Somers* case was well known and very influential. In his attack "Cooper gave evidence to show why the First Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort deserved to be blamed for the injustice together with the Captain. Melville had access to Cooper's pamphlet, soon after returning home from his own cruise aboard the frigate *United States*."<sup>4</sup> In fact, Guert Gansevoort had not only given the Captain the information which convicted Spencer and the other two sailors, but he also sentenced Captain MacKenzie and made him issue such a conviction so that the rest of the crew could see for themselves what was to become of the mutineers.

As we have mentioned, Melville himself had referred to the *Somers* case in Chapter 22 of *Billy Budd*:

Not unlikely they were brought to something more or less akin to that harassed frame of mind which in the year 1842 actuated the commander of the U.S. brig-of-war *Somers* to resolve, under the so-called Articles of War, Articles modelled upon the English Mutiny Act, to resolve upon the execution at sea of a midshipman and two petty-officers as mutineers designing the seizure of the brig. Which resolution was carried out though in a time of peace and within not many days sail of home. An act vindicated by a naval court of inquiry subsequently convened ashore. History, and here cited without comment. True, the circumstances on board the *Somers* were different from those on board the *Indomitable*. But the urgency felt, well-warranted or otherwise, was much the same.

As we can see, here again Melville attacked the brutal system of the navy and the "so-called Articles-of-War". He referred to the case as "History". The case then was presented by the narrator, or Melville himself, as a piece of history which did not need any comment. Melville also wanted his reader to be sure that though the "circumstances" of the MacKenzie case were not the same as those of Captain Vere or Billy Budd, at least the two incidents and the consequences were the same. Concerning the *Somers* case, "some forty-six years after the incident, the *American Magazine* published an article entitled, "The Mutiny on the *Somers*," and that article elicited

a retort in another magazine; a retort in which the word "Mutiny" was replaced by the word "Murder". Many readers had found the first article offensive because it defended Captain MacKenzie and glorified him as hero of the *Somers* incident, "while it characterized the three hanged men as villainous ..." In the "official" report of the death of Billy Budd, such report came to be almost the same as that of the three unfortunate men. The inaccurate account of Billy's death appeared in the "naval chronicle of the time," under *News From the Mediterranean*. That account said that Claggart, the master-at-arms had discovered a plot to mutiny on aboard the H.M.S. *Indomitable*. When he reported to Captain Vere that the "ringleader was one William Budd; he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning the man before the Captain was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath-knife of Budd". Furthermore, the account also accused the dead Billy Budd of not being an Englishman, "but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens". The account went on to say that Billy Budd was unfortunately "mustered into the service under an English name," and that the "enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal" appear worse when we know that the victim, John Claggart was really "respectable and discreet," very efficient and very important and dependable to "His Majesty's navy" as a petty-officer. The criminal was hanged and "nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard the H.M.S. *Indomitable*." The whole account was false of course, but it ironically and satirically presented and clarified Herman Melville's attack on the inaccuracy of the press and on the brutality of the naval system.

In fact, Melville's references to the *Somers* case occurred not only in *Billy Budd*, but also in *White Jacket* (1850) which was also based on his experiences as a sailor on board the American frigate the *United States*. In *White Jacket*, Melville called Captain MacKenzie a "murderer," who executed three men "by color of material law" in time of peace. In the Chapter entitled, "The Good Ordinances of the Sea," Melville attacked the "Articles of War" again:

Who put the great gulf between the American Captain and the American sailor? Or is the Captain a creature of like passions with ourselves? Or is he ... incapable of the shadow of error? Or has a sailor no mark of humanity, no attribute of manhood, that bound hand and foot, he is cast into an American frigate shorn of all rights and defences, while the notorious lawlessness of the commander has passed into a proverb, familiar to man-of-war, *The law was not made for the captain!* ...

So, the incident on board the *Indomitable* is not merely the offspring of the author's creative imagination. On the contrary, it is closely related to the *Somers* affair, though the circumstances of the mutinies are not the same. Melville uses the historical background as well as his own experience as a vehicle for very serious thought. He warns the nations, and probably every nation, that the people should never give up their freedom for security. He also cautions the country against laying too much stress on naval or on military authority and regulations. By one means or other, Herman Melville wants to tell us in *Billy Budd* that Billy Budd is really a victim of the so-called "Articles-of-War," or man-made laws. Melville then refers to the affair of the

*Somers* to show us that the Midshipman Philip Spencer, along with the other two sailors, is also the victim of the rules. Not one of them, including Billy Budd himself, has any choice whatsoever; they have to follow the rules. May be these rules do not do justice to the enlisted men, but in the eyes of the authorities such rules are legal and fair. When it comes to these man-made laws, the heroes or the innocent become villains (Billy Budd, Philip Spencer and the other two sailors), while the real villains become heroes and are glorified (Claggart, Captain MacKenzie and the officers). Meanwhile, the punishment of the innocent is death by hanging and the vilification of their reputations after death. The real villain, on the other hand, is rewarded by being glorified and immortalized. In a word, in the eyes of those who make the laws, and probably in the eyes of society, the "peace-maker" becomes a mutineer and vice versa. Thus, as long as these rules are legal, enlisted men like Billy Budd or Philip Spencer must follow them without hesitation, though they know for sure that such rules are unfair. Consequently, the common sailor and unfortunates like Billy become the victims of the law.

To clarify this, one must deal, even briefly, with the character and action of Captain Vere in relation to the hanging of Billy Budd. Captain Vere is presented in *Billy Budd* as a wise, almost god-like character, who sacrifices Billy, knowing his innocence, for the sake of a higher cause of justice, order and discipline. Billy accepts his death, blessing Captain Vere. How can we reconcile this approval of Billy's hanging together with the bitter anger Melville had earlier felt against the Articles of War in the *Somers* case and in *White Jacket*? Does this action fit into its background, or rather, does such dramatic action have any actual background, or was it merely fictional, indicating that this is Melville's affirmation and acceptance of God's will as some critics tend to believe?

In his critical commentary on *Billy Budd, An Introduction to Fifty American Novels*, Ian Ousby points out that:

Most obviously, the story is charged with allusions to the political upheavals of the era in which it is set. Billy himself represents, however unwittingly, something of that spirit of 'newness' and radicalism which had been expressed in the French and American Revolutions. He comes from the Rights-of-Man, named after Tom Paine's influential radical manifesto, to a ship that represents to Old World and the old order of things. HMS *Indomitable* is a rigidly hierarchical community whose lowest members are little better than slaves. The Captain's name – the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere – is a small essay in aristocratic lineage, while Claggart, with his deceptively polite and unassuming manner, is a walking perversion of gentility.

These elements, however, are subordinated to a deeper – in fact, a fundamental – allegory. The clash between Billy and Claggart is presented as a confrontation of absolute good and absolute evil. The carefree and innocent Billy is (as the narrative repeatedly insists) an Adam before the Fall. By his death he comes a Christ-figure. His hanging is accompanied by apparently supernatural phenomena – like the absence of the usual muscular spasm in the corpse. He

dies, like Christ, forgiving those who kill him. And after his death, the crew cherish mementoes of him like sacred relics.<sup>6</sup>

In the introduction to *Herman Melville: Selected Tales and Poems*, Richard Chase suggests that:

The relative failure of Billy Budd as a fictional character can be accounted for in a very simple manner. Melville was too personally involved with Billy Budd. Whether he was picturing his own son Malcolm (who shot and killed himself at the age of twenty) or speaking of his own youth or of Christ or making a general statement of the perpetual sacrifice of boyish innocence of law and society, the idea of Billy Budd appeared so overwhelmingly moving to the aged Melville that he was not able to express it in artistically cogent language. If the reader wishes to look into the subterranean depths of the story, its "secret mines and dubious sides," he might well begin with the large number of figures of speech having to do with the act of eating; for example, the "mesmeric glance" of Claggart at Billy Budd, which Melville compares with "the hungry lurch of the torpedo fish." These metaphors show what Melville, in his darkest vision of life, is really saying. He is saying that the "horrible vulturism" of the world, of which he had written in *Moby Dick*, is a basic principle of things. Society, law, adulthood, worldly accomplishment can sustain themselves only by feeding on youthful innocence and generosity. In this sense, the theme of Billy Budd, as of Melville's *Typee*, and, indeed, as of the sacrament of communion, is the ritualistic sacrifice of the hero.

But even as Melville shows us these dark and terrible ideas, we are aware that he is counterposing another range of meaning. Neither nature nor society is totally destructive of what is admirable in human life. By some genial liberating grace, innocence and beauty are empowered to renew themselves in the very teeth of destruction. And so we are enabled to feel Billy Budd, though not quite successful as tragic drama, remains immensely moving as a drama of pathos and myth.'

Captain Vere condemns to death a man whom he feels to be innocent; a young man who seems like a son to him because he puts the welfare of the state above everything else. Realizing the necessity for Billy Budd's death as a sacrifice to preserve the law, Captain Vere has then to suppress his personal feelings and to act at once.

Thus, Billy Budd's blessing shows the simplicity, goodness, kindness and peace-loving nature of a young man who trustingly accepts death from his father. Such qualities make Billy Budd Christ-like. The comparison with Christ forgiving his enemies and sacrificing his life for mankind is clear and evident here. Like Jesus Christ, Billy Budd hesitates to take any action to defend himself before the judges; he dies blessing Captain Vere. Such blessing and memory will haunt Vere to his own death. Captain Vere later dies uttering the name of Billy Budd.

Thus, on a larger scale, "the hanging of Billy Budd," as seen by Chase, "at once a death and a resurrection, has the same force in Melville's story as the resurrection of Hermione at the end of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, for both writers affirm that in some magical way innocence and beauty still exist in the world, that however evil nature and man may be, they are still graced with a kind of minimal creative principle. Claggart's death is sudden and final. Captain Vere dies without having achieved the fame that might otherwise have come to him. But "the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor" lives on in the heart of men. Of Melville, of Shakespeare, and of Sophocles (in *Oedipus at Colonus*) it may be said that in the works of their advanced age they took up the themes of the pathos of death, the crimes of society, the magically creative and restorative powers of nature, the myth of rebirth. We may note in conclusion that Billy Budd reminds us of the strongly political quality of Melville's mind. For the hanging of Billy Budd is in a fairly direct way a result of the French Revolution and thus assumes a relationship with the great political ideas of the nineteenth century, which Melville, as he tells us at the beginning of tale, "found so crucial to the destiny of mankind."<sup>8</sup>



### Notes

1. William Flint Thrall, *A Handbook to Literature*: (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1936), p. 37.
2. Lawrence Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel With God*: (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 93.
3. Haskel S. Springer, *The Merrill Studies in Billy Budd*: (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1970), p. 40.
4. Thompson, p. 117.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 358-359.
6. Ian Ousby, *An Introduction to Fifty American Novels*: (London: Pan Books, 1979), p. 85.
7. Richard Chase, ed., *Herman Melville: Selected Tales and Poems*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1950), pp. xiv-xx.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

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## دراسة في مصادر «بلي بد»

الدكتور : عادل عطا إلياس \*

### قصة

«بلي بد» والتي تعتبر من أحسن ماكتبه الكاتب الأمريكي هيرمان ملفيل ، هي واحدة من تلك الاعمال التي تلعب فيها الخلفية التاريخية دورا هاما في ملورة وتطور الاحداث الدرامية فيها ولكي يستطيع القارئ ان يدرك القيمة الجمالية لهذا العمل يجب عليه ان يضع في حسبانته الموضوع الرئيسي للقصة وهو قصة بحار - صابط صف يضحى بحياته وهو سيئله في البحث عن العدالة وفضة «بلي بد» كما نوهنا هي قصة مبنية على حقائق تاريخية حيث انها تلقي الضوء على قصة الكابن وتجارته الحقيقية في البحر وعلى ظهر السفينة الحربية الامريكية «الولايات المتحدة» . وسوف يتناول هذا البحث بعضا من تلك الحقائق والحوادث التاريخية والمصادر التي اتخذها الكاتب هيرمان ملفيل كخلفية لقصة «بلي بد» . سيتناول هذا البحث على سبيل المثال تمرد (سبت هدم) وما كان يطلق عليها «بتمرد نوور الكبير» . كما ستعرض لحادثة «سمرز» وطاقم البحرية الظالم المتعسف مع الاشارة بوجه الخصوص الى شخصيتين فظنتين هما الكابن ماكنزي وصابط الصف البحري سنسر .

Billy Budd. Herman Melville. BUY. Abraham may have caught young Isaac Melville compares the Captain's private conference with Billy to Abraham's intimate discussion with Isaac, his condemned son, in Genesis 22:1-8 of the Old Testament. according to the Articles of War As stated in Article XXII of the Principles and Practice of Naval and Military Courts Martial, enacted in 1749: "If any officer, mariner, soldier, or other person in the fleet, shall strike any of his superior officers, or draw, or offer to draw, or lift any weapon against him, being in the execution of his office, on any pretence whatsoever, ever Billy Budd, Sailor is a novella by American writer Herman Melville left unfinished at Melville's death in 1891. Acclaimed by critics as a masterpiece when a hastily transcribed version was finally published in 1924, it quickly took its place as a classic second only to Moby-Dick among Melville's works. Budd is a "handsome sailor" who strikes and inadvertently kills his false accuser, Master-at-arms John Claggart. The ship's Captain, Edward Vere, recognizes the innocence of Budd's intent but the law of .Herman Melville's Billy Budd is a short novel (novella) presenting the tragic story of a young sailor falsely accused of attempting to organize a mutiny aboard a warship. As in Melville's masterpiece, Moby Dick, the action in Billy Budd takes place at sea. Composition, Publication, and Editions. .Herman Melville completed a rough draft of Billy Budd several months before his death in 1891. About three decades later, Melville's granddaughter gave the manuscript to a writer, Raymond Weaver, while he was conducting research for a biography of Melville. After editing it, he include Continue your study of Billy Budd, Sailor with these useful links. Context. Full Book Quiz. These cookies allow us to count visits and traffic sources so we can measure and improve the performance of our site. They help us to know which pages are the most and least popular and see how visitors move around the site. All information these cookies collect is aggregated and therefore anonymous.