



Did Willoughby Join the Navy? Patrick O'Brian's Thirty-Year Homage to Jane Austen

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PERHAPS NO AUTHOR during the last two centuries has been compared to Jane Austen as frequently, and as favorably, as the acknowledged master of the late twentieth-century maritime-adventure novel, Patrick O'Brian. The twenty novels and the fragment of a twenty-first in O'Brian's Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin saga, informally known as the *Master and Commander* series, bear a striking resemblance to Austen's work. Both Austen's and O'Brian's novels largely take place during the Regency and the years preceding it, but Austen was writing about her own times, whereas O'Brian, who died in 2002, was writing about a time that had long since passed. Yet given that many authors have written about the early nineteenth century, what prompts statements such as *Time's* "If Jane Austen had written rousing sea yarns, she would have produced something very close to the prose of Patrick O'Brian" (Gray 91)? Austen's novels are concerned with life, love, and manners, and it has been pointed out that Austen for the most part ignores "the decisive historical events of her time" such as "the Napoleonic wars" (Williams 113). O'Brian's novels do just the opposite, *focusing* on the Napoleonic wars, and the British Navy's role in those conflicts through the involvement of Captain Jack Aubrey and his friend and ship's surgeon Stephen Maturin. As a result, O'Brian's novels elaborate on the details of seagoing life that Austen chose to ignore, and O'Brian's works are seen by some readers and critics as "companion volumes to [Austen's] novels, with formal differences in rank

replacing the differences in social position that intrigued her, and the complicated friendships of men replacing the complicated negotiations of courtship” (Carroll E-2).

While Austen did write one novel, *Persuasion*, in which several of the principal characters were members of the British navy, and another, *Mansfield Park*, in which a naval subtext serves as a backdrop for several isolated aspects of the novel, the strength of the similarities between Austen’s works and O’Brian’s do not rest on the mere use of characters in the navy. The reader discerns that O’Brian seems to be writing in the style of Austen, and in addition there are a number of concrete similarities between Austen’s works and life and O’Brian’s novels including people and names, both real and fictional. One reason for this, according to Starling Lawrence, O’Brian’s American editor at Norton, is that O’Brian “laid out his great admiration for Jane Austen, who was for him the greatest writer in the language.” It should come as no surprise then that O’Brian’s novels are interspersed with reference after reference relating to Austen, so much so that one can clearly see O’Brian’s Aubrey/Maturin series not just as a compliment to, but also as a five thousand-plus page homage to Austen’s novels. Sometimes the likenesses are superficial, such as “the initial coincidence of JAne AUsten and JACK AUbrey” (O’Neill 6), while at other times the comparisons are much more complex, and require research and an expansive knowledge of history, literature, and biography to identify. Whether the comparisons are obvious or not, as *The New Yorker* noted, “O’Brian acknowledges Jane Austen as one of his inspirations, and she need not be ashamed of the affiliation” (ctd. in King 344).

Austen’s two brothers, Francis William Austen and Charles John Austen, were, of course, her inspiration for using characters who were in the Royal Navy. Francis, or “Frank,” Austen was at the Royal Naval Academy from 1786-88, served as midshipman in 1791, made Lieutenant in 1792, Commander in 1798, Post Captain in 1800, Rear Admiral in 1830, Vice Admiral in 1838, and Admiral in 1848. Charles was at the Royal Naval Academy from 1791-94, served as midshipman in 1794, made Lieutenant in 1797, Commander in 1804, Post Captain in 1810, and eventually achieved the rank of Rear Admiral in 1846 (Le Faye 488-89). As a result, when reading O’Brian’s novels and looking for connections to Austen, one must look deeper than the obvious occasional character names that seem reminiscent of Austen’s fiction, as O’Brian draws not only from her novels, but also from the naval acquaintances and ships familiar to her brothers as well. Indeed, O’Brian frequently takes a real historical person or ship that was somehow associated with

Austen or her family and uses that exact person or ship, even to the name, in his own work. One prominent example is the appearance of the *HMS Leopard* in a number of the Aubrey/Maturin novels, including *The Fortune of War*, *The Mauritius Command*, and *The Commodore*, although it is in *Desolation Island* that the *Leopard* figures most prominently. In *Desolation Island* the *Leopard* is commanded by Jack Aubrey in what is roughly calculated to be 1810 or 1811 if one tries to place the novels in a real historical context (Brown 6). In Aubrey's fictional world the *Leopard* is also somewhat infamous, having several years earlier (before Aubrey commanded her) been involved in an international incident when she fired on the *USS Chesapeake* while in search of Royal Navy deserters. The *Leopard's* sullied reputation as a result of this attack causes tense moments for Aubrey and his crew in *Desolation Island* and in later novels.

The *HMS Leopard* was an actual ship in the service of the Royal Navy, and the incident involving the *USS Chesapeake* did take place in 1807 when the ship was under the command of Captain Salusbury Humphries (who is also accurately referred to as the ship's previous captain in *Desolation Island* and *The Far Side of the World*) (Brown 163). Yet what makes the *Leopard's* history germane to this article is the fact that Frank Austen was captain of the *Leopard* in 1804 and 1805, before the real Captain Humphries and the fictional Captain Aubrey. Several of Jane's letters to Frank, including the one informing him of their father's death, are addressed to "Capt. Austen, *HMS Leopard*" (21 January 1805; 22 January 1805; 20 January 1805). That both Jack Aubrey and Frank Austen would command the same ship must be considered more than mere coincidence, and given O'Brian's penchant for historical accuracy, it is quite likely that he knew the *Leopard's* history and, therefore, Jack Aubrey was given command of the *Leopard* because of its connection to the Austens.

But the connection does not stop there. Just as in O'Brian's novels Jack Aubrey often finds himself transferred from ship to ship, so, too, did Frank Austen, and within days of the posting of Jane's letters in 1805 he was transferred to serve as captain of the *HMS Canopus* (Southam 112)—another ship mentioned in several O'Brian novels. In *Thirteen Gun Salute*, we are told that Lieutenant James Fielding "had seen very little action, missing Trafalgar by a week—his ship the *Canopus* was sent off to water and take in provisions at Gibraltar and Tetuan" (100). This is a reference even more closely intermeshing Austen's reality with O'Brian's fiction, because as Brown notes, the fictional James Fielding and the real *Canopus* indeed missed the battle of Trafalgar after being sent to search for water and supplies a week before, and

“the Captain at this time was Francis William Austen, the brother of the novelist Jane Austen” (71).

There are many more references in O’Brian’s novels to ships that Frank or Charles Austen either served in or commanded, including the *Andromeda*, the *Aurora*, the *Bellerophon*, the *Daedalus*, the *Elephant*, the *Endymion*, the *Minerva*, the *Namur*, the *Phoenix*, and the *Tamar*. And while Austen generally created the ships her naval officers were attached to, she occasionally mentioned real ships in her fiction too, including the *Canopus*, the *Elephant*, and the *Endymion*. While writing *Mansfield Park* she sent a letter to Frank, “who was then commanding one of the ships in question, the *Elephant*,” and asked for permission to use some of the ships’ names in her novel (Southam 21). When permission was granted, Austen had William Price and his father discuss these ships in Volume III, Chapter Seven of *Mansfield Park*, thus giving these three ships the unique distinction of not only being actual ships in the service of the Royal Navy, but also having them alluded to in the fiction of both Austen and later O’Brian as well.

Few of these ships are as intrinsic to the lives of both Jack Aubrey and either Frank or Charles Austen as was the *Leopard*, and typically ships related to the Austens’ lives are simply mentioned in passing (as, for example, when in *The Wine Dark Sea* we learn that Aubrey served in the *HMS Minerva*, a ship on which history tells us that Frank Austen also served). These historical cross-references are so frequent in O’Brian’s novels that there is little doubt that O’Brian knew quite well what he was doing. One factor which elevates the mention of the ships related to the Austens beyond the level of mere coincidence is the fact that in 1804 and 1805 there were more than 540 rated and unrated ships in the Royal Navy, and in 1815 the number of warships alone was more than 250 (Miller 14, 27, 35). Consequently, given the few dozen actual British ships mentioned in O’Brian’s novels, the appearance of so many related to the Austens when there were literally hundreds of other ships to choose from seems to point to deliberate allusion rather than coincidence.

Character names are another aspect of O’Brian’s novels that instantly throw the reader headlong into the world of Jane Austen. Anyone familiar with Austen’s work who sees the names Willoughby, Jennings, Dashwood, Bennet, Lucas, Collins, Bates, Churchill, Martin, Smith, Dalrymple, and Elliot knows exactly to whom these names belong, but in truth they might be quite surprised to find these Austenian names as well as many others in O’Brian’s Aubrey/Maturin novels. They are not, of course, the same characters, as for example the dashing Willoughby who steals Marianne’s heart in *Sense and*

Sensibility certainly doesn't appear to be the Captain in *Master and Commander* who is about to be sued, just as one wouldn't think that Elinor and Marianne's parsimonious half-brother John Dashwood is the same Lieutenant John Dashwood serving on the *HMS Lively* in O'Brian's *Post Captain* (though one would admit that Austen's Willoughby and Dashwood probably would have benefitted immensely from life as junior naval officers). Likewise, *Emma's* unseen Colonel Campbell (the subject of speculation involving Jane Fairfax) is not the same British officer referred to in *The Mauritius Command*, nor would one suspect that Fanny Price's brother Lieutenant William Price of *Mansfield Park* is the same Seaman Price mentioned in *The Hundred Days*.

In all, there are names common to Austen's characters in each of the twenty O'Brian novels, with the most numerous instances appearing in *Master and Commander* (three, with Willoughby, Bennet, and Smith), *Post Captain* (five, including Dashwood, Jennings, and Bates), *The Ionian Mission* (six, including Bennet, Lucas, Bates, and Collins), and *The Nutmeg of Consolation* (six, including Collins, Bennet, and Dalrymple). While O'Brian does not use the obvious names from Austen that would fit into his own work logically and quite easily—characters such as Admiral Crawford from *Mansfield Park*, or Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, Captain Benwick, or Captain Harville from *Persuasion*—one appreciates O'Brian's playful allusions to Austen's novels through his use of character names throughout the *Master and Commander* series.

A familiar name from Austen that does appear, however, is Captain Wentworth's ship the *Asp*. In chapter eight of *Persuasion*, the Musgrove girls decide to go through the Navy lists and find Captain Wentworth's first ship, the aforementioned *Asp*. Captain Wentworth tells the girls, "You will not find her [in the lists].—Quite worn out and broken up. I was the last man who commanded her.—Hardly fit for service then'" (64–65). Though the sloop has been sold out of the service, Wentworth still remembers her fondly.

In *Blue at the Mizzen*, the twentieth novel in the Aubrey/Maturin series, O'Brian comes as close as he ever does to a direct naval reference from *Persuasion*. In chapter four, Jack Aubrey is sent to South America to meet a former British naval officer, Lord Lindsey, who is acting in an unofficial capacity for the Chilean Navy. Jack tells Stephen that this Lindsey "has acquired a moderate ship sloop, sold out of the service, and another, called the *Asp*, is being repaired" (102) and "refitted" (152).

O'Brian's *Asp*, which is badly in need of refitting, sounds remarkably like Captain Wentworth's former command. According to Southam, if one were

to try and equate Austen's novel with real time, Captain Wentworth probably commanded the *Asp* in about 1806 before moving on to command another ship, the *Laconia* (270). Since *Blue at the Mizzen* takes place at least a decade later, there is no reason Lindsey's *Asp* could not be Wentworth's old ship, and indeed, how many ships could there have been in the Royal Navy between 1805 and 1815 named the *Asp*? Once again O'Brian is paying tribute to Austen, and in O'Brian's world Wentworth's *Asp* has been sold out of service to spend her final days as a ship in the fledgling Chilean Navy. That is, of course, if she could have stayed afloat that long.

So what is the reader to make of these and many more clear parallels between the works of these two great writers? The one undeniable fact that seems borne out in Patrick O'Brian's literature is that Jane Austen and her fiction influenced him thematically, imagistically, and "nominally," that is, in his naming of characters and vessels. This influence manifests itself over and over again in the novels of the Aubrey/Maturin series, to the extent that there seems to be a roguish whimsicality in O'Brian's recurrent word affinities with Austen's fiction and family. The end result is that the reader is able to enjoy the pleasure of re-reading Jane Austen all over again in the fiction of Patrick O'Brian, in an homage from one great author to another.

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The Royal Navy was the Naval fleet of Great Britain. The Navy was formed from the navies of England and Scotland. During the 1800s, when the navy would become the largest in the world. During the War of the Spanish Succession, naval operations were at first focused on the acquisition of a Mediterranean base, culminating in an alliance with Portugal and the capture of Gibraltar (1704) and Port Mahon (1708). The middle part of the century was occupied with the War of the Austrian Succession and the Patrick O'Brian's Thirty Year Homage to Jane Austen. Did Willoughby Join the Navy? Patrick O'Brian's Thirty Year Homage to Jane Austen. Print Email. By James R. Simmons. James R. Simmons, Jr., Associate Professor of English at Louisiana Tech University, has published articles and reviews in *Brontë Studies*, *Victorian Studies*, *English Language Notes*, and *The Dickensian*. His book, *Factory Lives: Four Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiographies*, will be published in 2005. Patrick O'Brian's acclaimed Aubrey-Maturin series of historical novels has been described as "a masterpiece" (David Mamet, *New York Times*), "addictively readable" (Patrick T. Reardon, *Chicago Tribune*), and "the best historical novels ever written" (Richard Snow, *New York Times Book Review*), which "should have been on those lists of the greatest novels of the 20th century" (George Will). Set in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, O'Brian's twenty-volume series centers on the enduring friendship between naval officer Jack Aubrey