

1996

## Set and Drift—"A Voyage through Modern Naval Fiction"

James A. Winnefeld  
*U.S. Navy (Ret.)*

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### Recommended Citation

Winnefeld, James A. (1996) "Set and Drift—"A Voyage through Modern Naval Fiction", *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 2 , Article 12.

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## A Voyage through Modern Naval Fiction

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Rear Admiral James A. Winnefeld, U.S. Navy, Retired

**W**HAT GREATER FUN CAN THERE BE than to pick up a new work of naval fiction, or an older one that has just been discovered or rediscovered? One does not have to be a sailor to enjoy naval fiction; the great popularity of Patrick O'Brian's series on the adventures of Jack Aubrey and Steven Maturin during the Napoleonic wars attests to its broad appeal. It is the richness of the menu that first attracts the reader, and soon thereafter he is choosing sides as to which novel captures the prize for telling the story best.

What is it about the naval environment (be it the early nineteenth century of O'Brian or the mid-twentieth-century work of Nicholas Monsarrat or Herman Wouk) that captures the reader's imagination? One answer may lie in the tension between the sailor and his environment (*HMS Ulysses*, *The Cruel Sea*), between a sailor and his opponent (*The Good Shepherd*) or his shipmates (*Delilah*, *Sand Pebbles*), or indeed between a sailor and himself (*The Caine Mutiny*). There is also the attraction of the varied backdrops; O'Brian's and C.S. Forester's heroes travel the world, while the world of Richard McKenna's Jack Holman was the China of the 1920s. Another part of the lure of these novels is the prospect of adventure ("Sail Ho!") just over the horizon or around the next headland.

If we limit ourselves to, say, the years from the 1930s to the mid to late twentieth century, we omit such classic writers as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Joseph Conrad. But they have already received their due. Let us also put aside for the moment the superb series of Patrick O'Brian and that of C.S. Forester, as well as the warhorses of popular literature that contain

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Admiral Winnefeld is presently a resident consultant with the RAND Corporation. He is a winner of the Naval Institute Arleigh Burke Award for 1989 and 1995. He coauthored *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991* (Naval Institute Press, 1993) and *A League of Airmen: U.S. Air Power in the Gulf War* (RAND, 1994). He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, and is a collector of first editions of naval fiction.

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Naval War College Review, Spring 1996, Vol. XLIX, No. 2

a substantial naval component, such as Wouk's *Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*, and look at the stand-alone giants of modern naval fiction. Which of them would stand in the top ten? Most would agree that the following should be in every library of naval literature.

My first choice is *The Caine Mutiny*, by Herman Wouk. This classic work captures, perhaps best of all, the interactions of individuals in a small and elderly ship facing the enemy and itself in a battle for survival. *Caine's* storm, the ensuing court-martial, and its aftermath culminate in Barney Greenwald's cleverly turning the tables on the lament of the "reserves" against the "regulars." This work stands as a tour de force of the storytelling art. Reread *The Caine Mutiny* and be enthralled by its story and the dramatic art of its author.

A close second is *The Cruel Sea* by Nicholas Monsarrat, who does a better job weaving a love story into his saga of HMS *Compass Rose* than Wouk did in *Caine*. It is another postwar novel written by a reserve officer who grew up under the strain of combat, the sea, and shipboard relationships. This work's strength is showing how the protagonist, Lockhart, comes of age in the crucible of combat. If you enjoy *The Cruel Sea*, you will also enjoy *A Sailor's War*, by Sam Lombard-Hudson, who served as Monsarrat's model for the skipper of *Compass Rose*. It is fascinating to read about junior officer Monsarrat in *A Sailor's War* as seen through the eyes of his skipper.

Interestingly enough, neither Wouk nor Monsarrat are "naval writers"; both have written fiction in a variety of milieus. However, it is telling that it is their naval works for which they will be most remembered.

My third choice is Alistair McLean's *HMS Ulysses*. McLean's first major novel is set against the challenge of getting a convoy through to Russia during World War II. His accounts of storms at sea are among the most gripping in modern naval fiction. The action centers upon the actions of the skipper and wardroom officers of a small cruiser, with a flag aboard. McLean does not take the easy way out, that of having the embarked admiral and skipper in conflict. Both are sympathetic, and each acts professionally in his own sphere, but in the end the opponents to be outwitted are the sea and the enemy. The final action scene, a nautical "charge of the Light Brigade," will seem far-fetched to many but will bring a smile of admiration and a nod of the head from old sailors.

Some would rank Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* higher than fourth, but in my opinion Clancy remains an incomplete novelist, because of the improbability of his plots and the lack of depth in his characters. However, Clancy has founded an entirely new class of fiction, of crisply moving scenes tied together by convincing technical detail that is among the best provided by modern naval authors. *Red October* remains Clancy's best novel, though I have a special liking for his *Red Storm Rising*.

## 122 Naval War College

Marcus Goodrich's *Delilah* is the sleeper of this list. His evocation of interactions among the crew of a four-pipe destroyer in the Philippines just before World War I remains one of the best stories of the naval service. Goodrich does not dwell on technical detail, though the scene rings true, but rather examines the complex relationships of officers and enlisted men—the antagonism, loyalty, and even affection (in the best sense of the word). Goodrich's style is similar to Conrad's in its sometimes surreal descriptions, and, although the story is not tightly woven, the series of events that result in the bizarre climax will grip the reader. *Delilah* was Goodrich's only published novel.

McKenna's *Sand Pebbles* also focuses on the lower decks, the conflicts encountered by Machinist's Mate First Class Jake Holman in the USS *San Pablo*. McKenna, a former chief petty officer, describes the tensions and the contrasts among the men on the Yangtze River patrol during the upheaval of the 1920s.

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Published in 1962, just before the United States entered the Vietnam War, this novel captures the American imagination, making vivid the problems of involvement in revolutionary conflicts overseas. McKenna captures the feel below decks and also the anomalous position of American sailors in China. If the story seems a bit contrived, the reader will soon forgive the author, who does a superb job of setting the scene and narrating the action. Unfortunately, due to his untimely death this is the only significant work McKenna left us.

My pick for number seven is C.S. Forester's *Good Shepherd*. This is another convoy story—about not Hornblower in the age of fighting sail but about an American destroyer captain (and convoy escort commander) attempting to get his convoy through. The interplay between the skipper, his opponents, and his own charges is in many respects Forester at his best. Some would say it was his best novel after *African Queen*.

*Run Silent, Run Deep*, by Ned Beach, and *The Boat*, by Lothar-Gunthar Buchheim, are a tie for number eight. These submarine novels are gripping, each in its own way. Beach tells a good story that has the enemy as the principal source of tension. No reader will soon forget "Bungo Pete" as an opponent worthy of the hero's best. *The Boat* is a story of survival and quiet courage. It is a classic from the perspective of a World War II Axis opponent. Both books are superb counterpoints to the convoy novels of McLean, Monsarrat, and Forester.

Jan de Hartog's *The Captain* tells a story from the unusual point of view of the skipper of a salvage tug assigned to convoy work. One experiences the North Atlantic and the Murmansk run at their wildest (reminiscent of *HMS Ulysses*) and, again, the moral choices inherent in command. Duty and survival are put into sharp contrast as the protagonist battles the elements and the enemy. One also gets a feel for the ocean towing business, along the way.

Rounding out the top ten is Kenneth Dodson's superb *Away All Boats*. This is the only book of the ten devoted to the amphibious ("gator") Navy. Dodson offers a rich blend of heroes and lesser figures, and he captures the reader with his scenes of the air attacks during the Okinawa landings, showing the crews' sense of powerlessness in being a big, fat target. Dodson also portrays well the tensions between seniors from the regular Navy and their reserve juniors, showing sympathy for both sides and using only a minimum of caricature.

So, what is not included on my list? There is nothing about the air Navy—probably because books on the subject are few in number and are stories more about air than the Navy. Frederic Wakeman's *Shore Leave* and James A. Michener's *The Bridges of Toko-Ri* are interesting but of narrow appeal. Stephen Coonts's *Flight of the Intruder* is (along with Derek Robinson's *Piece of Cake*), probably one of the best pieces of air fiction written since World War II, but its naval setting is incidental to the story.

Anyone with an interest in the U.S. Naval Academy and the naval "mystique" is advised not to overlook Paul Horgan's *Memories of the Future*. Although principally telling a story of naval families and their loves and tragedies across decades, Horgan has done a fine job of dissecting the basis of loyalty to service and shipmates, using as his vehicle forty-eight hours in the Academy superintendent's quarters in the late 1940s. Other novels of importance include James Bassett's *In Harm's Way*, Thomas Heggen's *Mr. Roberts*, and Mark Rascovich's *The Bedford Incident*. There are many more, such as Vice Admiral Bill Mack's fine series on World War II destroyers; the list is too large to discuss here.

But let us return to naval series writers, of whom the current dean is Patrick O'Brian. His seventeen-volume series, which began with *Master and Commander*, traces the journeys of Captain Jack Aubrey, Royal Navy, and Dr. Stephen Maturin. There is no richer depiction of naval life during the age of sail to be found than in these critically acclaimed works. One can only wish O'Brian a long and productive life, as we eagerly await the next title in 1996.

Before O'Brian came to public notice a decade or so ago, it was C.S. Forester and his hero Horatio Hornblower who were the darlings of naval fiction. Today one can still enjoy reading the Hornblower series, though after O'Brian one tends to become restless with Forester's two-dimensional characters—with the exception of Hornblower himself, of course. It is not that Forester at his best is not good, but that O'Brian is even better.

## 124 Naval War College

Not in the same league as Forester is Dudley Pope's Ramage series. Pope, a popular historian of nautical subjects, particularly the naval wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, falls short in the fictional venue. His hero, Ramage, works through a series of tales that occasionally come close to being potboilers. Although not really forming a series, perhaps of greater interest are Douglas Reeman's stories of the Royal Navy from 1900 to World War II.\* The prolific Reeman's technical and historical detail enhances the drama of naval combat in out-of-the-way places. His style will attract readers looking for a light yarn with lots of excitement. The last serialist of my list is C. Northcote Parkinson, whose hero is Richard Delancey. Parkinson has the naval historian's eye and ear for time and place, but his characters are wooden and his action often contrived.

It is striking that the best novels have been written by reserve officers or by former petty officers. Except for Ned Beach and Bill Mack, the regulars do not make much of an appearance in the top ten (or twenty) best novels of naval life. Perhaps this is to be expected. Serious fiction is a consuming profession, and there is little time in a regular's life to cultivate the novelist's skills. Moreover, the serving officer sees the challenges and tensions of naval life as problems to be solved and hurdles to be crossed rather than as dramas to be dissected and narrated. Good storytellers in the naval service run the risk of becoming "happy hour" bores or eccentric "also-rans" come fitness report time. After all, watches are to be spent smartly performing one's duties, not dreaming or deep in philosophical conversation with one's fellow crewmen, as was the case on the bridge of Marcus Goodrich's *Delilah*.

What other gaps are there in our survey of naval fictional literature? Except for *Red October* and its imitations (some by Clancy himself), and setting aside O'Brian's work as a special case, we are still waiting for the superb novel of the late twentieth-century U.S. Navy, that is, one both written and set in that period. The Vietnam and Gulf wars are not particularly attractive backdrops. The former's principal naval component was aviation and brown-water, while the latter was too short to offer the continuity and drama of more extended conflicts.

So, what is left to write about? Somewhere there is a story that centers on the "choices" that face a naval officer in command: between running a ship or squadron as a business (the bottom line) or as a family (people come first); going by the book or by instinct; shooting first (as did the *Vincennes*) or shooting second (the *Stark*); and the choices between ship, shipmates, and self. These have been the choices of a skipper throughout history, but major social changes are afoot, and today's Navy is different from the Navy of the past—women are going to sea. Surely there are great stories to be told of the trials and triumphs of women joining the first ranks of the naval profession, but we have yet to see first-rate

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\* Douglas Reeman has also published (writing as "Alexander Knox") a series of Richard Bolitho novels, about Napoleonic-era naval warfare.

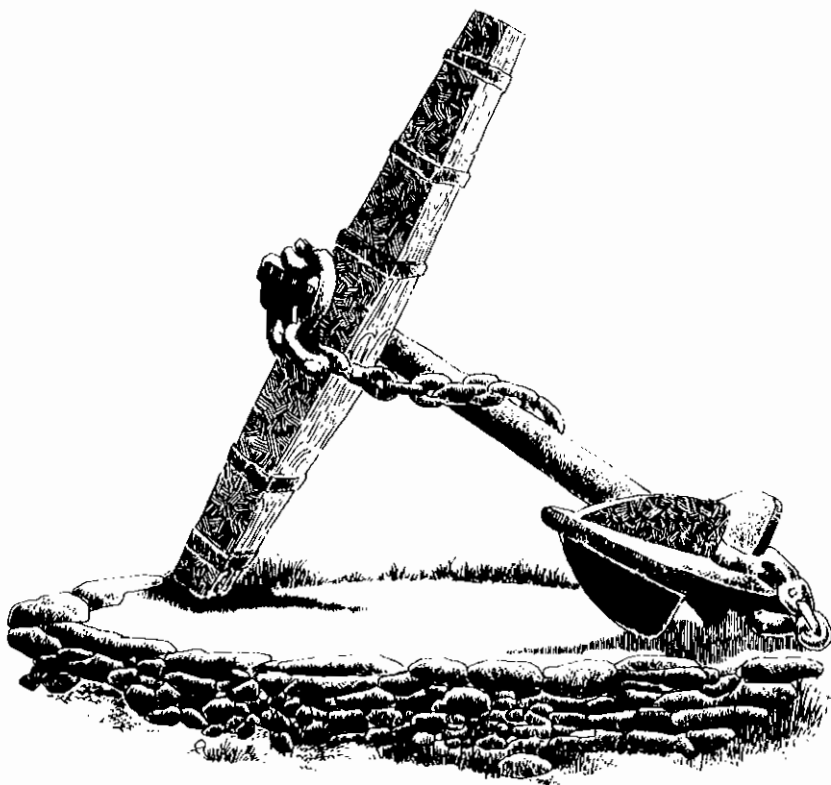
naval fiction on women officers or enlisted personnel in *professional* action. There is also a technical revolution underway (take a look at the inner workings and hidden mechanisms of an Aegis cruiser), as well as a major redrawing of the map of the world.

In this rich brew there must be a new Wouk, Goodrich, Forester, or O'Brian to chronicle events and entertain us in so doing. But allow me a cautionary word: the great novel of the late-twentieth-century Navy will have to be about people—believable people and how they interact in the naval environment—not about hardware or a bizarre enemy. The greatest mid-twentieth-century novelists on naval matters learned this lesson well. We are in their debt.

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*The anchor of the USS Constellation, which in the late nineteenth century was berthed as a training ship at Coasters Harbor Island, near the Naval War College, is displayed today on the grounds of the College.*